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# Y

A story for families with  
gender identity issues



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Rosemary Collins, ACSW  
with an introduction by Susanne Blix, MD  
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## INTRODUCTION

Gender identity issues may be associated with persistent and intense distress for the child about his/her assigned sex and the desire to be, or insistence that he or she is of the other sex. Such thinking may result in behavior or comments on the part of the child that distress parents. Boys may choose to do those kinds of activities that girls would normally do, even having a preference for dressing in girls' or women's clothing at times. Boys may prefer girls as playmates. Gestures and actions may appear to be too feminine and result in being teased or rejected. Little is known about how gender identity forms, and our understanding of this (developmental) process will continue through further study. In the meantime we must deal with the distress of the children and their families when gender identity issues become problematic.

All persons have sexual or gender identities. It is helpful to think of gender identity in three ways. The first is the way a person views him/herself anatomically; that is, does the person see him/herself as male or female (or does a child see him/herself as being like mommy or daddy). Another aspect of gender identity is behaving in traditionally masculine or feminine ways or sitting or using one's hands in a traditionally masculine or feminine way. A third way of viewing gender identity is sexual partner preference at the appropriate age; that is, does one become heterosexual, bi-sexual, or homosexual?

The majority of boys diagnosed with gender identity problems seem to develop it prior to four years old. Social rejection and conflict increase during grade school. For girls, the onset is also early. Most girls tend to give up their exaggerated insistence on boy-like activities and dress during late childhood or adolescence. A minority of girls may retain a masculine identity, and some may develop homosexual orientation. About one-third to two-thirds of the boys may become homosexual, and the young person's struggle and the family's struggle with a child being different sometimes require therapeutic interventions.

This is a book to help parents and children understand these issues. It is written in a way that a child may understand, and in a way that parents may see their own level of discomfort with gender identity issues. Parents also suffer, in part, because of the child rejecting traditional activities that the parents may enjoy. Parents may see this as a rejection of themselves as parents. Parents hurt also when they see their child confused or in pain.

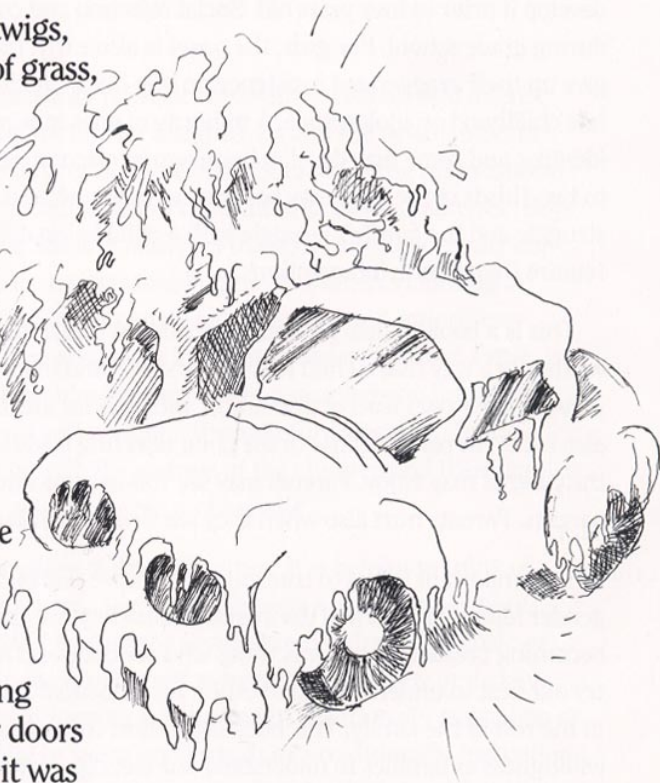
It is important for us to continue to improve our understanding of gender identity issues and disorders. As a society, we need to avoid becoming prejudicial towards those who are different. As families, we must try our best to understand each other. An individual's identity affects those in the rest of the family. This book is an effort towards increasing our willingness as families to understand our feelings, how we affect each other and how we may be able to improve relationships through continued growth.

Susanne Blix, M.D.  
11/92



It was the first ice storm in many years. The branches of trees down to the smallest twigs, each and every blade of grass, everything, was encased in crystal clear ice. When the sun came out, everything shined, everything was adorned, everything looked beautiful.

It was beautiful unless you had to drive on the streets. The windshields had thick layers of ice over them, which took a long time to chip away. Car doors were frozen shut, and it was hard to find a way inside. When you started driving, you might find yourself skidding, slipping and sliding out of control. Off the road. Into each other.





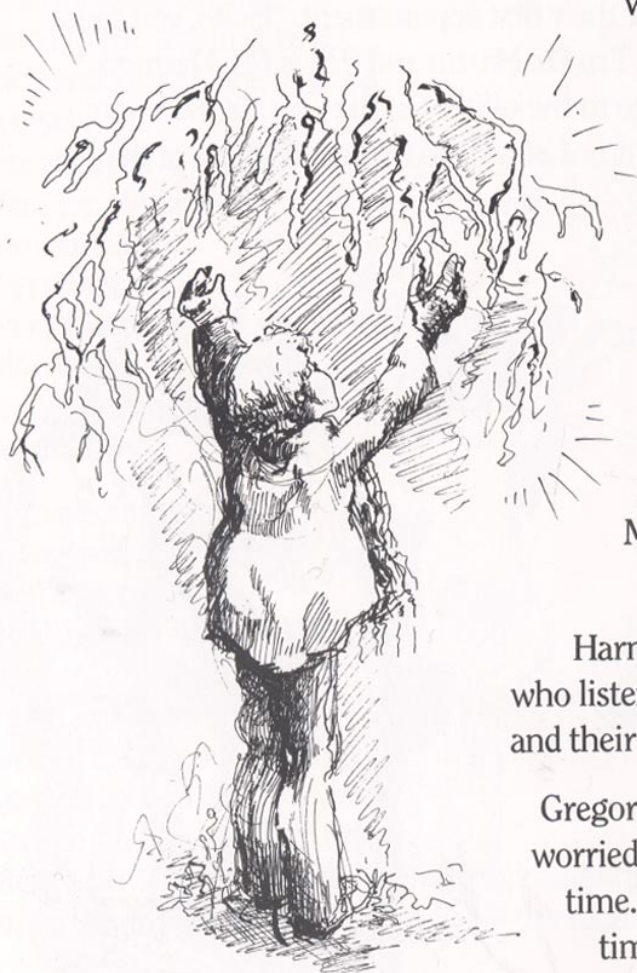
So Dr. Martin and Ms. Harmon were surprised when Gregory and his parents were on time for their first appointment. "Hello, you must be Gregory and his parents. I'm Dr. Martin and this is Ms. Harmon." Dr. Martin suggested they go to the office. On the way Ms. Harmon said, "We thought you might not be able to make it because of the weather."

"Isn't this storm something?" Gregory's mother exclaimed. "To get out of the house, I had to take a broom and knock down icicles hanging in front of the door. They were three feet long!"

"Some were even longer," said Gregory, stretching out his arms to show how long. "When the sun came out it was so beautiful—like walking through a chandelier."







"I understand half the city is without power—what with ice on the power lines and all," Gregory's father added.

Once in the office, everyone sat down.

"Well, we're glad you arrived safely," said Ms. Harmon. "To start, tell us about the reason for your visit today," Dr. Martin suggested.

Dr. Martin and Ms.

Harmon were psychotherapists who listened and talked to children and their families.

Gregory's father said he had been worried about Gregory for a long time. "He spends most of the time with girls instead of boys. He doesn't want to play sports."

Gregory's mother said, "Gregory tried soccer once because his friend Rita did, but he didn't like it."

"What didn't you like about it, Gregory?" Ms. Harmon asked.

"I didn't like the roughnecks," Gregory replied.

"Who first had the idea to play soccer?" Dr. Martin wanted to know.

Gregory said, "I did, instead of baseball or football."

Ms. Harmon asked Gregory's father what sports he liked. He said, "I enjoy watching football and baseball, basketball and wrestling. Mostly I like to hunt or fish. That's another thing that bothers me. Gregory won't go fishing with me."

Then Ms. Harmon asked Gregory's mother what sports she liked. She didn't like sports very much, except maybe tennis.

"Well, what do all of you like to do together?" Dr. Martin asked. Gregory and his parents had a hard time answering the question. Gregory's father said he travelled a lot in his job. Gregory's mother said she didn't get out much except to work part-time. Gregory pretty much liked to stay at home and play when he wasn't in school.







Gregory's mother said, "Gregory likes to help me with the housework and seems to have a knack for baking." Gregory's father added, "Gregory often plays with dolls. He used to like to play house when he was younger." Gregory said, "I don't anymore because Dad doesn't like it."



Gregory's mother said she was worried about Gregory too. She said, "He often cries when he comes home from school." Gregory said, "That's because kids tease me about playing with girls and the way I walk."

Dr. Martin and Ms. Harmon found out that what bothered Dad most of all was the way Gregory dressed. He sometimes borrowed Mom's clothes or made it look like he had on a dress.

These things had been going on a pretty long time. Dad wasn't sure how long. Mom guessed since Gregory was three years old. But what happened just a few weeks ago was new. Gregory had told his third grade teacher that he wanted to be a girl. His teacher talked to Gregory's parents and suggested they see Dr. Martin and Ms. Harmon.

To learn more about what wanting to be a girl meant to Gregory and his parents, and how it had become a problem for the family, Dr. Martin talked alone with Gregory, while Ms Harmon took Gregory's parents to her office.





"What was it like when Gregory was a baby?" Ms. Harmon asked. "Gregory was a beautiful baby," Mom remembered. "He was cuddly and loved to be held. We were very close."

Ms. Harmon asked Dad, "Was this ever a problem for you?"

Dad thought for a while and answered, "Not until he began clinging to his mother."

Ms. Harmon asked, "When did that happen?"

Mom responded, "When Gregory's baby sister died." Mom was quiet a moment and then said, "She was born with a damaged heart and the doctors told us she wouldn't live very long."



Ms. Harmon offered Mom some tissues and said she was sorry to hear about their loss. Mom nodded and tried to smile. Dad just looked down.

"It must have been a very sad time," Ms. Harmon said. "How did the two of you get through it?"



"It was very hard," Mom replied. She said she felt lonely because Gregory's father was gone a lot during that time. Dad explained, "I had to work."

Looking at Mom, Dad recalled "Remember what a hard time you had trying to get Greg to kindergarten?" Then he said to Ms. Harmon, "Greg kept running back to his mother." Dad went on to say, "Sometimes I wish Greg had an older brother to teach him how to play and act. It bothers me that he gets teased for acting like a girl. Now this."

There was something else that really troubled Dad. It was very hard for him to talk about. Dad wanted to know if Gregory would grow up to be "gay". When Dad said "gay", he meant persons of the same sex who are attracted to each other and sometimes choose to become couples. Ms. Harmon listened for a quite a while. Then she told him what she knew about studies that had been done. She said she couldn't predict what life-style Gregory would choose when he became older. Then Ms. Harmon said, "But it is for him to choose when he is older, not when he's a child."





Ms. Harmon was interested in learning more about Gregory's parents, not just Gregory. She knew a family isn't made out of just one person and a family problem doesn't belong to just one person. Both Mom and Dad had their own story to tell about themselves—really before they were Mom and Dad: what their own parents were like, how they grew up, what they wanted to become, how they met, and how they chose one another, how they shared responsibilities and how they showed they cared about one another. They remembered times together early in their marriage. They smiled about a camping trip they took then. They described what they wanted to change about themselves but they weren't sure how to do it.





One thing they decided was to meet with Ms. Harmon to talk and listen to one another with her help.

All this talking and listening took a long time. In fact, it took a visit each week all through the winter and into the spring. And while Gregory's parents were meeting with Ms. Harmon, Gregory was seeing Dr. Martin.

Dr. Martin was interested in learning all about Gregory, about his home, about his friends and about his school. Not only that but Dr. Martin wanted to know what Gregory thought and how he felt about all these things. Sometimes Gregory found it hard to tell Dr. Martin what he thought and how he felt.

On one visit, Gregory remembered something that happened in first grade. "We were learning letters," he said. "Our teacher gave everyone a letter to hold up. Some were vowels like A-E-I-O-U and the others were consonants."

"Which one was your letter?" asked Dr. Martin.

"Mine was Y," Gregory said. "Sometimes Y's a vowel but sometimes Y's a consonant, too. Y is really mixed up."





Dr. Martin said, "Y is really special to fit in with both vowels and consonants." Gregory said, "Y doesn't get to choose."

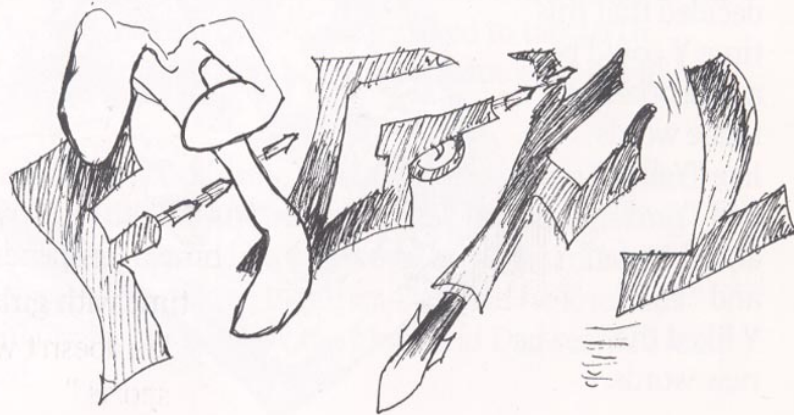
"Well, that's the difference between letters and people. Now if Y were a person....," Dr. Martin started to say.

"Y would always want to be a vowel like A-E-I-O-U," Gregory finished.

Dr. Martin and Gregory found it was fun to pretend about Y. They wondered what Y thought about other letters, the ways of vowels and consonants.



Y admired A-E-I-O-U and wanted to spend most of the time doing what they did. Y liked their vowel ways, making words sound full and smooth and connecting sounds together. Sometimes Y was asked to be a vowel like A-E-I-O-U. Y was especially happy to help make words like "Beauty" and "Jewelry" and "Lovely". Y didn't like the letter-ways of some of the consonants like G and K and F. They were too rough and tumble and they made fun of Y.



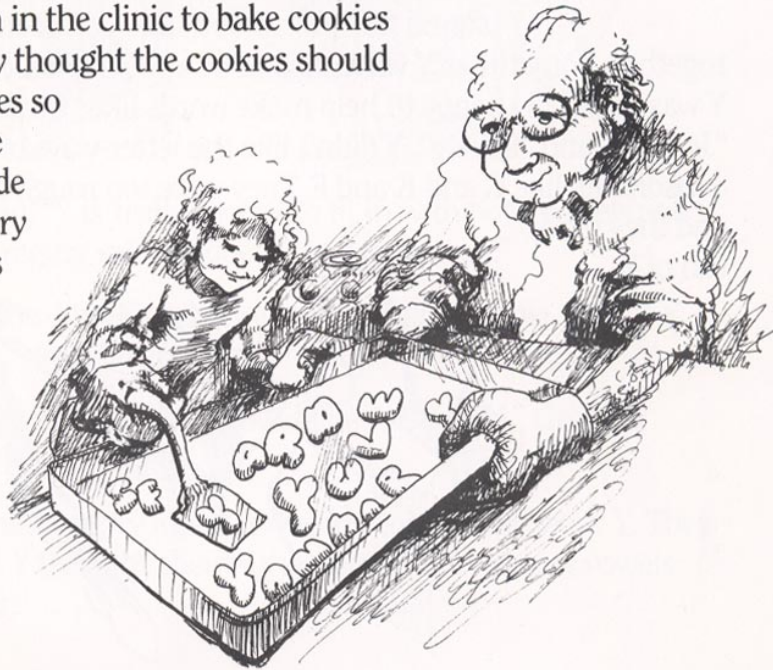


"But Y can be a consonant too," Dr. Martin suggested.

"That's Y's big secret," Gregory said. "Y always has special powers that nobody knows about."

Dr. Martin said he felt bad for Y because Y wasn't using the special powers to try out different letter ways. Gregory said it was too dangerous and Y would be made to do more and more things Y didn't like.

Dr. Martin and Gregory didn't just talk about Y. They did other things too. Gregory liked games and drawing. He also liked baking. Dr. Martin and Gregory used the little kitchen in the clinic to bake cookies one day. Gregory thought the cookies should be in letter shapes so they could make words. They made lots of Ys. Gregory decided that this time Y could be a consonant. Y made words like "Yellow" and "Yard" and "Yonder" and "Yule". Y liked the new words.







As time went on, Gregory also tried some new things. He found that there were some boys in his class who enjoyed word games like scrabble. He invited a new friend over and they built a model together. He was excited to find another boy from third grade in the same art class he took after school. Gregory liked to talk to Dr. Martin about his new friends. He also noticed some changes in his parents.

Mom and Dad talked about some of the changes. Mom decided she was spending too much time at home. Now she was making friends of her own. Dad decided he wanted to be home more. They both decided to spend more time together. Dad said he knew his choice to be with Mom was a good one. Mom and Dad seemed less sad, less worried.





The family had enjoyed ice skating several times during the winter. Mom and Gregory took lessons. Dad tried to talk Gregory into trying out for the ice hockey team. Gregory didn't want to play but agreed to go see a youth hockey game with Dad—if Dad went with him and Mom to see some figure skating.



When Gregory and his parents came to meet with Dr. Martin and Ms. Harmon for the last time, they couldn't help but notice the beauty of the spring day. The trees, with their new green, were bending softly in the warm breeze. Mom said, "It really is a lovely day." "Yes, just lovely," added Dad. Dad said they were planning a weekend camping trip to a large state park, not too far away. Mom and Dad had just been there and said there were good trails for hiking and even some deer who had made their home in the park. "Have a good camping trip," said Ms. Harmon as they left. "Let us know how you are doing," added Dr. Martin.

That weekend in the forest, Dad was teaching Gregory the names of a few constellations in the night sky. Then they were silent a while. Dad said, in wonder, "Greg, look at the stars—it's like being in a chandelier." Greg nodded and smiled.







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