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Dear John,

Is it true that letters written in a time of war—at least those that are written from a woman to a man—are all addressed, 'Dear John'? That's what I've heard. But who is John, and why should women write to him?

According to my dictionary 'John' can mean a policeman, a lavatory, or a prostitute's client. Dear me. That doesn't sound very nice does it? Then there's John Bull, an Englishman, and John Doe, a kind of everyman. It does seem that being a John means you're a bit of a loser.

Dear John,

I don't know how it appears to you but it does seem odd to me—a woman of my experience and at my age—that this should be my first Dear John letter. I'm feeling quite strange: pounding heart and sweaty palms—feverish really. I want to wallow in words that stab and sting; writing that cuts to the bone. I want to make it vicious. I want to make it mean. I'm sick of being sweet and nice; not saying what I think.

But that's not my way.

In sitting down to write to you today, I know that I am just one in a long line of women who have all sat down at one time or another, at a desk by a window and, gazing out from time to time onto the peaceful fields drowsing in the noonday sun, have penned those immortal words, 'Dear John'. I have a sense of ritual, of community, of history, with generations of women. I am enclosed, embraced and strengthened by this sisterhood.

Dear John,

It sounds so loving, but Dear John letters are not about affection. They are written to say, 'it's over' or 'don't bother coming home' or 'I'm sorry but I'm with someone else'. 'Dear John' is all about betrayal, and—let's not muck about—this is about women who betray men.

While the man risks life and limb and sanity in the theatres of war, his stay-at-home woman, his Eve, his Jezebel, his harlot, betrays his love, his trust, and his sacrifice—by giving her body to another. Her belly swells with another man's seed. She wears lipstick of flaming crimson and silk stockings; she flaunts diamonds—bright and shiny baubles. There may be a shooting. 'Oh Ruby. Don't take your love to town'.

In the suburbs with their green lawns and whirring sprinklers, women sigh behind closed Venetian blinds. In the heated stillness of lazy afternoons when the children are at school or outside playing or at the neighbours, the faint sound of ice tinkling against crystal; the whisper of silk over sweetly perfumed flesh; black lace negligees and peeka-boo brassieres rapturously discarded over chairs and stairs and bedroom carpets, all shape a familiar *mise en scène*. Valium, pot and alcohol blur the edges just enough to soften reality. In the suburbs, young Mata Haris practice their wiles. The suburbs are made for betrayal.

In remote pastures, young women roll up their sleeves and get down to work. Calling the cows, the sheep and

the goats home at dusk, they gather around the wool shed when the day's work is done and giggle and chatter about boys. Down by the river as the shadows lengthen, they lift their skirts for any young shearer or jackeroo. Their strong legs, sturdy thighs and milky breasts offer comfort, abandonment and release, and after all, their boyfriends and husbands are far away.

Dear John,

Have you seen? The fields bake under a blazing sky. Salt rises and famine spreads throughout the land. Water sinks into the cracked and baking sands. Frosts blight the peppermint trees and billabongs disappear into the creeping sand dunes. Bush fires rage and our rivers die.

In other places, AIDS decimates populations. Millions of children are orphaned and ongoing conflict and horrific violence are the stuff of daily nightmare. There are tsunamis, cyclones, raging floods and the polar caps are melting.

Meanwhile, Australia wins the Ashes.

Dear John,

If John is the every-man that every-woman betrays then I want to betray you but how will I do it? What would it take to bring you down? What would humiliate you? What would change your mind? I want to plot and scheme. I want to sneak about and disclose your weaknesses. I want to disguise myself and blow your cover. I passionately desire your undoing. The flashgun going off in your face; your hands up flung to protect you from the jeering crowds; the chattering of the news wires; the opinion polls that drag you down into the muck of the everyday and profound public humiliation.

Do you read me John?

Dear John,

You said we would liberate the Iraqi people; that we would topple Saddam Hussein's regime; that there were weapons of mass destruction. In Iraq, men, women and children are dying; more than 100 civilians a day. There are firebombs, and suicide bombers and atrocities beyond belief.

You lied.

David Hicks is in Guantanamo Bay. Refugees are locked up in detention centres. Asylum seekers are denied the right to work and support their families. The Australian Wheat Board is convicted of paying kickbacks and bribes. We've had Tampa and the Children Overboard incident and SIEV X. Temperatures are rising.

Dear John,

Need I say more?

Time to go.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sarah Miller.