

**Week 9**  
**Arts as**  
**Communication**

# Skeleton Key

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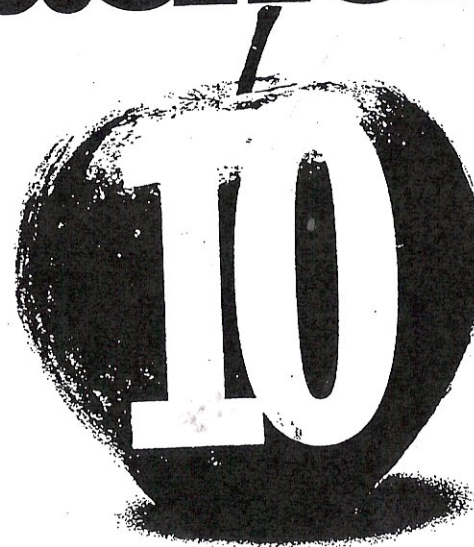
I live in the country, nestled among the hills and fields stretching between Iowa's cities; where I can watch deer browsing on the hayfield at evening; where I must stop my car in the lane so thirty-seven wild turkey may pass on their morning trek to breakfast; where my girlfriend, Sandy, and I work a 640-acre family farm. When I went back to college in 1985 (not so much tired of farming as hungry for company and the sense of affecting the world), I went to round out a bachelor's degree with the course work necessary to certify myself to teach in secondary school. I intended to teach in the country, in one of those red brick buildings that, except for the feed mill, is the tallest one in the town. I intended to open a few insular minds.

Iowa's rural schools keep the steady beat of local life pumping. The seasons here are marked not by solstices, but by school calendars, which darken parks and swimming pools, lighting athletic fields, band rooms, drama stages. Parents know and care about what teachers do, and think, and are. They may see the inside of the gymnasium far more often than the insides of our classrooms, but they know what's going on there, in their school.

So, when it came time to interview for teaching jobs, I knew two things: I'd teach in a fishbowl; and having been an out, farming, politically active lesbian for more than ten years, I wouldn't land a job anywhere near home. I got out an Iowa highways map and a compass I hadn't used since tenth-grade Geometry. Setting the point of the compass down in the heart of our farm, I began to draw concentric circles around us: twenty miles in radius, thirty, forty, fifty. I'd be willing to drive sixty miles one way, I decided, if it would give me some experience in the classroom, some effect on the world, and not force me to leave the farm or my girlfriend. I applied to every school

"Read *One Teacher in 10*—and weep." —*The Advocate*

# One teacher in



*Gay and lesbian educators tell their stories*

**Edited by Kevin Jennings**

district with a secondary job opening in that sixty-mile radius, and hunkered down to wait.

In the meantime, Sandy's father, principal of a nearby elementary school, said very shyly one afternoon, "What will you say in the interview, about your, uh, living situation?"

"As little as possible," I answered. "I'm walking into those interviews with a four-point grade average and letters of recommendation that glow in your hands. I'll dazzle 'em with pedagogical theory."

He looked somberly back. "All that won't mean a thing if you seem suspicious."

"Suspicious," I laughed. "What's suspicious about a thirty-year-old back-to-the-lander wanting to be a schoolteacher in her middle age?"

"A woman," he said levelly, trying hard to make me see sense as he saw it, "unmarried and attached in some mysterious way to a farm, is suspicious. You can acknowledge ten years of farm labor on your resume because it's honorable-enough work. But they're going to want to know with whom you've been doing it."

"It's none of their business," I countered angrily. "It's against the law to ask if I'm married."

"Hope," he said, his forty-odd years of principalship rising authoritatively in his voice, "it's time you thought up a good lie or two."

Every nerve in my body tingled resistance. "I don't want to live on lies," I groaned. "In silence for a year or two maybe, but not on lies."

He shook his head. "There won't be silence. Not if you don't tell them something from the very beginning that will prevent their asking anything else." He looked across the oak table his daughter had made the first year she'd worked the farm alone. "How would a woman your age, born and raised in the city, come to spend her twenties on a farm?"

I sighed and then smiled naughtily at his daughter. "Fell in love with a farmer."

He winced visibly and I stopped being a brat. "Married a farmer," I corrected myself.

"Okay," he shook his head. "But you don't want to tell them you're married and have to live with a missing husband. How'd you end up with that husband's farm?"

"He died," I groaned. "Farm accident."

The old principal nodded his head slowly, testing out the credibility of the story. "What kind?"

"No way," I groaned again. "I'm not getting into this, a million invented details I'll have to keep straight."

"Exactly," Sandy said very quietly, as depressed with the need for the lie as I, "so the answer to how he died has to be something they won't ask questions about."

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I turned down the first job offer because the "extra duties" included coaching a cheerleading squad. I didn't get the second job because, when they told me I'd need to choose between cheerleading and pompoms, I said, "I don't approve of teenage girls wiggling their asses on a basketball court." I didn't get the third job, teaching developmental reading and Native American literature in a school populated largely by members of the Mesquakie tribe, because they found an equally qualified Hawaiian and, I had to agree, a nonwhite teacher was more desirable than I. By the fourth interview, the quiet lie barely rankled.

"You live in, let's see, Dundee — that must be sixty miles from here, isn't it?" he queried.

"Almost seventy-five. But it'll be a beautiful commute. Good roads. Time every morning to think about what I'm going to do."

"So, you plan to stay in Dundee?"

"Yes, sir. It's hard to move a 640-acre farm."

"Oh, you're married to a farmer."

"Was." Pregnant pause. Make him feel his own prying.

"Your husband, uh...?"

"Committed suicide."

"Ah. Yes. I'm sorry. And journalism: you're willing to sponsor the newspaper, or perhaps advise the yearbook staff?"

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A quiet lie, no embellishments, like a skeleton key. It unlocked a number of doors, not least of them the heavy fire door on the red brick building at the top of the hill in Traer, Iowa. Like most Iowa schools, it was a very good one, with a competent, deeply entrenched faculty, a solid curriculum, very little social vision, and a sore need for an idealist in the English department. That quiet lie unlocked the door to Room 311, where a superintendent and a principal who hired me for my credentials left me alone to do what I thought fit; to structure my own curriculum, to write my own rationales, to choose the texts and

the contents my students and I would discuss. And maybe, most important, that quiet lie unlocked the barriers many of my students would have built around themselves had they known I was a lesbian.

It was difficult enough, believe me, for them to accept a strong, independent, liberal, unmarried woman, who drove more than an hour every morning to appear before them, her knuckles gouged and scabbed over with farmwork, the hands that tousled their hair caloused against their cheeks. Insecure and sexist, my male students resented having before them living proof that a woman could, even in physical labor, be their equal. Insecure and sexist, my female students resented having before them someone refusing to play the femininity game: no skirts, no heels, no makeup, and somehow still likable. It took at least a semester for them all to get used to me, and I wondered, often, on that long drive home in the evening, whether that would ever have happened if I hadn't told the lie.

Sandy and her father, rural Iowans all their lives, had been right about the silencing effect of that suicide. No one ever asked me about the dead husband, though they made up their own lies about it. In the hallways, at their lockers, or in the teachers' lounge before anyone realized I had entered, I learned all the gory details: what the man had looked like, how old he'd been, how he'd blown his brains out in the bathroom leaving poor Ms. Burwell to find him, to clean up the mess. I pretended not to hear. They pretended not to wonder, and left me holding a skeleton key weighing heavily in my palm.

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I'd come among them intending to open a few insular minds. When I started teaching in Traer there was one nonwhite student in a K-12 building of six hundred students. I asked her one September day as she worked in the back of my room, creating a bulletin board in Greek and Latin, if the two toddlers at home were also Asian. "No," she said quietly, a little puzzled by the word *Asian*. "They're normal."

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In November I reluctantly followed my students down to the school gymnasium for an assembly. I'd much rather have stayed behind in a silent classroom, luxuriated in an hour of uninterrupted time to check yearbook copy or read student journals. But, obediently, I shepherded an unstraying flock to a gym smelling of adolescent anxiety and aging varnish.

Half a dozen potbellied veterans holding the flags of their war and wearing American Legion hats paraded the flag up and down the length of the gym in front of six hundred kids, ages five through seventeen, who had never known war, much less want or struggle. The kids listened dutifully to their principal make a speech of loyalty and support, applauded politely when the superintendent introduced the president of the American Legion local, and listened attentively to her.

Suddenly I stopped stifling yawns, straightened my back, and listened as that gray-haired woman told a gymnasium full of kids that their country was great and their constitution two hundred years old because theirs was a Christian government. "It was the grace of God and Jesus marching with the Allies that stopped the Germans in World War II," she said. "It was Jesus flying with those bomber pilots that put an end to the war in the Pacific."

I looked at my colleagues. None of them blinked, stared, seemed the least startled. The principal and the superintendent who had hired me sat behind the speaker, smiling benignly as the woman went on and on. Row after row of aluminum bleachers rattled with people standing to pledge allegiance to the flag of a Christian country. I stayed seated. A colleague on one side jostled my arm. A student on the other stared down in disbelief, and then, anxious, put her hand over her heart and looked reverently at the flag.

On the way back to my classroom, I changed lesson plans and substituted a class discussion on patriotism, on the concepts of choice and judgment in a free citizenry. I would start by asking them to think, to open a dictionary, and to write for a few minutes on the meaning of the phrase "to pledge allegiance."

They had just settled into the task when the office-to-classroom speaker in my room crackled to life. "Please come to the superintendent's office," a female voice said in a tone normally reserved for children. I talked back. "I have a class this period. The assembly upset the schedule, remember? I don't have a prep period today." It felt silly talking to a dark hole in the wall. "I'll be down at the end of the day."

The box died and a minute later came back to life again. This time a stern male voice penetrated my classroom. "...In my office, now." I looked around at my students. I'd seen this look on their faces half a dozen times; they knew when one of their own was in trouble. I smiled weakly. "Please, go on writing and thinking about what it means to pledge allegiance to something. We'll talk about all this tomorrow."

I walked briskly down the silent hallways and echoing stairwells, breathing purposefully, wondering if the ACLU would handle this suit, and if they worked for free. In the newly carpeted office, behind an enormous slab of walnut desktop, sat a silent superintendent looking as if he'd been betrayed. Across from him, their backs to me, were an aged principal and an angry Legionnaire. The Legionnaire rose as I entered, his face scarlet with fury. I half expected him to spit at my feet, but he passed, closed the door behind him.

I stood, waiting. The principal, a man who had told me three times in as many months that I was a remarkably talented first-year teacher, asked me quietly to sit, and we three made a triangle. The man behind the desk tapped his fountain pen absently on the felt blotter and looked at me, pained. "You stayed seated during the Pledge of Allegiance?"

"Yes," I said.

The old principal used his most grandfatherly voice. "We can't have that. We have an obligation to educate patriots. We—"

"I have no obligation to educate patriots," I said quietly.

The superintendent started. "You don't believe it's part of your duty to teach democratic actions?"

"Yes," I said. "Democratic actions include staying seated during the Pledge of Allegiance."

"Now, now," the principal said. "You're not in college anymore. You're a teacher now. You set an example. You have to be conscious of that. We don't want these kids to follow the example you set today, do we?"

"If they're conscientiously driven to do so, we do," I said, looking at him, my heart pounding so loudly in my ears that the secretary's typing in the other room was drowned.

The superintendent's feet hit the Plexiglas beneath his chair with a clap. He leaned forward, pointing at me, threatening. "This is a conservative town. These kids respect their flag. Those veterans fought for it. You've embarrassed me and insulted some of the most prominent men in the town. It'll stop, and you'll apologize."

Following the principal's lead, I tried to keep my temper. I looked long at the superintendent, and shortly at the older man before speaking. "No," I said, "I won't apologize. You should apologize. What you allowed to happen in that gym today is illegal. Public schools are supposed to be free of religious worship." I kept speaking as the superintendent tried to interrupt. "That woman led a prayer in the gymnasium. She did it after insulting anyone in the room who isn't

Christian. The Supreme Court has named that an illegal act. And you allowed it. I don't owe anyone an apology."

He burst from his chair, storming. "This isn't some place where you can hold any radical belief you have and not be noticed. This is a small town and you are a small-town teacher. The community expects patriotism, and you'll give it to them when you're teaching for us."

"Yes," I said, standing. "I will. I'll teach them the term 'free country' means they have the right to voice an opinion or refuse to pledge allegiance—"

He cut me off. "No!" he shouted. "You will not teach them they may refuse to pledge allegiance. Not in my sch—"

"Yes!" I yelled back. "I will. You paid three thousand dollars two weeks ago to put your teachers through an in-service on developing thinking skills in their students. I will do that. I will help them develop thinking skills by teaching them to ask questions, not to make blind pledges to a government. I will teach them to think deeply and to follow their consciences, not what some authority figure tells them to do."

"You," said the principal, for the first time, angry, "are about to get yourself into trouble."

"No," I said, turning toward the door, placing a hand on the knob, and looking back over my shoulder at my employers, "you are. I did, today, in that gym, what the constitution you had us there celebrating allows me to do. I stayed seated. I have the right to do that. And, if you fire me for using that right, you will be teaching our students about fascism."

I didn't realize, until I saw the secretaries' faces in the reception room, how loud my voice must have been. They stared, open-mouthed, hands motionless over their typewriters. I didn't realize how angry I was until I heard my own breathing in the silent corridor, until I felt the heat in my face.

I cried all the way home in the car, angry and frustrated, wondering how I would tell my family I'd been fired. I bought my first pack of cigarettes in a year, rented a long movie, and drank Scotch, smoked cigarettes, and vegetated until I could fall asleep.

The next morning, as I put the period on the end of a quotation on the board, a noise behind me made me turn. In the doorway stood the principal and the superintendent, who spoke. "We'd like to forget yesterday afternoon," he said. "A disagreement among colleagues, period."

My knees buckled. I leaned against the chalk tray to keep myself up. Smiling weakly, I nodded, "Okay."

They turned away. I signed the eighteenth-century quote and was surprised to see the principal still in the doorway, reading, when I turned again. He read it once, and again, and, shaking his head slowly, walked out of the room. "Patriotism is the last refuge for fools and scoundrels." I read it aloud, nodded, and smiled. There were great arguments in Room 311 that day.

By my third year in that little Iowa school, my classroom library had become a very carefully sculpted work of art. I'd frequented book sales, library clean-out days, Goodwill stores, leafing through the books sections for titles and authors that would fit.

Not just anything would have done. I was making a library that meticulously reflected the population of the U.S.: 52 percent of the books must be by or about women; 48 percent by or about men; 11 percent by or about black people; 17 percent by or about Jews; 10 percent by or about gay and lesbian people; 1 percent by or about differently abled people. The ratios and proportions went on, carefully.

I never assigned a common book to read, but they had a common assignment. "In the course of the semester you may read whatever you like, but your reading must reflect the population of this country." The students fidgeted when told they had to read about people of color, and they rebelled when told they had to read about gay or handicapped people. And when they rebelled, I got nervous. I'd sit down behind my desk, so they could not see me dance off the hot coals under my feet. I'd look at them, pull a stern mask down over my fear, and speak with a tone of authority salvaged from the wreckage of my fears. "You will do it. There is a world full of people outside of this town, and you must find a way to get to know them. So, you'll read. In some small way, you'll begin to see that being who we are doesn't mean we are better; it may not even mean we are different. If you object to a particular book you select, put it back on the shelf and choose another. But, remember, to get a C, your reading must reflect the population of this country, and this library will make that fairly easy, because it reflects the same population."

Being children, my students rarely took their objections from the room. But on rare occasions they'd pack them up and take them home. At the supper table, when Dad was in a particular foul mood, or Mom

more rabid than usual about the pro-choicer who shared her cubical at the office, they'd spill out the gory details of their new English class.

"Do you know, Mom, that in order to get an A in English this semester I gotta read two books about Jews, one about niggers, and one about queers?"

The principal appeared in my doorway at least once a semester to report a parent complaining about the reading requirements. I'd swallow hard and listen to the sound of my heartbeat growing faster and louder, envisioning a call before the school board that seemed to grow more conservative with each election.

"Yes," I'd say to him. "I suspected it would upset that student. That's too bad, I'd guess she needs the diversity in this library more than anyone else in the class."

He'd nod sadly. "I know, but we can't force her. Let her skip the books about black people and lesbians."

"Okay," I'd sigh, frustrated, trying not to think about this one student but about the other twenty sampling a world differently colored and textured than their own.

"I still think," he'd always say before leaving, "that, if you'd get rid of the queer books, we could fight these bigots."

Every time he said it I was glad I had taken Sandy's father's advice and told that quiet lie. They let me among them because they thought I was one of them. Being a lesbian would have made me "Other," and I have no doubt they would not have allowed me to push their boundaries as often and as hard as I did had they known.

The skeleton key had unlocked a number of doors. But it probably locked just as many. I never made a close friend on that faculty, though there were many people I liked and admired. I simply couldn't bear the moment when I would have to admit the lie, so instead I held my distance. And, of course, there were gay and lesbian kids deprived of a role model because I'd lied about my identity. In the end, that lie cost me my secondary teaching career.

Late one afternoon, the superintendent who had hired me, who had come to my defense on a half dozen occasions when parents or fellow teachers thought I was pushing the envelope too hard, called me to his office. On his desk lay a copy of a magazine in which I had recently published an essay. The biographical note attached to the essay said, among other things, that I taught at North Tama High School in Traer, Iowa. Paperclipped to the magazine was a typed, unsigned note.

Reflections in

AN EVENING OF EXTRA CREDITS

"Have a seat, Hope," he said, oddly subdued. Silently, he slid the magazine across his desk to me and I read the note. "Are you aware that Hope Burwell is a lesbian?"

I could hear his wristwatch ticking. After several pregnant seconds I looked up. "Do you want me to respond to this?"

"Yes," he said, his voice almost a plea. I liked this man. We'd had our differences, but I'd grown to care very much for him, and to respect the way he dealt with faculty, gave them free rein, let them explore their profession and their potentials.

"Gary," I said finally, "if I admit to this I'm going to martyr my career to a cause; if I deny it, I'm going to become part of the homophobia that makes the accusation dangerous in the first place. I refuse to respond. The ball is in your court."

We listened to his watch tick off the seconds. Finally he smiled very weakly. "You have a yearbook to advise, I believe."

Several weeks later he offered me a contract for the next academic year, but I couldn't sign it. I couldn't make another human being professionally uncomfortable carrying my secret. I couldn't sustain my own righteous indignation about other kinds of hypocrisy in the face of someone who knew my lie. So, I walked out of that high school and turned the key on my secondary teaching career. I went back to graduate school and earned two master's degrees. In my first college-level teaching job interview I came out to a committee of four startled faces, all of them politically correct enough to feel proud of themselves for hiring an out lesbian.

I miss teaching high school the way amputees are said to miss a limb, a ghostly ache that accompanies me some days. But the quiet lie doesn't thunder through my dreams anymore.