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Anne Gomez Rubin
Academy ofthe Sacred Heart, Bloomfield Hills, Ml

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For Ms. Pete's Sake

Anne Gomez Rubin
Academy of the Sacred Heart
Bloomfield Hills, MI

There probably was not a worse way for me to find out that Ms. Pete died. I've been thinking about her recently, so I Googled her, and her obituary was the very first link to show up on my screen. It was dated two years after the fact.

Ms. Pete's real name was Janet Peterson. The facts that I knew about her were scant. She was from Missouri. She carried a gigantic English, toffee-colored Dooney and Bourke satchel. She smoked like a chimney. When I was her student, Ms. Pete lived alone in a white, ranch-style house three blocks away from my home at the corner of Glazebrook and Topeka. There was a tall white fence around her yard, and the shades on her windows were closed up so tight that they looked like they were about to sneeze. Compared to her house, her classroom was a disaster area full of filing cabinets and piles of books. She drove a low-to-the-ground, slate blue Toyota Celica with a huge spoiler that she would always park in the exact same place on Texan Trail, the wide boulevard in front of my school. Ms. Pete would go to her car at lunch and smoke with the window down, her bony arm resting on the door frame, flicking away ash and watching the traffic at the corner of Texan Trail and Staples Street.

It's safe to say that I did a lot of observing of Ms. Pete because that was the safest way to interact with her. I never visited her classroom at lunch, and I never straggled in to her room after the eleventh grade American Literature class. Ms. Pete was, at best, notoriously volatile. She had a reputation for being a bully, a madwoman, a maniac, a nutcase, a fascist, an autocrat, and a genius. According to her students, she was the best and the worst thing to ever happen to our school; someone, either Satan or God, broke the mold when they made her.

Ms. Pete had only one instructional method: straight lecture. All of desks in the room were in a rough half moon, and many of those desks were pushed up to the wall, as if students were trying to create the most distance possible from where Ms. Pete sat, in a lone student desk, with another desk right next to her holding her giant satchel and a Diet Coke. From this desk, she would hold forth not only on matters literary but also personal. Ms. Pete's plan was to forgo a nursing home by robbing a bank, so then she'd go to jail (for free) because they'd take better care of her there. She never wrote on the chalkboard, never stapled anything, never passed things out (you went to her for your test), and never kept a grade book. Instead, students were required to keep all of their own tests and, come grading time, *one would call out each grade to her as she averaged them on her calculator.* If she doubted one of your grades (which was quite frequent), you were required to bring your test to her so she could authenticate your claim. "Looks like my chicken scratch," she'd say. Even when she wasn't in the room, her presence had a panoptic power over us. I still remember some key advice she gave me once—don't trust a man who is mean to waiters or dogs. She was right about that one.

To a seventeen-year old girl, she was a genius of sorts. The woman seemed to know everything. You never had to interpret anything yourself because she disagreed with almost anything you said. Her way of seeing literature seemed so fully formed and so tightly bound that it seemed more like fact than interpretation. To me, though, her real genius was when she'd soliloquize about the lives of writers: it was from her that I learned about the shy loneliness of Emily Dickinson and the secret writing life of Wallace Stevens. I'm not sure anyone else was listening. A lot of my classmates were honors students on the high road to the University of Texas or Texas A&M, and Ms. Pete's honors American Literature class was a necessary pit stop on their way to what they believed to be bigger and better places.

The previous year, I had been kicked out of Mr. Livsey's sophomore honors English class because I had trouble with expository writing and comma rules. Instead of failing me, Livsey sent me down to "regular"

English. My own sense of guilt and self-consciousness made me feel like I had to earn my keep in Ms. Pete's honors class, and, in my mind, I did it by keeping my head down and my voice low. I did this because more than any other teacher that I had up to that point, Ms. Pete taught me the kind of things that I really wanted to know about the books that we were reading: I wanted to know about the people who wrote books because I wanted to be like them. To me, the image of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald dancing in a fountain in New York was endlessly romantic in a similar way that J.D. Salinger's reclusivity was. I gathered the bits of information she threw out to our class and I prayed that one day my life would be as interesting as a writer's was.

Now that Ms. Pete is gone, I understand that we were alike in one way: we were inspired and deeply moved by other people's lives. I saw this in our school library in the winter of 1996. We all met in the library to begin research on our author research projects. No one picked their author; rather, Ms. Pete assigned us of her choosing ("You...John Cheever ...You... John Updike...You...John Gardner"), possibly because she assumed we had no real literary interests. Our class was supposed to meet her in the library, and we scurried there because Ms. Pete hated nothing more than students who were late.

I remember seeing her in the library leaned up against the waist-high shelves that held our already out of date encyclopedias, staring out the window, lips tightly pursed. When we gathered together (silently, of course) waiting for her instruction, she asked us if we had heard about Barbara Jordan's death that morning. This was something that Ms. Pete pulled frequently. She loved to point obscure questions at us (for example, the date Nathaniel Hawthorne was born or the name of F. Scott Fitzgerald's first published work). We were accustomed to not knowing anything she ever asked, so we stayed silent, as usual. Her eyes blazed. Before she walked out on our class, she spat at us, "Goddamn you kids. How the hell do you not know who the hell Barbara Jordan was?"

When I walked home that day, I picked up the paper at the corner gas station, and read about the struggles and successes that Jordan had faced as the first black woman from a southern state to work in the House of Representatives. That afternoon, I filed away that information, along with the title of Fitzgerald's first publication; but when I learned that Ms. Pete died, I couldn't get that day out of my head.

The news of Ms. Pete's death was jarring; it was not unlike falling and getting the wind knocked out of your lungs. In the days after finding out, I went back and read a little more about Jordan's life: I didn't know that she had battled multiple sclerosis so privately for many years that President Clinton didn't know of her condition when he was considering her for a seat on the Supreme Court; I didn't know that Jordan carried a copy of the Constitution in her purse and that she lived with a woman for over twenty years in a time when that simply was not done.

Because Ms. Pete was not famous to anyone but her students, I never got to read an obituary that might have told me things about her own hidden life. I'll never know what she carried in that giant handbag of hers, what her troubles were, or who might have shared her house with the high white fence. All I know is what little information has been passed on to me through friends with families still living in our town.

One day, Ms. Pete showed up to school with a cane, and soon after that the breathing trouble started. On the night she died, her friends begged her to let them take her to the hospital, but she refused. For all her acrimony, Ms. Pete seemed to have lived a life of private desperation, much like my own life when I was her student. Like the larger world that was on the horizon, high school was sometimes a terrible and bewildering place, and Ms. Pete seemed to believe that the very least one could do was be dignified, hence the threats of defenestration for chewing gum, showing up late, making excuses. Last, for all her lessons about eccentric writers' lives, it seemed that her stories were meant to make us empathetic to someone like her—someone seemingly lonely and brilliant who happened to believe she had a thing or two to teach the world.

In true Ms. Pete fashion, I am sure she would disagree with my interpretation.

About the Author

Anne Gomez Rubin (arubin@ashmi.org) teaches English in the Upper School of the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.