

PAUSE YOU WHO READ THIS

The ninth chapter of Dickens' *Great Expectations* ends with a passage that has stayed with me since I first read it in eighth grade: *Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.* I once sent an audio file of a British actor reading this passage to a former student of mine. Because of the actor's clipped theatrical accent, she was convinced he was saying, "Whores, you who read this..." And she was darkly furious at me for insulting her. I laboriously explained her misreading. The friendship was never the same — and somewhere in the distance I could hear God laughing. My old friend Fania (who hated doctors and loved Russian literature) lived to be 94 and used to tell me: "If you want to hear God laugh, make plans."

Speaking of God laughing, I went to the funeral last week of my friend Barbara Wersba, the children's book author. In 1991 I met Barbara through writing her a fan letter. (We shared the same publisher, HarperCollins, and I thought Barbara was the best young-adult writer they had.) Barbara suggested we meet in the bar of the American Hotel in Sag Harbor. She walked in the door: a serious woman in a headscarf who spoke like the actress she had once been — as if she were dictating to a journalist. She was much different than I had expected, and I liked her immediately. And I admired the seriousness which she brought to all her writing.

We walked together down Main Street in Sag Harbor, and, at one point, she said: "There's a student of mine I think you should meet." Some months later, at Barbara's increasing insistence, I called her student in one of those terrible blind-date moments. I had read that when the *New Yorker* editor William Shawn used to call his authors (like Salinger) he'd always begin: "Have I called at an inopportune time?" I liked that sentence, particularly the word *inopportune*. And so my first words in the phone call to her student were: "Hi, you don't know me; my name is Robert Kaplow; I'm a friend of

Barbara Wersba who suggested that I give you a call. Have I called at an inopportune time?”

And the woman’s first words to me were: “As a matter of fact, you have.”

That was 1991. Lynn has been entwined in my life ever since. Somewhere God must be highly amused.

Barbara’s funeral was a grim tableau: eight of us stood in the corner of an overcast, freezing cemetery in Sag Harbor. It’s the same cemetery where George Balanchine lies buried. No one had made more detailed funeral plans than Barbara, who had a deeply controlling personality. Every six months she’d send me a priority envelope filled with copies of her important documents, keys to safety deposit boxes, business cards from her attorneys. And all of it turned out to be for nothing. Like some character in the Chekhov plays she admired, she lost everything: her publisher, her library, her house. She ended her days as a ward of the State, living in a wheelchair on the basement floor of the Lillian Booth Actors Home in Englewood. She had always disliked the cumbersome apparatus of funerals, and she had asked to be cremated. But because she was a ward of the State, this was not done, and we stood at the graveside that morning staring at her massive steel casket, painted bronze. It looked like an industrial refrigerator. But she had written her own eulogy, which managed to survive, and which Lynn read at the graveside: a factual retelling of her considerable professional accomplishments (two dozen books, a produced play, book reviews for the *New York Times*.) She’d also left instructions that a specific passage be read from her novel *The Wings of Courage*. It was an odd, poetic selection that didn’t quite work out of context, but it was a paragraph she loved, and I was glad, at the end, her own words floated up into the icy air; up into the Long Island geese that passed, high above, right on cue; up into the universe.

The mourners gathered afterwards at a Sag Harbor restaurant where Barbara had eaten dinner almost every night. We sat adjacent to the table where she had dined alone all those years: table 81. And I thought of that famous black-and-white drawing, “The

Empty Chair,” that had circulated after Dickens died: a chair with no occupant set in front of a writer’s desk, pen and paper waiting. On the wall above table 81 hung a large black-and-white photograph of an empty rowboat. No one sat at Barbara’s table.