

# DAVID EBERSHOFF

*Letter Home*

*July 2011—July 1984*

*Dear David,*

Let's get a few things out of the way. Yes, you have a boyfriend. No, he isn't a professional tennis player. Yes, you own a car. No, it isn't a black Rabbit convertible. Yes, you got into college. No, it wasn't Princeton — but that wouldn't have been the right place for you. Yes, everyone knows you're gay. No, people didn't freak out. Most people already knew anyway.

The other day I was on my yoga mat — I know, yoga; I didn't see that one coming either — when I thought of you in that long hot summer of 1984 when you never felt more alone. A few things came to mind: your corduroy Op shorts growing loose on your waist because you were too anxious to eat; the round tortoiseshell glasses always smudged with fingerprints; and the red Schwinn bicycle you rode all over Pasadena just to escape your life. It's been

a while since I thought of you behind your bedroom door moaning with the Smiths ("How Soon Is Now?") and the Thompson Twins ("Hold Me Now"). I was trying to figure out what you might want to hear from me in the future — what I could possibly say that Morrissey wasn't already teaching you. After all, what is more trenchant, and true, than *I'm human and need to be loved, just like everybody else does.*

There's this slogan going around these days — It Gets Better. While that's mostly true — being gay gets better, or at least easier — I realized those words wouldn't completely resonate with you. You've never been one for pick-me-ups or complex feelings boiled down to catch phrases. Your skepticism of the trendy is admirable (if a bit trendy itself). Anyway, here's what I want you to know, and I hope you take this the right way: Stop waiting for the future because the person you are today is in many ways the person you will be.

And that's the good news!

I'm not saying you won't evolve. I'm not saying your life won't improve. I'm not saying that the sucky parts of being David E — the tortured shyness, the alone-ness, the back acne — won't abate. What I'm saying is this: If you want to save yourself a lot of time and get on with the business of living happily, you might want to understand yourself a little better now. The best parts of who you are today will affect who you'll become — can become, I should say. Yes, part of this is about being gay and coming to love yourself. That's important — essential in fact. But I'm actually talking about something larger. I'm talking about your core beliefs. The things and principles you most value in life. I know you roll your eyes at

words like values and beliefs and principles. See, there they go turning behind your glasses. (Sidebar: In a few years you'll give up the goggles for contact lenses.) The reason these words make you cynical is because you've heard them primarily from the mouths of cynical people whom you rightly distrust — the hateful preachers, lying politicians, anyone who says you are wrong or *less* because you keep crushing on boys. (Another sidebar: no need to waste your entire senior year hearting after Jeff. He isn't gay, and tucking anonymous notes under his windshield wiper isn't going to change that.) Those people say they are talking about values and principles and beliefs — but they aren't. You already know this.

But what you don't know, or at least haven't yet articulated to yourself, is that you have strong — very strong — values and principles and beliefs yourself. These beliefs will guide you for the rest of your life, if you let them. If you don't ignore them. If you refuse to let others diminish them. These beliefs already help define who you are. If you hang on to them and don't let them get muddled up in ideas that aren't important to you, they will guide you to the best version of yourself, which is just another way of saying leading a happy life.

Take for example your belief in words.

You love to read. Eudora Welty, with her cat's-eye glasses and the hump atop her spine, is your hero. *The Stranger* terrified you, although you're not sure why. You giggled along with Jane Austen, thinking you were the only one getting her irony. And *Wuthering Heights* revealed a storm in your heart that will never really go away. Guess what — this profound connection with books isn't going to change. In fact, that's going to be a core part of who you are. It

will be a big part of how the world knows you. Through words and books. I know that seems unlikely for a boy from the smoggy suburbs of Los Angeles, but it's true. It will only become true, however, once you ask yourself directly and sincerely what you truly believe in. For some reason, I didn't ask that question of myself until I was in my mid-twenties, despite the powerful feelings books created in me. Had I asked it when I was your age I would have been able to answer it, because the answer was already there.

Look, I know this summer feels eternal. There's a heat wave. And a smog alert. It's too hot to be outside and yet every day your mom, before she leaves for work, tells you to go out and *do something*. But what? You don't have any plans except the daily training for cross-country. You don't have a job. You don't have a driver's license. And, let's face it, you don't have many friends. Yet as drifting as this summer feels, in fact it's turning into a great project that will forever shape you. Don't believe me? Ask yourself how you've spent your days. That's right, reading. Devouring books like they were food.

When you were younger, whenever you complained about being bored your mom would say, "Read a book." That's what you've been doing this summer, almost a book a day. Except this is the summer you discovered that the Pasadena Public Library — yes, conservative old Pasadena — carries gay books. Books that are either about men who love men like *A Boy's Own Story*, *Maurice*, *Giovanni's Room*, or books like the plays of Tennessee Williams and *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* that have a gay sensibility that you recognize. You've been inhaling these books for weeks, each one shoring up your own belief in yourself. You've fallen into a summer

routine. You get up and ride to the Pasadena Public Library and find a book that has anything to do with gay and take it to a quiet corner and read all day. You don't dare check it out because that would leave a record of your instincts. Most of the time you finish before you have to go home for dinner. When you don't, you hide the book on a remote shelf so that you won't have to encounter a librarian over re-shelving and reserving. The next day you return to keep reading. Again and again and again. This is how you discover Thomas Mann and Carson McCullers and Joe Orton. How you first read Armistead Maupin and Rita Mae Brown. How you met the words of a writer you'll always revere, Edmund White.

One day not long ago something unlikely happened. You ran out of gay books. You read your way through the library's limited collection of queer. Your discreet search of the card catalog turned up nothing new. You weren't brave enough to ask the librarian for a suggestion. Instead you rode the red Schwinn over to the Pasadena Plaza. On the mall's second floor you hunted around Waldenbooks until you found the small gay and lesbian section at the back of the store, next to health and fitness with that oversized exercise book called *Buns!* staring at you. Trembling, you bought your first gay book, *Forgetting Elena* by Edmund White, with the money you earned babysitting Friday and Saturday nights for the past two years. Back in your bedroom you read it in an afternoon. Though you barely understood it, its mood of longing felt exactly how you've been feeling all summer—the hot sun, the hypersensitivity to male flesh, the endless cycle of longing and hunting and devouring.

Now you have a new routine: up in the morning, on the Schwinn, and over to Walden for another book. Today, it's *Family Dancing* by David Leavitt, the Warner mass market paperback with wet footprints on the cover. You buy the book, frightened the clerk will figure you out (in fact, he's too stoned to care) and bicycle home in something of a trance, the little plastic Walden bag dangling from your wrist. The house is empty and you run to your room and fling yourself on your bed and begin to read. And read and read and read. These stories are about young gay men from middle class families in California — men who could be you in a few years! How much you recognize — the swimming pools and the mothers who drive station wagons and sunbathe in bikinis and cocoa butter and their sons who break from the family in search of love. All of it feels like you.

No one will be home until 4:30 or 5:00, but you must read quickly. You don't stop to eat. You don't stop to do anything except maybe pee. You don't want to stop because this summer, for the first time, you are seeing evidence of yourself beyond yourself, if you know what I mean. Evidence in black ink and cheap mass market pulp that your existence is worthy of print. Proof that you're not alone in this cyclone of feelings. It's late July and you've been doing this for two weeks now, maybe ten books bought and read in this adolescent fever dream of words. You don't pause to analyze the books or their layers of meaning. All you want from them is what they mean to you. The recognition of emotions. The recognition of impulses. The mirror on the page. All you are doing is reading and feeling and you've never felt more free. The words are saving you from yourself.

At around 3:30, with the thought of Mom pulling up the driveway

in her paneled estate wagon, you finish the book. Another day and another book and another day of inching closer to a kind of love you've never felt before — a love for these words, for these pages, and, eventually, yourself. Although you love the book in your hand, although the last five hours of your life disappeared because of the words on these pages, you also know you must get rid of the book. You are fifteen. You aren't prepared for the world to know that this is what you love — that the great loves of your life will have to do with *this*. Men and words. Loving men and loving words. That these are your great passions and they will always be intertwined somehow. With each passing day, and each new book, you come closer to understanding this. Still, you can't let anyone know this and so you must get rid of the evidence: the book. It can't sit on your shelf. In your heart, yes. But not on your shelf.

When they say it gets better, for you, David, this is what that means. After this long summer you will never again have to do what you're about to do. You take *Family Dancing* outside behind the garage. You drop it into an empty aluminum trash bin. You look at it, at the paperback cover you held so tightly that it's now creased, and you douse it in Kingsford lighter fluid (from one of those metal squeezable cans). You open a matchbook pocketed at Ariba! (your mom's favorite Mexican restaurant) and you drop the small flame into the can. You burn the book you just read. You get rid of it. You watch the flames eat the words — just as you ate the words all day — until they are no more. Not only are you eliminating your greatest love, you are destroying evidence of it. For no one must know that you are drawn to stories about men who

love each other. That you long to read more stories like this, and one day write them too. You poke the black pages with a stick until they are ash. Then you throw a little dirt into the bin and go back to your room. You did this two weeks ago with *Forgetting Elena* and you did this yesterday with *Dancer from the Dance* and you'll do it tomorrow and I'm writing you today to tell you after this summer you'll never do this again.

Here's the miracle: those words you burned in the trash bin? They're still with you. Not verbatim, of course. But the feelings they created have stayed for almost thirty years. You can't know this now, but this hot summer of books is creating your future. Your love of books will become so great that you will create a life around them. You will become a writer, an editor, a teacher. All of it about words. You will have many friends, and a couple of boy-friends, who come into your life because of words. Your happiest hours will be when you are working to find the right words. You will become a professional word nerd not because of career ambition but because the love those books this summer have given you.

That's what I want you to know. Yes, your life will change. Yes, things will get better. Yes, that feeling of being trapped will go away. But not everything will change, thankfully. I want you to notice what you love the most right now, today — for this will guide you a long, long way.

Love,

*David*