

Dear Goldie Hawn,  
Dear Leonard Cohen



*Claudia Sternbach*



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SAMPLE CHAPTER

*Dear Emily Dickinson,*

In reading your poetry and searching out information about you, I have never read anywhere that you ever spent time exploring the East Village in New York City. But, for my 60th birthday, I took you there. In spirit at least.

The East Village can be a bit gritty, but nothing like it once was. These days there are tourists, hipsters, cafes with coffee served in as many ways as one could possibly imagine, vintage shops, bars, some dive, but mostly not, and tattoo parlors. Ink has become very, very popular. And this, Miss Emily, is what brought me to the colorful neighborhood on a Tuesday evening a few summers ago. My daughter was with me. She, who has lots of experience when it comes to ink, was there to cheer me on. I was about to get body art. My first, if piercing doesn't count. I mean who, these days, doesn't have their ears pierced, other than my friend Christy.

Although I was a tattoo virgin, it was not my first time in a parlor. The day my daughter turned 18, a day I

had imagined taking her to high tea at the Plaza Hotel, she had other ideas in mind.

“I’m getting a tattoo today because I can,” she declared first thing in the morning. She also stated that she would be purchasing porn and cigarettes, again because she could. She desperately wished there was an election taking place, so she might cast her ballot. I had two choices, neither of which would dissuade her. I could be a part of her birthday celebration or let her go on her own.

Oh, Emily, you, never having had children, may think I did in fact have another option. I could stop her. Tell her just how un-ladylike tramp stamps are and lecture her on the fact that her taste would surely change and she would regret this early-morning decision for the rest of her life.

I could take away her cell phone. Disconnect the internet. Ban “The Real Housewives” from our television. Oh, my dear, how the world has changed since you sent poems down by basket to those waiting beneath your window.

Well, Miss Em, parenting is filled with challenges. Battles to be fought and won and fought and lost and I chose not to pull rank on her. I instead chose to join her on her adventure. I held her hand as she stretched out on a table face down and had a sun/moon drama mask inked onto her lower back.

Now, here we were, years later making an appointment with a tattoo artist so that each of us could acquire new ink. I have lost count of how many

decorations my daughter has, but for me, this would be my first.

Our wait was short, and we both knew exactly what we wanted and where. My daughter, who is far from warm and fuzzy, more prickly pear, surprised me by her sentimentality. When she was a small child, she was shy. “Uppie me,” she would beg if she was feeling timid. And I would hoist her up and set her on my hip where she felt safe.

This is what she wanted written forever on her body. “Uppie Me.” On her hip. In my handwriting. I didn’t tell her how touched I was. She undoubtedly would have changed her mind.

Then it was my turn.

My artist was a bearded chap with colorful designs covering most of his dermis. He also had what looked like black rubber discs embedded in his earlobes. (It’s a style these days, Em. Again, a lot has changed.)

He asked if I had been drinking. I told him not yet. Good, he replied.

He had a rule about never tattooing anyone who had been imbibing. There could be excessive bleeding. Or excessive feelings of regret the next day, and why should he have to deal with a bloody, hungover, angry customer?

He asked me where I wanted the tattoo. I believe he may have held his breath as he waited for my answer. I mean, at 60, there are only so many places on my being which should be seen by men I don’t even know. Even professionals.

I pointed to my wrist.

His shoulders dropped ever so slightly as he let out his breath and relaxed. He then asked me what I wanted.

When I told him, he was unfamiliar with the quote.

It was then that I introduced him to you, Emily Dickinson. He had heard of you, but did not know you.

He practiced on paper before piercing my skin. His cursive was lovely. I was surprised. These days it is no longer taught in school. That, Miss Emily, hurts my heart. I can't imagine what you would say were you to visit us here in this century and discover that most of those lovely swirls and dips and circles you used to write your poetry in would be foreign to young students today.

I digress.

I was enjoying my time in this environment. There was a large gentleman in the booth next to me lying on a table having work done on his chest. Part of his design included a massive set of wings which I thought would look better on his back, as it seems as if that is where you might find wings was kind of a coincidence, as wings figured into my plan for my own tattoo, and his torso was in grave danger of looking as busy as the wallpaper my auntie Di once had in her dining room if he continued to go under the needle.

I approved the design I was shown by Eric (I felt I should know his name as this was feeling a bit intimate), and placed my arm on the wide, flat arm of the chair.

Soon I developed a great admiration for the gentleman next to me. How the fuck (pardon my

language, but we are in a tattoo parlor), was he able to take it?

Thirty minutes later, we were finished. We paid up and trotted across the street to the nearest establishment serving tequila. My wrist was wrapped in gauze bandages.

Later, after dropping off my daughter, my taxi pulled up in front of the apartment and our doorman Jose released me from my yellow cab and then opened the door to the lobby. The lights seemed extra bright. In the glare, he noticed my wrapped wrist. Then noticed my wobbly stance.

“You didn’t ...” he began.

“I did!” I replied.

“What does it say?” he asked.

Carefully, I unwrapped the bandage and held up my wrist to be examined.

“Hope is the Thing”, it read. With a cerulean blue feather drawn delicately beneath the cursive writing.

He gave me a gentle high five.

In the years since, I have introduced you to many others. A bartender at Phil’s Fish Market in Moss Landing, California. A sales clerk at Filene’s Basement before they went out of business, a punky looking gentleman on the 6 train, a woman seated at the next table in Manuel’s Mexican restaurant in Aptos, California, and my grandson, who, at only 4 years of age, is restricted to stick-on tattoos for now.

So, I thank you, Emily. I have carried the words in my heart and relied on them often. Now I wear them,

*Dear Goldie Hawn, Dear Leonard Cohen*

not on my sleeve, but on my person. My daughter and I  
were not alone downtown on those once-gritty streets.  
You, in your virginal white, were with us for  
inspiration.

I'd love to know what you thought of it all!

Fondly,  
*Claudia*

*Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830 and died in 1886. (I thought everyone knew her, but since tattling myself with words I always attribute to her, I have learned differently. What is being taught in school these days?)*

*As a young woman, she studied at the Amherst Academy for seven years. She then dipped her toe in the world of Mount Holyoke Seminary, but quickly returned to the family home in Amherst.*

*Neighbors thought she was a bit off. Dressed in all white most of the time, she spent her days writing poetry — much of which was never published while she was alive.*

*She was known to stay hidden away in her room and apparently avoided people like the plague.*

*She never witnessed her own success. But she became so very popular that one woman even had a small piece of her poetry tattooed on her wrist more than a century after her passing!*

## About the Author

Claudia Sternbach is the author of two previous memoirs, *Now Breathe, a very personal journey through breast cancer* (Whiteaker Press) and *Reading Lips, a memoir of kisses* (Unbridled Books).

Claudia was a newspaper columnist for many years and has been published often in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. She has also been published in several anthologies and is the former editor-in-chief of the literary journal, *Memoir*.

When she isn't writing, Claudia paints. When she isn't writing or painting, she can be found on her daily walk on the beach. And at the end of the day she enjoys a cocktail on her back yard swing while watching the squirrels trapeze branch to branch in the redwoods. Claudia lives on the coast of Northern California with her husband, Michael.



