

FROM

# *An American Marriage*

BY TAYARI JONES



Dear Roy,

I'm writing this letter sitting at the kitchen table. I'm alone in a way that's more than the fact that I am the only living person within these walls. Up until now, I thought I knew what was and wasn't possible. Maybe that's what innocence is, having no way to predict the pain of the future. When something happens that eclipses the imaginable, it changes a person. It's like the difference between a raw egg and a scrambled egg. It's the same thing, but it's not the same at all. That's the best way that I can put it. I look in the mirror and I know it's me, but I can't quite recognize myself.

Sometimes it's exhausting for me to simply walk into the house. I try and calm myself, remember that I've lived alone before. Sleeping by myself didn't kill me then and will not kill me now. But this is what loss has taught me of love. Our house isn't simply *empty*, our home *has been emptied*. Love makes a place in your life, it makes a place for itself in your bed. Invisibly, it makes a place in your body, rerouting all your blood vessels, throbbing right alongside your heart. When it's gone, nothing is whole again.

Before I met you, I was not lonely, but now I'm so lonely I talk to the walls and sing to the ceiling.

They said that you can't receive mail for at least a month. Still, I'll write to you every night.

Yours,  
Celestial

Dear Celestial, aka Georgia,

I don't think I have written a letter to anyone since I was in high school and assigned a French pen pal. (That whole thing lasted about ten minutes.) I know for sure that this is the first time I ever wrote a love letter, and that's what this is going to be, a love letter.

Celestial, I love you. I miss you. I want to come home to you. Look at me, telling you the things you already know. I'm trying to write something on this paper that will make you remember me — the real me, not the man you saw standing in a broke-down country courtroom, broke down myself like a sand castle on a rainy afternoon. I was too ashamed to turn toward you, but now I wish I had, because right now I would do anything for one more look at you.

This love letter thing is uphill for me. I have never even seen one unless you count the third grade: Do you like me \_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_ no. (Don't answer that, ha!) A love letter is supposed to be like music or like Shakespeare, but I don't know anything about Shakespeare. But for real, I want to tell you what you mean to me, but it's like trying to count the seconds of a day on your fingers and toes.

Why didn't I write you love letters all the while, so I could be in practice? Then I would know what to do. That's how I feel every day here, like I don't know what to do or how to do it.

I have always let you know how much I care, right? You never had to wonder. I've never been a man for words. My daddy showed me that you *do* for a woman. Remember that time when you damn near had a nervous breakdown because it looked like the hickory-nut tree in the front yard was thinking about dying? Where I'm from, we don't believe in spending money on pets, let alone trees. But I couldn't bear to see you crying, so I hired a tree doctor. See, in my mind, that was a love letter.

The first thing I did as your husband was to "sit you down," like the old folks say. You were wasting your time and your talents doing temp work. You wanted to sew, so I made it happen. No strings. That was my love letter, to say, "I got this. Make your art. Rest yourself. Whatever you need to do."

But now all I have is this paper and this raggedy ink pen. It's a ballpoint, but they take away the casing so you just have the nib and this plastic tube of ink. I'm looking at it, thinking, *This* is all I have to be a husband with?

But here I am trying.

Love,  
Roy

Dear Georgia,

Hello from Mars! That's not really a joke. The dorms here are all named for planets. (This is the truth. I couldn't make this up.) Your letters were delivered to me yesterday. All of them. I was very happy to receive them. Overjoyed. I am not sure even where to start.

I haven't even been here three months, and already I have had three cell partners. The one I have now says he's here for good, and he says it like has some type of inside track. His name is Walter. He's been incarcerated for most of his adult life, so he knows what's what around here. I write letters for him but not for free. It's not that I'm not compassionate, but you get no respect when you do things for free. (This I learned in real life, and it's ten times as true in here.) Walter doesn't have money, so I let him give me cigarettes. (Don't make that face. I know you, girl. I don't smoke them. I trade them for other things — like ramen noodles. I kid you not.) The letters I write for Walter are to women he meets through personal ads. You would be surprised how many ladies want to pen-pal with convicts. (Don't get jealous, ha ha.) Sometimes I get irritated, staying up so late answering all his questions. He says he used to live in Eloë, so he wants me to bring him up to date. When I said that I haven't lived in Eloë since before I went to college, he says he has never set foot on a college campus and he wants me to tell him all about that, too. He was even curious about how I got the name Roy. It's not like my name is Patrice Lumumba, something that needs explaining, but Walter is what Olive would call "a character." We call him the "Ghetto Yoda" because he's always getting philosophical. I accidentally

said “Country Yoda” and he got mad. I swear it was an honest mistake, and it’s one I won’t make again. But it’s all good. He looks out for me, saying that “us bowlegged brothers got to stick together.” (You should see his legs. Worse than mine.)

So that’s all I got in terms of atmosphere. Or all that I want you to know about. Don’t ask me questions about the details. Just suffice it to say that it’s bad in here. Even if you killed somebody, you don’t deserve to spend more than a couple of years in this place. *Please tell your uncle to get on it.*

There is so much here that makes you stop and say, “Hmm . . .” Like there are about fifteen hundred men in this facility (mostly brothers), and that’s the same number of students at “Dear Morehouse.” I don’t want to be some kind of crazy conspiracy nut, but it’s hard not to think about things in that way. For one, prison is full of people who call themselves “dropping science,” and second, things here are so bent that you think somebody must be bending it on purpose. My mother wrote to me, too, and you know her theory — it’s Satan! My dad thinks it’s the Klan. Well, not the Klan specifically with hoods and crosses but more like AmeriKKKa. I don’t know what I think. Besides thinking that I miss you.

I finally got to make my visitors’ list and right at the top is you, Celestial GLORIANA Davenport. (They want your full government name.) I’ll put Dre on, too — does he have a middle name? It’s probably something religious like Elijah. You know he’s my boy, but when you come the first time, come by yourself. Meanwhile, keep the letters coming, baby. How did I forget that you have such a pretty handwriting? If you decide not to be a famous artist, you could go be a schoolteacher with that penmanship. You must bear down on the pen because the paper buckles. At night, when the lights are out — not that they are ever really out, because they make it dark enough that you can’t read but too light to really sleep — but when they cut the lights off, I run my fingers over your letters and try to read them like Braille. (Romantic, right? Ha ha.)

And thank you for putting money on my books. You have to buy anything you think you might want in here. Underwear, socks. Anything you need to try and make your life a little better. This isn’t a hint, but it would

be nice to have a clock radio, and of course the main thing that would make my life a little better would be seeing you.

Love,  
Roy

PS: When I first started calling you Georgia, it was because I could tell you were homesick. Now I call you that because I'm the one missing home and home is you.

AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE

by Tayari Jones

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