

LETTER *to* EMILY

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A Memoir

MARILYN JODY



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FOR JO, ALWAYS

and

IN LOVING MEMORY OF MY MOTHER
SARA CROMER JODY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to every student whose life has touched mine, to every camper who sang with me around a campfire, to every friend whose love has blessed me, and to all my loving family, who are the bedrock of my life. You are all a part of my story.

To protect their privacy, I have changed the names of students in the class that provides the setting for this book. They know I will always remember them as the intrepid pioneers they are and be grateful for their good company on the journey.

This book began in a writing group, where Barbara Hardie first encouraged me to tell the story. I am deeply grateful for her continuing encouragement and for her insightful reading of the manuscript in all its many and varied stages. I also thank The Hambidge Center for providing the time and space for a reluctant writer to find her voice.

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PROLOGUE

This is my letter to the world
That never wrote to me,
The simple news that Nature told
With tender majesty.

Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see.
For love of her, sweet Countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me.

— Emily Dickinson

DEAR EMILY

I never envisioned telling my own story. In fact, I worked at keeping my life a secret for most of it. Even now, a voice warns me, “Keep it to yourself; only silence is safe.” I’ve finally moved into a writer’s retreat, just to avoid my usual excuses for putting off telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but—you get the picture.

My belongings are neatly tucked away in a rustic cabin. No distractions. The pantry and refrigerator are nicely supplied. I’ve

rearranged the furniture, set up writing space , and procrastinated as long as possible, thinking to myself that a real “writer in residence” would dump her stuff on the floor and start creating great works of art.

Instead, I’ve unpacked the groceries and discovered “Rainbow Girl,” tucked in with the tuna fish cans. “Rainbow Girl” is a silly looking, six-inch-high doll dressed in multi-colored checkered overalls over a yellow t-shirt, her rainbow-colored hair tied in a bristly topknot. She shows up at odd times all around the house. Last week I heard the teakettle whistling and Jo shouting, “Help! Help!” in the high-pitched puppeteer’s voice she uses to make stuffed animals talk to children and dogs. Rainbow Girl was perched on top of the teakettle, getting steamed.

Have I digressed already? Being evasive is a tough habit to break. Let me try again.

As I was about to say, reading your poetry and your life story made me want to answer your “letter to the world” with a story of my own. Some of the critics have finally figured out that your secret love was not a mystery man, but the friend of your youth, Sue Gilbert Dickinson, the woman who married your brother. I thought about you, sitting at your bedroom window, the place where you wrote your poetry, looking across the hedge toward the house next door where Sue and your brother lived. I thought about you carrying your letter-poems, hundreds of them, across the space between, delivering them in person to Sue.

Some kinds of pain are beyond ordinary words. But not the power of yours. You knew how, as you said in one of your poems, to “tell all the truth/ but tell it slant.”

And so, to my story. It begins in an ordinary college classroom where extraordinary things can happen.

THE LOST LANGUAGE OF CRANES

Before I could identify the voice in the tiny whirlwind, Katie was explaining her lateness to class, announcing to everyone how thrilled she was to be there. She was a cartoon character emerging from a little cyclone of whirling dust. Grabbing my arm, she held it in a firm grip, punctuating her comments with the white cane in her other hand. Her blank blue eyes were quivering, moving back and forth nearly as fast as she talked: “I’ve been wanting to take a course with you ever since I’ve been here, and finally I get to. Wow! I started hearing about you my freshman year—about this really cool lesbian woman in the English Department. Everybody said I just had to take a lit course with you, and since I’m a lesbian—”

Then she was tugging my arm—hard—and saying, “We’re sitting around a big table—right? I’ll just sit next to you. Is that ok”?—whack! with the cane on the nearest chair—“right here?” As Katie announced she had just broken up with her woman lover, was dating again and, by the way, was “looking around” for somebody new, I was still trying to process my reaction: *blind people could be gay?* It was an embarrassingly stupid realization, one that Katie already knew would probably dawn on someone every time she came out. She thought it was hilarious. As she took her seat, she said, “Blind, gay, whatever...the world

is full of freaks. Most of them just don't know they are!" And she laughed again.

"Freaks." I could see the fairgrounds, the sideshow barker waving his megaphone. I shut out the image, trying to remain focused.

Twenty students were quietly waiting. No gay studies course had ever been offered on this rural southern campus. Even in a course on Whitman and Dickinson, I had kept silent on their suspected homosexuality. The topic was taboo in the classroom, especially for a closeted teacher. Now that Jo and I were settled into our life together, I thought, "Why did I decide to come out now?" I looked at her calm face, smiling encouragement from the back row, ready to share whatever might come up, even if the Klan marched on the English building bearing "God Hates Fags" signs. Silence was no longer bearable. I breathed deeply and began: "Let's be sure we're all in the right classroom. The name of this course is Gay and Lesbian Literature."

No one stirred. Even my former students avoided eye contact. Their faces were deliberately guarded; their uneasiness mirrored my own. The words *GAY! LESBIAN!* seemed to be echoing, almost palpable in the unnatural silence. Finally, I leaned toward the students and asked in a worried, conspiratorial whisper: "Do you think anybody else heard me?"

After the relieved laughter stopped, I told them we would be hearing other words that were not the usual language of the classroom. It might be a good idea to get rid of some inhibitions. We would start by saying all the words for gay that we could think of. Raising my voice, I said, "QUEER! HOMO!" A student's voice called out *FAGGOT*, then *DYKE*, and the rest became a jumble of noise, a litany of politically incorrect language, with more of Katie's rapid-fire commentary: "This is so great! How many are in the class? Could we talk about Adrienne Rich? Is she in our book?" More laughter, an exchange of comments, and finally, readiness.

Books were the first issue. Outside the classroom, the titles were causing trouble. Bookstore employees had been surly. Janet, a shy and quiet-spoken young woman, had placed brown paper covers over her texts. Dan, a fraternity member, had been ridiculed by his “brothers” who were calling the course “faggot lit.” He had already taken two courses with me, telling me before the semester began he hoped the course would be cancelled for lack of enrollment. Like about half of the class, he was straight. “This gay course,” he said, “is the only literature class left that fits my schedule. If it’s cancelled, I can take an independent study with you and still graduate on time.”

Then we discovered that the bookstore had run out of texts for the course. The “closet” buyers of gay literature had already disappeared with half of the books ordered for my class. Other gay kids were out there, afraid to be seen in this class, desperate for books that told them they were not alone. While we joked about the “invisible class auditors” and waited for the re-order to arrive, students shared books and overcame their initial fears, no longer hesitant to use the disquieting words: “Can I borrow *Lesbian Short Stories*? Are you using your *Homosexual Poetry* book?”

Meanwhile, our weekly three-hour class never seemed long enough. In response to each week’s reading assignment, everyone wrote a short “discovery paper,” a discussion starter. I had opened a floodgate. Dan came into class the next week saying, “This is the book they banned? You’ve got to be kidding!”

They were reading *The Well of Loneliness*, an infamous lesbian novel, banned as obscene in the 1920’s. In this story a father, disappointed at the birth of a girl instead of a boy, names his daughter “Stephen.”

Grabbing his copy of the book, Dan pointed to a page with a turned down corner, saying, “Check out this hot page!” He began reading aloud, pronouncing each word with mock solemnity:

Stephen bent down and kissed Mary’s hands very humbly,

for now she could find no words any more, and that night they were not divided.

The rest of the class were groaning: "We read 450 pages for that?" It was the one lesbian love story most of them had actually heard of, probably because Virginia Woolf had defended the book at the obscenity trial.

Will, the class philosopher, was frowning, scribbling into his notes, shaking his head in apparent disgust at what he was hearing and finally broke in: "You think things are any different now? Take a look at the slush they feed us in lit courses. Have you read any William Burroughs? They water down *Naked Lunch* for a movie and leave the real book on the shelf. That's censorship too. Just ignore what the guy has to say and make money on the juicy parts!"

It was the first time Will, who appeared to be a somewhat world-weary intellectual, had said anything. His vehemence was intimidating, but Dan ventured a response: "I haven't read Burroughs, but I've been thinking about this obscenity thing. You're right about the money. Look at *Hustler*. They talk about banning it, but all that talk is just good advertising. The thing is, gay porn sells too. Censorship hasn't got anything to do with it. What really gets censored is the part that's *not* about sex."

Will was looking straight at Dan, still frowning, his lanky frame draped forward across the table. He had forgotten the rest of the class around him: "Yeah! That's it! It's all phony. All this freedom is just so much bullshit. They still kick the crap out of gay guys on the streets, while New York *Times* critics pronounce benedictions on gay writers they wouldn't be seen with in public."

I wasn't really hearing Will anymore. Something had struck a nerve, something about "the part that's not about sex." Some buried recognition.

Sandy, an intellectually gifted student I knew from other classes I had taught, interrupted my thoughts: "Dan's right. What I think is, they condemned this book because the whole idea of a woman

loving another woman was considered immoral. It still is, by a lot of people. My parents, for example. It doesn't matter that the book didn't have any sex in it. Her whole life got censored. You have to look at what the author was trying to say about love, not sex."

Sandy was flipping through the pages of the novel as she spoke: "Here's the part that really matters. It comes just before the passage Dan read where they finally slept together." She read slowly, almost reverently:

Then all in a moment the restraint of years was shattered as though by some mighty convulsion. She remembered nothing, was conscious of nothing except that the creature she loved was going...she gasped, "You don't understand, you can't understand—God help me, I love you!"

The silence was a tribute to Sandy's dramatic skill. The scene had come alive for her audience. She was out-going, popular among faculty as well as students. But this vivacious young woman, seemingly so self-assured, was on the edge of despair. When she said, "Can I just read my discovery paper," I nodded, and the person we all knew as Sandy disappeared.

"I am this character. I knew when I was in high school I was gay. When my parents found out, they wouldn't let me see any of my friends. I could only go out with my boyfriend. They sent me to see the minister at their church for counseling. He quoted the Bible and said I should pray to be 'cured.'"

As Sandy read on, we heard how she finally ran away from home, how her parents found her staying with a forbidden friend, brought her back, kept her confined. Finally, confused and exhausted, she made peace with them by announcing her engagement to her "boyfriend." As a result they had allowed her to go away to college. Now, two years later and no longer engaged, she was living one life at school, another at home. By the time she finished reading her paper, Janet was crying.

Later that week I received a phone call from Sandy, desperately asking if she could come to the house and talk to us. When she walked in the door, her eyes were swollen from crying. Her voice quavered and the tears ran unchecked as she told us she was going to have to quit school. Her parents had received a copy of her transcript with the course title on it. They were cutting off financial support, demanding that she come home immediately. The confident young woman we knew was gone, a stricken child in her place. It would take a week of emotional conversations and help from the campus counseling staff before her parents relented, allowing her to remain in school.

The next week letters condemning the “teaching of homosexuality” began appearing in the campus newspaper. Dwayne, who had never taken an elective course in literature before, came into the class saying he was ready to write a letter to the editor. As a practicing Christian, he was angry the letters had used religion to condemn homosexuals. Coincidentally, the popularly elected, outspoken editor of the paper was also in the class. She assured Dwayne there would be a reply to the letters. When Whitney’s editorial supporting the course appeared the following week, every copy of the campus newspaper was snatched up the day it came out. We waited for what might come next.

The mood was light when Dwayne began reading his first “discovery paper,” about David Leavitt’s novel *The Lost Language of Cranes*. In this story of a young man and his father, both struggling with their homosexuality, the father is closeted, torn between wanting to reassure his son and having to reveal the truth about himself to his wife. Dwayne identified with the son’s painful childhood, telling us a story from his own life. The paper in his hands trembled, but his voice was resolute as he recounted for us the day he was tormented by the boys in elementary school. A jeering playground gang of older boys had pulled down his pants, laughing at his tears, chanting, “Fairy queer! Fairy queer!”

I could imagine the gentle child he must have been. By the

time he finished reading, I was seeing beneath the young man's brave façade a sensitive little boy who once had run away from school, crying with fear and humiliation, the searing brand of laughter burned into his memory.

I heard the terrible sound of laughter, remembering the day when I knew, as he did, that nothing would ever be the same again.

Sharon, an older graduate student sitting next to Dwayne, placed her hand on his arm, a spontaneous gesture of comfort. She said, "I think maybe that's what David Leavitt meant by the 'lost language of cranes.'" Still holding his arm, she continued, "Remember how we tried to figure out the meaning of the image of a child on the roof of a building, turning in circles, his arms out like wings? He was imitating the motion of the builder's crane he sees next door, hovering over the construction site like a huge bird. I think Leavitt says what we lose is the innocence—the 'language'—of childhood."

I was moved by Sharon's tender response to Dwayne, knowing she understood the depth of his suffering. I could see the pained, slightly shocked reaction on the faces of others in the class as well. None of us had expected such personal revelations.

The idea of teaching the course had been exhilarating at first. I was caught up in a cause, finally free to speak out on an issue I understood all too well. On campus I was already seen as a risk taker, one of the activists always supporting a cause, struggling for some *ad hoc* justice of the day. As one friend put it, my Joan of Arc uniform was badly dented, but still serviceable. I challenged segregation in the 50's; marched for Civil Rights in the 60's; for Women's Rights in the 70's, the end to war in every decade. It was always a time to support Peace Talks somewhere, save the environment, challenge the status quo. Everyday life held enough of injustice in it to spark my continuing zeal for a better world, a better way. Yet I had never taken the real risk. I had always chosen to be on the side of the angels, at least outwardly. To be a gay activist was

to lose the acceptability I had spent a lifetime trying to acquire. So why now? And, O Lord, why me? Empathy for these young people whose lives were as painful as mine had been was stripping away the accretion of years, layers of protective denial. I hadn't expected to find my own sensibilities still raw and bleeding inside that shell.

AFTER CLASS

When we got home, Jo and I began a conversation that lasted late into the night. Dwayne's paper had evoked memories for her too, of how her brothers taunted her unmercifully about the way she walked—"like a boy." And of her mother, who said she "walked like a longshoreman," a phrase the boys had taken up gleefully as a perfect way to torment their younger sister. I saw the hurt in her eyes: "What made it worse was my mother always looked great. You remember her, tall and elegant. She was beautiful, and I was awkward and clumsy."

The lovely woman sitting across the room from me looked very much like her mother, but what I remembered was the sharp angularity of her mother's face. Jo's was warmer, softer, prettier—and more vulnerable. I hated the thought of her in pain. The hurt child she had been stared past me: "I couldn't compete with her, couldn't even play in the same league. She wanted me to be pretty and cute and all dressed up. I hated wearing the skimpy halter top and shorts my mother called "adorable," hated exposing the little roll of baby pudge around my middle."

She was scrunched down into her favorite easy chair, arms wrapped around her knees, her voice barely audible: "I was ugly. My brothers told me I was. And I didn't have any friends because I tried too hard to be liked. I couldn't just be one of the girls. I wasn't the frilly type. And I couldn't compete with the boys. I was an athlete, but that wasn't what girls got approval for. I couldn't ever be comfortable, couldn't decide which part of me—the boyish part or

the girlish—was really me. The last time I remember being happy when I was a kid, I was five or six years old.”

Telling her the truth, that her self-image had been totally wrong, would have been meaningless. Childhood can't be changed. We both sat quietly, until I finally said, “Do you remember the picture of me in my family album, the one that shows me sitting on a swing, holding the leash of a black cocker spaniel?”

She nodded yes.

“That’s my favorite. I call it ‘a perfect ten.’”

She had begun to smile.

“That was *my* last happy memory of childhood. I was lucky—managed to make it all the way to ten.”

I think there was a dog in every picture of me as a kid. In that one I’m smiling, wearing a bathing suit, my bare legs and feet dangling off the swing, dark hair wet from a swim in Lake Erie, a vast watery expanse in the background. I look like the healthy kid I was, comfortable with myself and the world around me, totally alive and whole in that moment of endless summer. Ten years old. At that age I was called a “tomboy,” an affectionate term in those days for an active, athletic girl who preferred climbing trees to playing with dolls. I was proud of the designation and a little contemptuous of girls who threw a ball “like a girl.” I had vague notions of becoming a star baseball pitcher. Of course some of the neighbors shook their heads and made comments to my mother about seeing me wearing my brother’s old clothes while I practiced pitching. Mom laughed them off, along with my superstitious concern when I told her a neighbor had said, “A whistling girl and a crowing hen always come to some bad end.” Mom called that “foolishness,” told me I had a lovely whistle and could forget such silly old wives’ tales. I trusted her completely.

Relating to the tomboy image, Jo remembered her own discomfort with the issue of what girls, especially athletes, could wear: “I could never decide what I wanted to look like, especially after I got married. I tried for awhile to look like the suburban wife—really

femme, long hair. I did dinner parties, wore little cocktail dresses. It felt like I had on a costume.

"Exactly! I interrupted. "I wore those awful uniforms to work for years—the full regalia—skirts and dresses, girdle, stockings, high heels. I'm sure lack of oxygen must have stunted my brain."

"Thank God for the 70's and pants suits," Jo laughed. "What a breakthrough!"

I recalled how the University's Chancellor banned pants suits in Administrative offices, then promptly withdrew his decree, overruled by rebellious female staff. I remembered reading Gloria Steinem's comment about women being taught to "impersonate a female" by putting on the "façade of femininity" that society imposes.

"Maybe guys have the same problem," Jo mused. "I wonder if that's why gay guys like drag shows. They can poke fun at the myth of femininity and masculinity at the same time."

"We should ask John and Bud," I said. "Remember John's joke about lesbian shoes: 'How can you tell if she's a lesbian? Answer: She's wearing comfortable shoes.'"

We both laughed, more relaxed. Then I told her of another kind of laughter, the kind I heard when Dwayne read his paper, the sound still echoing from my first encounter with the importance of a feminine façade.

Ten had been a perfect age; thirteen was a zero. It was the miserable year of a required class in *Home Economics*. Every former tomboy I knew dreaded the very sound of it. I struggled through the class, learning how to thread a needle, make neat little stitches, knit a fairly straight row. But the day I learned our last assignment was to make a dress and model it in front of all the parents, I was finished.

Mom was in the kitchen rolling out a piecrust when I slammed through the back door and threw my books down on the kitchen table. Her look of annoyance changed to one of concern when she looked up and saw my face. She rinsed off the flour and dried

her hands, trying to understand my incoherent account of the day's horror. Sitting at the kitchen table, Mom listened sympathetically as I insisted I would not prance around modeling clothes. I would be sick that day. I would run away. She let me spew out my anger and frustration, unruffled, telling me in between outbursts, "It probably won't be so bad. We'll think of something." Meanwhile, I was blowing my nose, hoping she meant somehow I could get out of it. I should have known better.

Of course, in those days girls had to wear skirts or dresses to school. No pants allowed. I wore my clothes like a school uniform, caring only that their colors were my favorite blues and greens. Mom must have been thinking of that as she smiled and said, "I've got a great idea! Let's ask Mrs. Green if you can make a pair of slacks." It was an inspired thought that caught me off guard. Would the teacher actually allow me to wear pants for a style show? The idea had just enough rebellion in it to spark my interest. Mom knew me well. When I agreed to try, she called Mrs. Green and asked the impossible. Mom's sweetly reasonable tone was irresistible. When she hung up the phone, she was grinning at me like a conspirator. It was a compromise. I still had to model and making a pair of slacks was well beyond my abilities, but Mom's optimism was infectious.

The long weeks of struggle with that pair of slacks were a gift of patience only a mother could give. She repaired my mistakes as I ripped holes in the brownish, flimsy paper of the pattern. When the pinking shears made ragged edges and swerved in alarming directions, she guided my hand. When I finally tried on the vaguely slacks-like garment, half of the stitches pulled out. With the style show only days away, Mom salvaged the remains and finished the slacks the night before the show.

Backstage my classmates were all in their dainty dresses, some of the more elegant creations also clearly the last minute work of mothers. I put on my plain but acceptable dark blue slacks with a new white blouse and tried to ignore the waves of stage fright as

each name was called. All I could think of was getting on and off the stage as quickly as possible.

We had practiced how to walk, how to turn and stop, how to leave the stage, “slowly and gracefully,” toward the side opposite our entrance. At least I tried—shortening my stride to what felt like baby steps, keeping my arms from swinging freely, holding my head up, trying not to hurry through it. That night I remembered my own clumsy attempts as I watched the girl ahead of me part the curtains and assume her best Junior Miss smile. She moved with carefully measured steps toward center stage, then floated into a soft turn, smiling back over her shoulder toward the audience. Her flowing pink skirt swung softly around her as she paused, leaned to one side, hand on hip, then tossed her long blond hair just slightly as she left the stage.

By that time I had steeled myself for the torture, convinced myself I could do it, determined to succeed. As applause for the girl ahead of me faded, I launched myself toward center stage with long, purposeful strides and reached the spot where I was to turn before I realized the audience had burst into spontaneous laughter. Sensing their mistake, they abruptly stopped laughing and began to clap. By then I had spun in place and was on my way out the wrong side of the stage. As Mrs. Green met me beyond the curtain, I smiled at her distressed face as hard as I could, desperately afraid she might see the humiliation I was feeling and try to comfort me. I didn’t cry, pretending nothing had happened, waiting the endless minutes until the show was over.

As I slid into the front seat of the car beside Mom, she smiled at my stony face as convincingly as she could. “You did so well, honey. Those slacks look really good on you—the white blouse was just right.”

When I finally met her eyes, not sure where I hurt, aching in some deep place I hadn’t felt before, her loving, pained gaze

brought my repressed tears. My whimpering sobs sounded like they belonged to someone else, someone I didn't know. Mom took my hand: "Honey, they laughed because you were so unexpected in slacks, after all the dresses. You looked so cute and—and just so lively." But it was too late. I knew that I was different in some embarrassing way, and people were going to laugh at me for it.