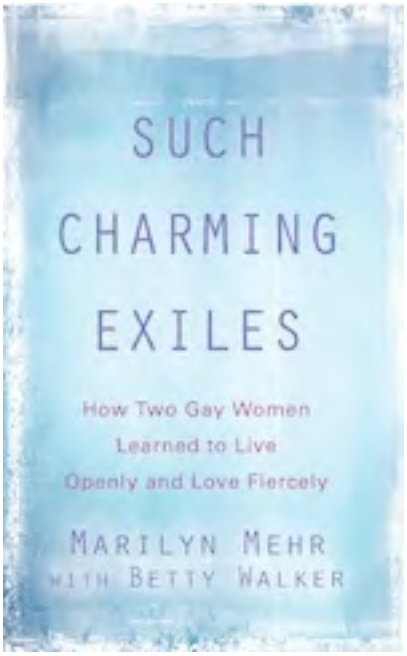


How honesty and courage transform lives of two gay women.

SUCH CHARMING EXILES: How Two Gay Women Learned to Live Openly and Love Fiercely

by Marilyn Mehr and Betty Walker

SUCH CHARMING EXILES

How Two Gay Women Learned to Live Openly and Love Fiercely

MARILYN MEHR
WITH BETTY WALKER

SUCH CHARMING EXILES:

How Two Gay Women Learned to Live

Openly and Love Fiercely

Marilyn Mehr
With
Betty Walker

ISBN: 978-1-63492-077-3

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2017

First Edition

Dedication

To Esther Somerfeld, M.D.

because she understood

Table of Contents

Preface

On November 18, in the year 2003, the closet door was opened wide for Massachusetts same sex couples when that state became the first in the United States to pass a law allowing them to marry one another. Eight years later, in 2011, New York State passed a similar law; and in August of that year, my lover Betty Walker and I mounted the steps of the Bronx County Courthouse in New York City to apply for a marriage license. That license and our subsequent wedding in September were the culmination of a rich, but challenging, relationship of over forty-one years.

It had begun in 1970 when Betty and I first met in a final graduate seminar on Humanistic Existential counseling at the University of Southern California. Although we had each begun our professional lives as most women did then, as teachers in secondary schools, we had both become frustrated by our inability to help some of our students with emotional problems that stymied their learning. We were drawn to psychology, particularly to the program at USC because it emphasized the power of the individual to change. Humanistic Existentialism focused on a person's innate search for meaning and showed how conscious choice and action can give purpose to one's

life. These ideas echoed those churning outside our classrooms, as students everywhere were questioning the traditional assumptions of our parents, our government, and our culture, and demanding change. Some of our classmates were risking their lives to protest injustice and hypocrisy.

Although Betty and I shared the same professional aspirations, we came from very different backgrounds: I grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles, in a conservative Mormon family. Betty came from a broken home in the South Bronx; her mother was both a hard worker and highly promiscuous. Neither of our fathers had graduated from high school. Both sets of grandparents were immigrants, hers from a little village in Hungary, mine from St. Gallen, Switzerland. Still, we were attracted to each other at once, as much for our differences as our similarities.

Shortly after we met, we became lovers. At the time Betty was 38, and I was 32, and each of us had erected her own closet of deceit. We acknowledged our feelings only to a few close friends, never to our families; otherwise, we pretended to be like heterosexual women. Thus, when we began to live together, we did not march boldly out of our separate closets telling the world. No, in some ways we shared a closet; in other and crucial ways, each of us remained for a time exiled in her own closet, kept there by shame and the long-engrained habit of deceit. We

closed the door even tighter as soon as we received our doctoral degrees in counseling psychology and accepted jobs teaching college level courses for the military in Frankfurt, Germany. Even though we were fervently opposed to the Vietnam War, we believed we could challenge our students to question authority and live authentic lives; in addition, we would have time to knit together our relationship and still have an adventure in Europe.

Although we had both become adept at hiding our sexual orientation from others, we were not prepared for the rigidity and homophobia of Army life. These two years made us both realize that we needed to return to L.A. and find the courage to come out of the exile imposed by society and accepted by ourselves. We also needed to help others to do the same. When we returned to L.A. in 1973, we reconnected with our lesbian and gay friends and found that some of them were not only coming out, but also protesting their oppression as gays and lesbians. The Stonewall Riots in 1969 had spurred gays and lesbians to come out even if they still risked being fired from their jobs, rejected from housing, and arrested for having sex with a person of the same gender. We spoke out with them, joining them in forming social action groups; and we were among the founders of the Gay Academic Union and the Lesbian Psychologists and Municipal Elections Committee of L.A. (MECLA). As we joined others in

social protest, we experienced the euphoria of freedom unknown to gays and lesbians in history.

However exhilarated we were by being able to speak out loud about the destructive effects of discriminations in our culture, we were still neither looking at nor speaking about the habits and attitudes we had developed to hide from society's condemning eye. Speaking out publicly in protest movements was not enough. We had to look to our silent selves, those selves that, out of false shame, were still deceiving our families and covering our feelings with too much alcohol and too many affairs. As a result, our relationship was beginning to fall apart, and we were both miserable. After several crises, we summoned up the courage to commit ourselves to honesty: we confronted each other, found a good therapist, walked into an AA meeting, and began to unravel our self-deceptions. Our biggest challenge was to speak out to our families-- Betty's mother and my Mormon parents -- about our love for one another. To their credit, they offered only love and acceptance in return. The public acknowledgement of our love for one another occurred when New York State recognized the right of gay couples to marry, and we were equal to all other couples before the law.

As personal as our story was for us, it is nonetheless a story lived in many forms by all too many same sex couples. We feel that by sharing our

story, we may help others to deal with the distorted feelings and behavior that society still imposes on us in many places. Although as therapists and professors we have been trained not to speak in any but the most limited way about our personal lives, we now believe that we must be honest about our story, and speak openly about the failures and mistakes we made in our attempt to overcome the insidious suppression of self caused by living in exile. Ours is actually a classic American story with a gay twist. It is the story of how through self-awareness, determination, and commitment, two women learned how to embrace who they are and to declare their love openly and fiercely for all to know.

Chapter Four — Changing Minds Changing Hearts

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.

- Anatole France

In the next three weeks, my teaching and my personal life took an unexpected turn. It was now early fall of 1972, three weeks since my students, all non-commissioned officers, trekked into my classroom in Vilseck, angry, suspicious and tired from a long day's work repairing trucks in 30 degree weather. When I invited them to put their chairs in a circle, they were confused, grumbling about "touchy-feely hippies," but still willing to arrange the chairs as I had requested. They were reluctant to speak, crossing their arms over their chests and refusing to participate in discussions. Yet, I was determined to overcome their resistance just to prove to myself that all those years of studying psychology had taught me something about breaking through to students who had barricaded themselves against you.

Even if I succeeded in changing their minds about psychology and my "hippie teacher" approach, I still wanted to leave this forlorn and lonely place. The Army had provided me a room with a pot-bellied stove, three cafeteria meals a day and a meager salary. I had already used up some of my savings and would have to return home in the next few months if I didn't find a full-time job.

Betty and I had written each other daily, but the mails were slow and there wasn't much to communicate other than my quiet misery on this lonely outpost on the edge of the Czech border. My days had become routine in their solitary pattern: awaken, light the stove, make a cup of tea with my Bunsen burner, trek down the hall of the barracks to shower, dress and walk across the quad to the mess hall for breakfast. No one ever spoke to me and I never spoke to anyone sensing some boundary that it wasn't wise to cross.

After breakfast I would walk to the small library in the Educational Center where I would talk to the secretary, Patty Aronson, a nice young woman from Mobile, Alabama, who never read any of the books in the library, but who was always cheerful and pleasant. While leafing through the books, I would occasionally bump into Eric Nielsen, the director of the center, who would ask about my class, although I was sure he had heard reports from my students. I always told him that things were fine and on one level that was true—

everyone obeyed orders, did his assigned reading and turned in short writing assignments—but on another level, they weren't fine. The men refused to engage in any discussion and scoffed when I brought up issues such as why and how people were motivated to do a good job. "Cause they'll get their asses kicked if they don't," was the agreed upon retort.

"How are *you* rewarded for your work?" I had asked the men in our previous session. After many scoffs and murmurs, such as "you gotta' be kidding," they grew quiet and stared at me, as though I had spoken to them in a foreign language. Then, I asked them about their families, how they got their children to behave.

Johnny Phillips, a Corporal from Tennessee, shot back. "I wup them, that's what I do!" More laughter.

"Oh, I see," I answered quietly. "You treat him just like you've been treated."

This time, no one scoffed. The silence in the room told me that I had communicated some deeper understanding than they were used to receiving. As I walked back to my barracks, I allowed myself to believe that a bunch of angry truck mechanics had allowed me to offer their first lesson in psychology.

Today, I was searching for a book that I thought might provide a good follow-up to our discussion.

"Hi, 'find anything interesting?" A tall man wearing a beige coat covering his uniform looked over my shoulder as he smiled.

"Not yet, just looking for a book my class might like."

"Why don't you try this one," he said as he pulled a slim volume from the shelf. "Viktor Frankl, know him?"

"Sure, *Man's Search for Meaning*. 'Seems like a good book for the setting, here in Germany, but I'm not sure about the audience…I'm teaching undergraduates—truck mechanics."

"You might be surprised," he said softly. "Could we talk about it over lunch?"

I was surprised by his forwardness and stepped back to get a good look at him. He was sturdy and compact, olive-skinned, with dark curly hair and a wide smile. Underneath the coat, he wore a khaki Army uniform, the bars on his collar indicating that he had the rank of major.

"Who are you anyway?" I asked.

"Josh," he answered. "Josh Andelman."

"Well, what are you doing here?"

"I'm in the Medical Corps of the National Guard, checking the needs of small outposts like this one for services. When I finish here, I'll be setting up a health center for teens in Frankfurt."

"You know, I think we *should* have lunch." I smiled at him, a stranger, but one with an insignia showing that he belonged to the medical corps. I longed for some company and he had offered it. "Any suggestions?"

"I have a car. 'Want to go into Vilseck?"

"Do I? This is my third week on this base and I feel like a squirrel in a cage—pacing from the barracks to the cafeteria to the library! I would love to go to Vilseck!"

"Well, come on then," he said as he opened the door of the Center and led me down the steps to his parked Jeep. I gave a quick wave to Patty who had quietly observed our interchange. Josh and I drove along the snow-crusted roads chatting about the conditions at Rose Barracks, grumbling about Army food and telling each other about our travels. I was giddy with the thrill of having lunch with someone who could share my interests. Even though I could feel the stirrings of an attraction, I dismissed my feelings as the result of too much isolation. I missed having sex, but I knew that Betty and I had agreed to meet in Nuremburg in a few days and we could spend the whole weekend in bed, if we wanted. For now, I savored every moment with Josh.

As we sped along the furrowed roads, I appeared to listen as Josh told me about his recent travels in Europe, but I cautioned myself about reacting too

strongly to his presence. He was a curious man with an engaging smile; in fact, he was a psychiatrist who would soon go back to California. I felt an attraction for him, but I knew I was gay. I'd had relationships with men, some satisfying, but never lasting more than a few months. *Oh, the hell with it,* I thought, *just enjoy his company.*

Whether I was gay or just lonely didn't really matter as we passed the security booth and left the base. I had slept with enough people before I met Betty to know that I liked some men, but loved a few women. I worried about the price of loving a woman, the hiding and secrecy, being a lesbian psychologist in a homophobic world. I didn't want to live an inauthentic life, as we had said in grad school, concealing my most important relationships, but I didn't want to miss the opportunities I had worked so hard to find.

When I met Betty, I knew she was worth risking my reputation and maybe a job to love. She was different from anyone I had ever known--smart, funny and sophisticated; she posed a challenge I had never found in a relationship with either men or woman. We could talk about Camus and de Beauvoir, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, Plato and Socrates, all in the same evening. Then, we could make love all night and still get to work in the morning.

Seeing Betty had been exciting, a distraction from my fears about completing my dissertation. The mix of alcohol and sex soothed my anxieties and allowed me to give up my fears of intimacy. We made a safe space for one another. When we got too close, one of us would inevitably back away. I had flown to Germany hoping we could break this pattern, but so far, we hadn't been able to. Shrugging away my doubts, I realized that six weeks was hardly a measure of our commitment. More time, I thought. Yes, more time.

Josh was telling me about his practice in Orange County where he was a child psychiatrist. "Mostly, I see kids who can't sit still…. you know, "hyperactivity," as they call it. I refuse to medicate them and tell the mothers to get them into sports programs. The mothers just want the meds, so they go to someone else, I'm pretty sure. So, no good deed goes unpunished," he laughed.

He pulled up to a small vine-covered inn where we found a table overlooking a patio covered with snow. A flame glowed brightly in the fireplace warming us from the drafty trip in the Jeep. I didn't want to drink wine before returning to class, but figured that a shot of schnapps would warm me up and dilute into the bratwurst I ordered.

I raised my glass and proclaimed, "Here's to Vilseck! May it one day be a distant memory!"

Josh laughed and tipped his glass of beer. “Oh, c’mon, it can’t be that bad.”

“Yes, it can and it is!” Like a prisoner released from solitary confinement, I poured out the story of my need to escape academia, travel around Europe, and reclaim a spontaneity I felt I had lost. He was easy to talk to and the time passed quickly as we shared edited stories of our past, finding common threads in growing up in Southern California, loving reading and baseball, and missing Mexican food.

“What I wouldn’t give for a taco!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, taco pescado with salsa verde!” he shot back with a knowing expression of longing and memory.

As we waited for the check, he leaned closer to me as though providing a shelter of secrecy and asked. “So why are you really here?”

A little giddy from the mix of alcohol, rich food and conversation, I laughed, “God, I wish I knew. It’s partly an escape from timetables, and academic bullshit, but it’s also a way to know myself apart from where I grew up—L.A., sunny skies, the pretense of happy little suburbs. If I’m going to be a decent therapist, I need to know more about suffering and hardship. ‘Probably sounds romantic, I know, but there it is, part of it.” I had described “part of it,” and neglected another part, avoiding any mention of my female lover and my need to convince her of my love.

I was careful to speak as though I were a solo wanderer, out on a post-graduate adventure in Europe.

"So, why are you here?" I asked, catching him off guard.

He was quiet for a moment, and then offered, "I'm here because the military sent me and I sure as hell didn't want to go to Vietnam. And then, I'm trying to accept the fact that my marriage is over. I've got two kids. It won't be easy for them."

"I'm sorry," I said. We sat in silence while he paid the bill.

"You know," he said at last. "If you can get to Frankfurt in the next month, I may have a job for you. I was sent here by the U.S. government to open up a health center for teens, dependents of Army personnel. You know, the usual-- the government gives out anti-drug money and the mental health people do family therapy."

I could hardly contain my excitement. Since Betty's next assignment would be in Frankfurt, Josh's invitation might just allow us to live together and each have an income. Besides, I could fulfill my dream of working with teenagers, the dream that propelled me from high school teaching to grad school to a job as a psychologist in the Frankfurt Youth Health Center!

" Tell me how to apply and I'll do it! I'll be at the clinic in three weeks."

We drove back slowly to Rose Barracks, the sun fading on the bleak rows of gray buildings which had suddenly taken on a halo of light. We talked briefly about the book I had checked out of the library. Even though the men in my class were all truck mechanics, Josh reasoned, they still wanted to feel that their lives had meaning.

"Read from the chapter about Auschwitz, how even in captivity, the men could choose how to see their world," he suggested.

I wasn't so sure that my students would agree, but I told Josh I would try out some of Frankl's ideas in my class. My sergeants had stopped crossing their arms across their chests, but still refused to answer my questions with more than one-word answers.

As I stood on the steps of the barracks, I promised Josh that I would show up in Frankfurt in three weeks to apply for my first job as a psychologist. There would be an application process—forms, background checks and interviews—but I was confident that I could persuade the selection committee that I was the right person for the job. I just knew it.

I waved good-bye and I ran down the hallway to my room to find an envelope slipped under the door: "Dr. Mehr, please read."

I hurriedly tore it open and started to read:

> Dear Dr. Mehr,
>
> 'Just wanted to let you know that your students from the 27th Maintenance Battalion have requested that you return to teach for another term. I doubt that you'll accept the offer, as I know how lonely your days must be, so I'll also tell you that the U of Maryland has sent me a notice of a position in Izmir, Turkey, starting in January.
>
> It's nice and warm there. You would like it.
>
> Let me know, Eric

I sat down on the bed and began to cry, but my tears soon changed to laughter. Maybe my fortune was changing. Now I had three possible offers: Frankfurt, Izmir and Vilseck. And what was this, "the men of the 27th battalion request that you stay…." After all they put me through! Damn! Damn! Damn! It was all a test and I guess I passed it.

After quickly changing clothes, I trekked across the quad to the classroom where the men were all assembled in a circle, books open, grinning with their own little secret about the visit to the Learning Center. One of them jumped up and offered to help with my briefcase.

"No thanks, Edwards, I can do this." I sat down and grinned back. "So I know what you've been up to—guess this is working, right? You like psychology or you like me, I'm not sure, but I appreciate your visit to Mr. Nielsen and I'll have to think about your offer. For now, I'm going to read you a few pages from a book written by a man you should know—Victor Frankl—and we're going to discuss what it means to you." I paused and let my eyes pass slowly around the circle, looking directly at each man, holding his gaze for just a moment, and then smiling at the group. "You Sons of Bitches!" I barked at them, "You sure fooled me."

They laughed out loud, punching each other's arms, enjoying this moment of recognition. For the next three weeks, now that they could see that their gruffness hadn't driven me away, they began to relate to each other and me. telling stories about their work, bosses and families. By the end of our time together, they were competing over who would carry my briefcase to and from the class.

Gratified by their appreciation, I realized that I had overcome one of the most difficult challenges of my teaching career. I had persuaded a group of truck mechanics in a remote corner of eastern Germany that their lives had meaning and that the lessons of psychology could help them to solve some of their problems with their superiors and their families. As

flattered as I was at their request for me to continue, though, I had two other attractive options—a job in Frankfurt and one in Turkey—so we hugged one another at our last meeting and Edwards presented me with a bottle of Ansbach brandy, with a tiny ribbon tied around the neck.

"I'll miss you guys," I said through tears, "and think of you every time I take a swig of your brandy." They had taught me more valuable lessons than I had learned in many courses in graduate school—how to share abstract ideas in a language that hardworking people from simple backgrounds could understand; how to persevere when rejected; how to show my feelings as well as my thoughts. If a professor can love a room full of rough and rowdy students, I had loved them and I would miss them.

When Betty and I met in Frankfurt, we were eager to see each other, but edgy and evasive. Even though I had applied for the job in Frankfurt I was tempted by the possibility of teaching in Izmir and separating for a while. She seemed indifferent to my decision, so in a moment of frustration, I reserved a seat on an Army transport plane bound for Turkey.

Betty had agreed to drop me off at the train station in Frankfurt where I would take a train to Ramstein Airbase. The morning that I was scheduled to hop a C-47 for Turkey, I stowed my suitcase in the trunk of Betty's Mercedes and rode with her to the Frankfurt

train station in stubborn silence. Much as I hated to leave her, I was certain that this was our final separation. She gave little indication of her feelings. At the parking lot, she offered a swift hug and found a cart for my luggage. I covered my sadness with a casual wave and began pushing the cart to the station. Near the entrance, I heard the blast of a horn and turned to see Betty speeding along the street, horn honking, lights flashing, her fists beating on the steering wheel.

She screeched to a halt, threw open the car door, jumped out and ran toward me.

"Hey, you, wait a minute!" she called, her hands waving in the air.

"What's wrong?" I yelled.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" she said, now standing squarely in front of me.

A few Germans paused in surprise at two grown women flailing at one another in heated argument. Satisfied that they were just ill mannered Americans, the Germans shrugged and continued on their way.

"I'm catching the God damned train!" I shouted.

"Just like that? You're leaving?" Betty called.

"Well, yeah, just like that. You let me go…. I'm going!"

"I made a mistake! *You're* making a mistake! Stay here and let's work this out! Can't you see I love you?"

"No, I don't see it," I said softly. "Do you?"

"Yes!" she whispered, "I do," and grabbed my luggage cart.

"I don't have a job!" I called to her as she pushed the cart towards the car.

"Call Josh…tell him you want the job at the Youth Health Center. We'll get an apartment, you and I, and live together. Go on. Find a phone!"

"All right!" As I turned around to look for a phone booth, she pulled me toward her an enfolded me in a long embrace.

"All right, Betty. We're going to make this work," I whispered.

Chapter Six — Opening the Door

"In everything else, I was out in front. In the open. But here's one piece of my life that wasn't at all. That'll kill you."

- Henry Finch, Former Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina, after being stripped of his post for being openly gay

I returned to Los Angeles in 1974, more confident of myself as a psychologist and more secure as a lesbian, although still not out to many people. Spending two years in Europe had been the right way to recover from the academic exercise of getting a Ph.D. The pressures had been intense and I hadn't always made good decisions, but I had achieved a goal that I had never imagined as a child. I had moved from being a high school teacher to becoming a psychologist employed in a medical setting with professionals I respected. I had also survived two years of working with the military, trying to stay true to the ideals I had embraced in graduate school. Betty and I had grown closer and more trusting of each other. Still, living in the closet was becoming stifling. No matter the price, I knew that I couldn't keep hiding such an important part of myself.

Now, I was flying back to Los Angeles to a new life. As the pilot of the Boeing 747 announced over the loudspeaker, "We will be landing at LAX in 25-minutes. I felt a surge of excitement. From my seat near the window, I could see the snow-capped tips of the San Gabriel Mountains forming a border into the vast basin below.

Betty had left for the States a month ago, planning to find an apartment. Now, I was following her to a city of suburbs, little enclaves where I had grown up and begun to form as an adult: Hollydale, where I had lived with my parents for my first eighteen years, obeying the rules as a good Mormon girl, getting good grades and learning to drive; Manhattan Beach, where I had rented my first apartment as a newly-hired teacher, made love to a woman; and now, the hills of Silver lake, where we would live in an apartment overlooking the reservoir, perched on a hilltop near the hospital where I hoped to work. Though giddy with anticipation, I needed a minute of reassurance from Betty, and so drew a letter from my backpack to read one more time:

After reassuring me of her love and offering to declare it in any train station in the world, she admitted that she had let me down in serious ways.

The part I wanted to hear came next. "You are my forever love and if I can ever get over my need to be adored, you will be my only love. No promises, but

I'm going back to therapy and try to face some of the demons I met while growing up in the Bronx." The captain announced our descent as I read the last line, "I miss you, I love you, please come back soon. Love, Betty."

Despite my brief affair with Josh, I was pretty sure that I could commit myself to Betty and I hoped that she could do the same. Josh had written to me several times, but he was in the middle of a divorce and I knew my feelings were stronger for Betty. Still, I was cautious about believing her promises. She planned to resume her job at a community college, El Camino, in Los Angeles, while I stayed on in Frankfurt to allow for unhurried good-byes to patients and friends. During that month, Betty's letters were warm and loving, full of her search for a place for us to live. The last letter ended with a description of "the most charming two-bedroom Spanish-style apartment--tile roofs and white stucco, high up in the hills of Silver Lake overlooking the downtown skyline of Los Angeles. You'll love it! " She finished with a surprising postscript: "Did I tell you that USC has offered me a full-time job? I'm honored, but worried about the salary—one-third of what I'm making at El Camino--let's talk."

If everything worked out, we would both have new jobs, a new apartment and a new start on our relationship. Our two years in Frankfurt had been

disturbing and turbulent as well as passionate and loving. We had taught and counseled in a military culture that was often alien to our beliefs. In graduate school, we had been taught to challenge authority, to take risks and speak our own truths. No one had prepared us for challenging soldiers who had been trained to obey authority, adhere to the orders of superiors and follow the "chain of command" without question. Reminding ourselves that even Sartre and DE Beauvoir concealed their beliefs during the Occupation, we were careful, but still challenged these soldiers to understand that they had choices.

And so did we. Somehow, we had stayed together, exploring the medieval cities of Europe, delighting in discovering art and history of ancient cities. We were good companions, drawn from different backgrounds, but sharing the same curiosity about new places and a willingness to laugh when things went wrong.

I had never shared myself with anyone as deeply as I had with Betty, so I overlooked her flirtations and affairs, thinking that in time she would tire of all the drama. Over the past month, she had been so romantic and devoted in her letters that I hoped that I could be enough for her. I reminded myself that I had wished this before, only to end up going to a party, having a few drinks and watching Betty turn on the charm and let the games begin. I had lived with this chaos in

Europe, but I wanted to find out what it would be like just to love one another and find some peace.

As the plane descended into the wide desert basin south of L.A., covered with endless carbon copies of housing tracts, my eyes took awhile to adjust to the loss of greenery, the absence of fog and clouds typical of Frankfurt weather. My self-imposed retreat was over. I had made the transition from high school teacher to graduate student to psychologist in a medical setting. My professional identity was more secure than my personal one, but I wasn't ready to give up on Betty. I was home and Betty was waiting at the gate with a bouquet of red roses.

"I'm so happy you're here," she said, tearfully.

I threw my arms around her and started to cry as well.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Was the trip O.K.?"

"Just fine. It's great to be home. I've missed you so much."

Riding home with Betty in her blue Mercedes, I let my eyes become accustomed to the flat desert landscape and the bright sunlight of L.A. We talked about friends, re-connecting with each other and enjoying the special excitement of reunion.

As we turned off the freeway and stopped at the first red light, she grew quiet and then said. "You know, I don't know what to do about the job offer

from USC. It's such an honor—a chance to teach and write and work with Abe—I never expected it."

I knew how she idealized Abe, the fiery challenging professor of our grad school classes, and a comrade from the Bronx who understood what it meant to leave his gritty neighborhood and leap into a sunny California paradise. He had been our champion, provoking us to leave the confines of our 50's upbringing, introducing us to all the heroes of the French resistance, infusing our boring counseling texts with readings by Camus and Sartre and DE Beauvoir.

"So, what's the problem? Why hesitate?"

She stepped on the gas and we started up the hill to our new home. "A cut in pay, for starters, like almost two-thirds less than what I'm making now. My Mother thinks I've come unglued to even consider it."

I started to laugh, imagining her mother's unbridled opinion. "Bertie," as we called her, never left anyone in doubt about what she thought."Anyhow, let's talk later," she said, as we pulled up to a white stucco, red-tiled duplex. "You'll just *love* the apartment! And you must meet our new downstairs neighbor. Steve's a southerner—but I haven't held that against him—gay, red-haired and a doctor at USC, at the med school. He wanted our apartment, but I got there first. So, once again, a damned Yankee wins!"

I laughed at the image of the tall dark-haired New Yorker and the slim red-haired southerner fighting it

out over an apartment in the Silver Lake Hills. Steve was now standing in front of the apartment watering a row of dahlias. The duplex was just as Betty had described it--two-story Mediterranean, white stucco walls--but she had neglected to mention the purple bougainvillea everywhere. I felt as though I were entering a tropical paradise.

After Betty introduced us and Steve offered to carry our luggage in, he insisted that we join him in his downstairs apartment for coffee. Settling around his kitchen table, I told him that my Medical Director in Frankfurt had given me an introduction to the Chief of Adolescent Medicine at Children's Hospital. He was enthusiastic about the job, but not about coming out to anyone. Betty had told him we were lovers, so he offered some brotherly advice.

He sipped his coffee and said softly, "The medical world is very conservative. Just be careful about telling anyone that you're gay."

Although I had no intention of announcing that I was gay, I was starting to feel uneasy about all the many evasions I had used to cover up my love of women. In my last job, my co-workers in Germany had just assumed I was straight and I went along with the pretense, although, of course, there had been Josh. Apparently, he had never told anyone about my relationship with Betty, so I let people assume

whatever they wanted, and they wanted to see me as straight.

I had suppressed an important part of myself to survive for two years in the military and Steve was telling me that I'd have to do the same in a medical culture. Another island of exile, I thought to myself. For now, I would stop worrying about whether Children's Hospital was homophobic and discover the culture on my own. I was eager to find a job, especially one involving teenagers. Soon after unpacking, I called the Chief of Adolescent Medicine, Bill McInnis, who wanted to add a half-time psychologist to his staff.

I met Dr. McInnis for an interview at The Adolescent Clinic, near the corner of Sunset and Vine. The clinic, a two-story stucco building opposite the entrance to the hospital, was detached enough from the main structure that teenagers could feel separate from children. The walls of the waiting room were decorated with posters of rock musicians and movie stars on the walls welcoming all those passing from childhood to adulthood, however long it took them. .

Bill McInnis looked like a teenager himself, with long shoulder length hair and a Sergeant Pepper mustache. In our talk, which lasted for an hour and a half, he told me about himself-- a graduate of McGill, eager to escape the frigid winters of Montreal for the perennial summers of Los Angeles, and an advocate for a new field of Pediatrics--Adolescent Medicine.

Like many of those drawn to the storm and turmoil of the teenage years, Bill was creative and expansive, imaginative and visionary. His excitement about creating a center where teens could be seen. not just as "large children or little adults," was contagious, and I listened attentively to his dream of building a center for teenagers in the heart of Hollywood, where a staff of people like himself, people who weren't afraid of troubled youth, were willing to try new solutions to their problems, would come together and make a difference.

Finally, he took a breath and asked me to lunch. Over a table in the doctors' cafeteria, he asked me at last about myself. I told him about how my frustration as a high school teacher had led me to return to school to become a psychologist which led me to the challenge of working with Army kids and their families. He seemed interested in my journey, so I told him how I had gotten toughened truck mechanics to reflect upon their lives, how I had met with a four-star general who had agreed to join his family for a therapy conference, but only if he could climb up the backstairs so he wouldn't be recognized. Bill understood my message. *I could handle whatever came my way.*

Bill set his fork down and looked directly at me. "You know what I'm looking for?" I raised my eyebrows quizzically. "I'm looking for someone

who'll take risks and you're the one I want on my team."

"You mean you don't want to hear about "Systems Therapy," and Haley and Minuchin, and all the new theories of family treatment?"

"Nope, 'don't need to. That's your department." He looked at his watch and I suspected that he appeared to know more about psychology than he actually did, but I was also pretending to know more about medicine than I did, so we were both trying to impress each other. All fine. We shook hands in the circular driveway in front of the main building. He assured me that he would find funding for my position, and that I could start in a month.

Before returning to my new car, a small sensible Dodge compact, bought with my remaining savings, I crossed the driveway from the clinic to the hospital. I wanted to savor my new job offer, a dream job, working with teenagers, their families and a whole team of like-minded health care professionals. I had feared that I had given up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in Frankfurt, but I had now found a position that promised to be as good or better.

Sitting in the waiting room, I watched children and their families entering through the glass doors beneath an arch marked, "Children's Hospital of Los Angeles—Welcome." Suddenly, a memory surfaced that I had completely forgotten. I had come here with

my mother and brother in 1946, when I was eight years old. We had traveled by streetcar to the corner of Sunset and Hollywood, walked through the nearby arch and taken an elevator to a surgical floor where my mother met with doctors and left my brother behind to have a cyst surgically removed from his forehead. Everyone had treated us all with such extreme kindness that even then I wanted to be one of the people--doctors, nurses, social workers—who made us feel safe and loved. I wanted to be one of those people.

I knew that fitting in to a medical culture would be challenging, particularly with my unusual Existential psychology background in a science-based setting. Even though I had survived teaching in Vilseck and made a place for myself in Frankfurt, I was still worried about proving myself in a medical culture. Psychologists were still relatively new to hospital settings and I would have to create my own role and convince busy doctors of my worth. When, as a child, I sat with my mother waiting for my brother to be discharged, I had wanted to find out how to make children healthy again, to be a member of a society that seemed almost magical, its rites and rituals unknown to me. And, now, twenty-five years later, I had returned and would soon become part of a team, devoted to caring and healing.

I drove the short distance from the hospital, to our apartment eager to tell Betty the news. She was both

happy and relieved not to have both of us relying on her reduced salary from USC. After deliberating endlessly about giving up her job as a counselor at El Camino, she had realized that being a professor would be far more challenging than filling out class schedules for college students. I thought so, too. As we began to resume our lives in Los Angeles, we discovered new political groups advocating both for women and for gays. One afternoon, I came home from work to see Betty sitting on our deck, sipping a Scotch and sifting through the day's mail. She opened an envelope addressed to the two of us.

"Hey, take a look at this!" she exclaimed, waving a small white card in the air. "An invitation from the Southern California Women for Understanding to attend a 'special interest rap to discuss how to tell your family and friends that you're gay! You've got to be kidding!"

"No, come on, let me see this," I said as I grabbed the card from her hand. "Who's sponsoring this? Dr. Betty Berzon and Myra Riddel…well, they're okay…activists….not crazy….let's go!" I poured myself a glass of wine and we began to talk about what these two women were doing, still not trusting the wisdom of being open with our parents, a thought we found awkward and strange. On another level, we doubted that lesbian women could form a powerful

enough lobby to bring about change. *Who would listen to us if we did come out?*

We were starting to catch up with the social and political changes that had taken place in our absence. As we watched the sunset, I began to wonder if we had started drinking more to make ourselves more comfortable in meeting new friends, but let the thought drift away in the afternoon haze. We would go to meetings and listen to women speak about their lives with a pride that neither of us had heard before. In the past, the lesbian women we knew would gather secretly in bars or one another's homes, mostly sharing stories of friends who were either breaking up or moving in with new lovers. Our friends had come of age during the 1950's and 1960's and grown into adulthood too frightened to tell anyone but a trusted few about their feelings for women, always speaking under a cloud of shame often diluted by alcohol.

"You know," Betty said that afternoon as she watched the lights turn on, lighting up downtown L.A. "I've had enough of hiding. Let's go to the meeting and listen to what they have to say."

"I agree," I said, touching her shoulder. "Let's go. Just don't sign anything."

Betty had always been more closeted than I, dividing her life into two separate spheres, giving parties for her straight colleagues, while meeting gay women in their homes or at bars. A few years younger

than she, I had been more open, coming out to my friends, gay and straight, but not to my colleagues. Both of us knew we could be fired for being openly gay and both of us needed to support ourselves. Besides, we carried the serious baggage of guilt and shame at falling short of the expectations of our families and our traditional culture.

Equally serious, however, was our graduate school exposure to the Existentialist writers who insisted that people have a choice—to risk/not to risk—to be true to yourself or to hide and give power to those who might expose you.

After meeting with the SWUU women, we began to see how we had all been affected by our culture and family as lesbians. Betty and I continued to talk about the subjects raised in the group: hiding at work, concealing ourselves with families, covering up with friends. As one of the women said, "Unless we come out, no one will know us and nothing will change." There were still more conversations between ourselves about whether and how to come out. We decided to invite Steve, our neighbor to coffee and ask for his advice. As a physician who had worked in both academia and medicine, Steve had spoken out before, cautioning us against coming out at work, but we both hoped he had changed his mind.

This time, he was adamant. "I have three words," he said, brushing back his copper-colored hair. "Don't

do it. Once you tell people you're gay, the word is out there. You can never take it back. Believe me, you'll be sorry!"

Betty got up, refilled our coffee cups, looked down at both of us and said, "Well, are we going to join the Vichy government or not?"

"Oh, Betty, c'mon," I said. "It's not that dramatic!" he said, but I wasn't sure.

"Look," Betty said, "things have been changing since we've been away. What about all the reading we've been doing? What about the lesbian and gay political groups, the therapist groups, the demonstrations? The train is leaving the station."

Though Steve wasn't sure, I was. We had read Betty Friedan, Charlotte Bunch, Gloria Steinem on feminism, and then Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation,* Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* and Abbott and Love's *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman*—and found ourselves on every page. Our people were finally finding a voice. We had recently been invited to two more political organizations: David Mixner invited Betty to join the board of the Municipal Elections Committee (MECLA), a new group forming to elect gays and lesbians to office; and, Betty Berzon asked me to join the Gay Academic Union, a gathering of teachers and professors who met monthly to discuss discrimination in their classrooms and schools. Both David and Betty were well-respected leaders in the Los

Angeles gay and lesbian community and their invitations strengthened our resolve to come out and risk the consequences.

We had also started a small group, The Lesbian Therapists Union, where we invited a group of other psychologists and social workers to meet in our home. At first, we talked about ourselves, sharing our experiences of oppression and hiding. Then, we began to see these same patterns in our lesbian patients, how they blamed themselves for loving women, disappointing their families and falling short of society's expectations. Slowly, we began to share some of our own experiences with our clients and could see the relief and healing that followed.

We both still needed a push at work. It came from a most unexpected place. Betty came home and told me that our former professor, Abe Selznick, was jealous over her success as a professor and had begun spreading rumors about her being gay. I was angry that he was threatening her. I was even angrier to recognize that we lived in a world where our love of women was a weapon people could use to hurt us. I was tired of hiding my real self and so was Betty. We knew that she had to come out at work and as her partner, I would come out, too.

Abe had always supported Betty, urging her to apply for the position at USC and offering space for her to start a private practice in his offices in Beverly

Hills. As a mentor, he had been engaging and charismatic, but as a colleague, he soon became competitive. After Betty opposed him at an open meeting, she noticed arbitrary changes in her teaching schedule, class changes, and students dropping out without reason. Suspecting Abe of manipulating the schedule, she went to his office to confront him. "How dare you question my authority!" he yelled and threw open the door. "Get out!"

Hearing about a whisper campaign alleging that she was a lesbian who was trying to recruit students to her "lifestyle," Betty complained to her department chair, Jim Butler, who dithered about taking action. Finally, she stood up and said, "Look, Jim, I am gay, but I'm not "recruiting" students, whatever that means. If the slanders don't stop, I'm taking legal action. In fact, I met with Gloria Allred last week."

Since Jim knew about Gloria, the prominent feminist L.A. attorney, he realized she brought national attention to her cases through her savvy use of the media. At the mention of her name, Jim stood up, shook Betty's hand and said, "I'll take this to the Dean today. Abe has to be stopped."

Fortunately, Abe resigned after he entered the academic hearing room and saw the many faces of those willing to testify against him. I admired Betty's courage, not only for fighting for herself, but for being willing to admit that she was gay. No woman ever

came forward to say that she was "recruited" by Betty. With Abe's resignation, we both lost someone we had idealized, whose convictions had seemed real, who urged us to be authentic and real, but who failed to follow his own precepts. Ironically, what we learned from him enabled Betty to face her fear of being exposed and to fight back against a dangerous man.

At my new job, I had my own fears about coming out. I hadn't said anything to Bill McInnis about my personal life, nor had he asked. Then, when approached by another psychologist at the hospital about joining a women's consciousness group of other mental health professionals, I worried about whether to tell them I was gay and whether rumors might follow my disclosure. Still, I was beginning to feel a real strain in being so cautious about my personal life. Now, I wanted to find out what it would feel like to be myself without wearing a camouflage suit, so I responded eagerly to their invitation.

Our first meeting was at the psychologist's apartment, Mary Winston, who lived a few blocks from the hospital. I arrived to find seven other women sitting in a circle, drinking tea or coffee, and making small talk. Mary began the meeting by suggesting that each of us take three minutes to talk about herself, her beliefs and experiences, whatever was on her mind. The only rules were that we don't tell anyone outside the groups what anyone has said and that we never

interrupt a speaker, holding all of our comments until everyone had finished. Since women were so often interrupted in their daily lives, Mary insisted, we should simply listen to one another. The three minutes allotted to each speaker belonged entirely to her, even if she preferred to spend them in silence.

That meeting was like a medieval coven around a campfire where we all told stories, laughed, sometimes cried, sometimes remained silent. The experience was liberating. None of us had ever realized how frequently other people stopped us, contradicted us, or ignored us. Here, we could complete a sentence, a paragraph, a whole page of thoughts, even if we rambled, lost our place, and bored everyone to death.

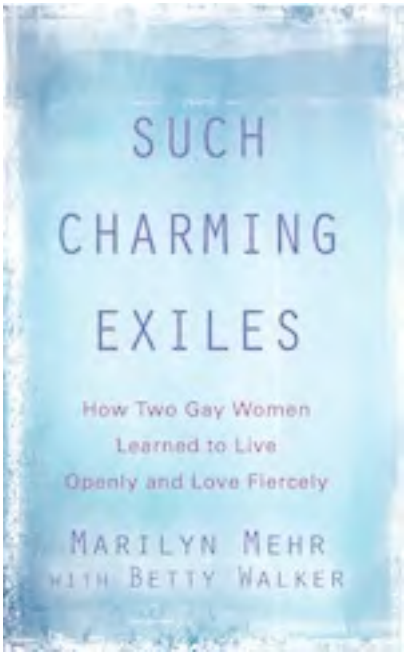
When it was my turn, I took a deep breath and began. "My name is Marilyn Mehr and I've just returned from a job in Germany with my partner, a woman named Betty. I'm gay." True to our agreement, the group members were silent. I checked their faces to see whether I could read their reactions. I saw a few smiles, a few raised eyebrows as though asking me to continue, and heard one cough.

I continued. "I've never said this to a group of people I don't know well, but I'm tired of hiding such an important part of my life. I want to take the energy I've been using to hide out and begin building my career--writing some articles, develop a practice—free

of the fear of exposure. That's it, I'm gay and thank you for listening."

Another long minute of my time remained; we all spent it in utter silence. I was scared. I tried to imagine what others were thinking, but their faces were opaque. If they asked me to leave, I thought, well, so be it. I'll be embarrassed, but not ashamed. Finally, the next speaker began, introduced herself, told us about her conflict with the Chief of Hematology and we moved ahead. After we finished the round, we talked freely for a while and most of the women expressed appreciation for my disclosure.

Driving home in the waning light, I felt that I had crossed a threshold. I had opened the door of a closet that had suffocated me for too long. Whatever the consequences of my declaration, I would face them and become more wholly myself. I loved men and felt attracted to them still, but I couldn't conceal my feelings for women if I were to build an honest life with Betty. And we were going to build an honest life. That afternoon we talked about the airless closet we had lived in for most of our lives and decided to enter therapy together to open the door forever.



How honesty and courage transform lives of two gay women.

SUCH CHARMING EXILES: How Two Gay Women Learned to Live Openly and Love Fiercely

by Marilyn Mehr and Betty Walker