

A SORT OF PARENTAL PRIDE

It's a rainy summer evening, and I'm driving through rush-hour traffic towards Drew University in Madison, to hear a poetry reading by a student of mine from 33 years ago. I taught Sally Ball in 10th grade Honors English. She edited the high school literary magazine called *Guarded Optimism*. By now she's had two books of poetry published with a third on its way.

Our paths have rarely crossed since her high school days. Then, decades later, I received an envelope from Arizona; inside was a copy of Sally's second book of poetry, *Wreck Me*. She'd inscribed it: *For my first best teacher, Mr. Kaplow. Thank god for you!! All love and gratitude from the desert — Sally*. She was teaching literature at Arizona State University.

A few weeks later, at my invitation, she stopped by the school to speak to my Creative Writing class. She still looked as I remembered: willowy, tall, pale blue eyes. When the class ended she sat with me at a student desk and said, in words that felt carefully chosen, "I realized the other day that all the significant decisions of my life were made because of you."

I couldn't believe she was saying this. "Thank you," I managed.

Now on this rainy night in midsummer, my increasingly angry-sounding GPS (*recalculating!*) has brought me to Drew. An old friend, David Stein, who taught French to Sally 30 years ago, has met me in the parking lot. We share an umbrella as we walk to Mead Hall.

About 40 folding chairs have been set up in a classical-looking gallery whose walls are painted with a mural depicting a horse battle from the Middle Ages.

Sally breezes into the room with her manuscripts and entourage. “Sara Louise,” I call out to her, remembering her full name, and she turns, in her mid-length black dress, to give me a smile and a hug. Then she gasps in astonishment to see David. “Oh-my-God-Mr.-Stein!” She tells him: “I finally made it to France!” and in a seamless second they are both speaking French. I don’t understand a word of it, but I’m charmed by the music of their fluency. They could both be native speakers.

Sally begins her reading by putting her hand to her chest. “I was raised in Summit,” she says. “Two of my former teachers are here. So this feels like a homecoming. And right now I’m feeling...*raw*.” The microphone is too low to accommodate her height. She dedicates the first poem to me. When she was in my 10th grade class, she had to memorize Shakespeare’s sonnet 29. Then she reads a poem called “Some Verses”. It begins: *Like to the lark at break of day...*

I watch her standing at the podium, reading from her book; the light glinting off her clavicle, and suddenly it is all I can do to keep from crying. She reads with an actor’s sense of drama and diction, using her right hand the way Sinatra used his free hand when he sang: it inflects, it comments.

The audience applauds at the intelligence and wit of her poem — and I can no longer look at her. I ask myself: *Why am I so moved by this?* And I think

it must be a kind of parental pride (though I am not a parent), but even that metaphor isn't adequate to describe the complexity of what I'm feeling. It's as if I've seen my replacement. When I was younger I was the remarkable teacher with the publishing credentials, and now I stand on the sidelines and observe my successor. And she is good.

The next day Sally sends me an email: *...People always say teaching doesn't matter, that our best students don't need us and we can't much help the weaker ones...but what that leaves out is how giantly grateful a student feels for a great teacher, the mix of inspiration and affirmation and challenge....*