

I had only a few days to enjoy my newfound social life when Dad took me aside. "Dave's been injured," he said. "He's going to be okay, but they're sending him home." My brother was coming home!

Then I started trembling. "What about the rest of the guys?" I asked. "Are they coming home too?" My dad was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice sounded strange. "Dave will tell you about it."

He did not need to. The next day my letter came back, unopened and stamped "Return to Sender." I stood at the mailbox, tears falling on the envelope and smearing my friends' names. They would never know how they had helped me be somebody.

Oddly enough, I got a letter from the guys a week later. They had mailed it the day of the deadly ambush. "It won't be long now until our tour of duty is up and we will be going home. We wanted to tell you good-bye. Thank you for writing us. We don't know if you figured out who you are yet. Sometimes it's just a matter of knowing who you do not want to be. Your brother is a nut. He is always singing Dean Martin's *You're Nobody, Til Somebody Love You*. If that's true, you definitely are somebody. We all love you."

After school I told Sister Judith Ann about the guys. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know you will miss them." I nodded. "Writing them was like writing in a diary that could talk back."

GOD ANSWERS WITH HIS WORD

"I have a diary like that," she said. She showed me her Bible. The margins were filled with her hand-writing. "I write down my thoughts, and God answers with His Word.

I know He does, because ever since, I have kept a diary like Sister Judith Ann's.

Last summer I visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. At the wall I found the 1969 section. I kissed my fingertips and touched them to the names etched in the smooth, cold granite. Jerry, Mike, Tom and Steve were home with God, and I had a feeling that somehow they would get the long-overdue letter I was writing them in my heart:

"Whenever my life seems on hold, I try to live the in-between moments the way you guys did. You taught me to value ordinary things, like autumn leaves and movies, faithful pets and letters from faraway friends... and even what's for supper. These days I write whatever is on my mind in my Bible. God is faithful about listening and answering, just like you guys were. Thanks for believing in me. I love you. P.S. We're having spaghetti tonight."

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Letters and a Shy Young Girl



***"My brother Dave asked me to write
to a couple of his buddies in his platoon...
What could I possibly tell them
that would be of interest? "***

LETTERS AND A SHY YOUNG GIRL

by Marilyn K. Strube

(Some 35 years ago, four young men serving in Vietnam gave a confused and lonely teenager an unforgettable gift.)

In the lunchroom that day I surreptitiously studied the cool girls, hoping to figure out their secret. Was it their skirts, rolled to mini length? Or their boyfriends, who trotted beside them carrying their books? Mom made me wear my skirts at my knee, and Dad said I was not allowed to date until I was 16, a whole year away.

The other girls at this huge high school always seemed to be surrounded by friends. Meanwhile, I sat alone day after day... my diary my only confidant.

"I can't stand being my boring old self anymore, God. Can't you make my life more exciting?" With a sigh, I went back to the letter in front of me. At least my 18 year-old brother, Dave, appreciated me, sort of. He was serving in the army in Vietnam, and wanted me to write to a couple of the guys in his platoon. What could I possibly tell them that would be of any interest?

One of my classmates sauntered past. I thought I heard her snicker. I hid my burning face behind my hair, and wrote Dave, "Maybe I can see if some of the popular girls will write to your friends."

We heard from Dave that Sunday, one of his infrequent calls from Vietnam. "Marilyn, don't give my buddies' names to the popular girls," he said. "They used to have girlfriends like them, but got dumped for guys who are stateside. You always ask if there's something you can do for me. Well, this is it. You write to them. Okay?"

That night, instead of writing in my diary, I took a sheet of paper from my loose-leaf binder and started a letter. "My name is Marilyn. I'm Dave's sister. But I guess you know that. Ha ha. I like English and art, but hate geometry. I feel like my life's on hold. I can't wait to be a grown-up. Sorry I don't have anything interesting to write about. P.S. The leaves have turned orange and red. I love crunching through them in the park!"

TOO BORING??

A few weeks passed. Guess I was too boring to deserve an answer. Then I got two letters. "My name is Jerry. I know how you feel. I am a grown-up, I guess, but my life is on hold too, until I go home. Being an adult is not all it is cracked up to be. Don't be in such a hurry. P.S. We used to make huge piles of leaves and jump in them! I miss autumn bonfires. Thanks for reminding me."

Mike's letter was pretty much the same except he wanted to know what we were having for supper. Every week I wrote Jerry and Mike, as well as two other guys, Steve and Tom. Now, I never seemed to run out of stuff to tell them. I wrote about funny things, and sad things too. "I saw a dead cat today in the woods where our art class went to sketch. I felt so stupid because I started to cry."

The guys told me about the pets they missed back home. Steve added a P.S.: "I used to cry every night when I first came over here. Now I never cry and I wonder what's wrong with me. Be thankful you still cry."

WE WROTE FOR A YEAR

For almost an entire year, from 1968 to 1969, I confided in Steve, Tom, Mike and Jerry. They wrote me the same way, sharing whatever was on their minds. As awkward as I felt with the kids at school, I felt comfortable talking to these guys I had never even met.

YOU ARE WHO YOUR FRIENDS ARE

During study hall one day I wrote, "Sister Judith Ann handed out a book called *Who Am I, God?* My mom says, 'You are who your friends are.' My best friend moved away. We used to love to walk to the movies on Sunday afternoons. I haven't made any new friends since I started high school. I guess I am nobody."

Tom replied, "I like to think I am who I am in spite of my friends! Seriously, a lot of people will want to tell you who you are. Don't let them. It is something you have to figure out for yourself. P.S, I loved movies on Sunday afternoons, too! What I would give for a box of Milk Duds!"

His letter made me feel better. Still, it did not stop me from wondering as I lay in bed at night, dreading yet another lonely lunch at school... "Who am I God?" No answer seemed to be forthcoming. I guessed God had more important things to worry about, like the war in Vietnam.

WHY AM I SO WEIRD?

But my classmates seemed pretty clear on who I was: an outsider. It had its advantages. It was easy to observe the different cliques. In each, the kids all thought the same about everything. I just could not bring myself to act that way.

That is not to say I did not want to fit in. I tried to connect with people I knew from grammar school. But they said there wasn't any room left at their lunch table. Another time a group of girls invited me to go to a dance. They seemed kind of tough, but I was grateful to be included. Afterward they wanted to vandalize a cemetery. "No," I said. "I just want to go home." They made fun of me the rest of the semester. I wrote the guys and asked, "Why am I so weird? Why can't I be like everyone else?"

They answered in one letter, the way they did when they had something really important to tell me. "You are not weird; you are brave. It takes guts to be different." It was nice to know there were people on my side, even if they were half a world away. That night I wrote an opinion piece about Vietnam for composition class. It was not a difficult assignment because I knew guys who were serving there. What was hard was reading my essay in front of the class the next day. I kept my eyes riveted to my paper.

"My brother is there and I write to four guys in his platoon. At first, I did not think I would have anything to write about, but after a while, I found we had lots in common."

I quoted from one of Steve's letters: "Some of us enlisted and some of us were drafted. It doesn't much matter anymore how we got here. We just look forward to when we are not."

Surprisingly, my classmates were not wearing their usual expressions of disdain; they were actually listening. I took a deep breath, and concluded, "Maybe instead of war, enemies should be required to be pen pals. I don't know. I'm confused about Vietnam... and life in general. I just hope the ones who are in power are not."

"You guys should have seen it!" I wrote when I got home. "The class just sat there gaping at me. Then one of the kids got up and started clapping, then another joined him, and then the whole class gave me a standing ovation! My face got really hot, but boy, it was great feeling accepted! P.S. A girl invited me to a party at her house. I used to think she was stuck up, but she's just shy. I bet I've been wrong about a lot of kids. Maybe today they thought the same about me."