Rosemarie's Hands

Rachel Adams

> Dear Rachel,
>
> I will write this letter, but in the future you should ask your new colleagues for recommendations.
>
> Good luck with the fellowship application.
>
> A.

I know the message went something like this, although my email files don't go back far enough to preserve a copy. The gist of it is seared in memory: because I had a job, my former teachers were no longer obligated to write me letters of recommendation, and this one was unceremoniously vacating our relationship. The author is my dissertation director. It was the first semester of my first job as an assistant professor, and I was applying for a fellowship to spend a month doing archival research on my book project. I remember the small blue screen of my 1990s-era computer, the screechy noise of the dial-in modem, and A.'s message like a punch in the stomach.

The rejection came as a shock because I thought my relationship with A. was just getting started. She was a model in so many ways. On a campus where professors lectured in sandals and T-shirts, she wore dark tailored suits, imposing glasses, and dramatic scarves. She was young and stylish, with a European accent and a cloud of black hair. She didn't

claim to specialize in any particular literary field, instead listing as areas of expertise "the body," "theories of subjectivity," and "new materialism." I took every course she offered. I loved her syllabi, a salad of films, works of art, and written narratives paired with dense theoretical readings by Marx, Foucault, and Irigaray; Hardt and Negri, Deleuze and Guattari, Klaus Theweleit, and Kaja Silverman. I loved her poise, her complexity and mystique. She didn't return my work promptly, but it eventually came back covered with comments in her elegant, looping script. She challenged my ideas and asked hard questions, but always with an underlayer of affirmation.

Things with A. weren't perfect. She could be cold and moody, complaining of migraines and toothaches. Sometimes, despite our years of work together, it seemed she didn't know me at all. When I was invited for a campus visit, she warned me, in a scolding voice, to dress appropriately. At the time, I bought most of my clothes in vintage stores, looking for garments that announced—with a fur collar, wasp waist, or calf-length pencil skirt—what I believed to be an idiosyncratic but stylish professionalism. I was affronted by the suggestion that I couldn't be trusted to pick the right outfit for my job visit. Once I landed the job, A. cautioned me to sit quietly during faculty meetings in my new department to avoid drawing attention to myself. I considered myself a shy and cautious person. Did she really think I might act otherwise in my professional life?

But in the whirlwind of accepting a job, filing my dissertation, and moving across the country, I shrugged off these incidents. A. was an eccentric European theorist, preoccupied with lofty and complex ideas. Was it any wonder she didn't pay attention to the mundane details of my clothes and behavior?

But then that email, just a few months into my semester. I thought the role of dissertation advisor would segue neatly into that of professional mentor, just as I had transitioned from graduate student to assistant professor. Instead, A.'s coldness continued. I heard she had a baby and sent a gift that was never acknowledged. I mailed her a copy of my first book, having thanked her copiously in the acknowledgments, and heard nothing. When I got tenure, I wrote again, telling her I would be in town for a weekend. Did she want to get together and could I meet her children? This response was recent enough to be saved in my files:

> Dear Rachel, what a wonderful surprise! And congratulations on your tenure, this is truly great news. I think, though, that

> we will have to wait for seeing each other again, perhaps in the fall?
>
> All the best to you,
>
> A.

She didn't want to see me. Her written congratulations rang hollow, as did her offer to meet in the future. We lived on opposite sides of the country and by fall I would be thoroughly caught up in the semester's work, thousands of miles away.

During the years that A. kept me at arm's length, I had been swept up by a different kind of mentor. Although my new department had no official system of faculty mentoring, a dynamic senior colleague had appointed herself to this role even before I arrived on the job. Of all my colleagues, she was the person I most feared and idolized. In graduate school, I had been dazzled by the brilliance and audacity of her research, and riveted by stories of her notorious eccentricities. B. seemed to know everything and everyone, to have read every book, and seen every important film. When I arrived for my job interview at the MLA convention hotel, she opened the door in a teal faux-fur coat that would be her trademark for years after. It accentuated the spiky hair that was sometimes white-blonde and sometimes closer to red, adding at least an inch to her already magisterial height. I never worried about saying inappropriate things, since B. would talk in long monologues without stopping for a breath. When she asked me a question, she also answered it. I didn't mind because I felt so lucky to have B. as my advocate, not to mention a source of amusing stories, like the one about the time she strode into my apartment, wiped a finger across a dusty radiator, and announced, "At home, I use Pledge." I thrived on B.'s affirmation, as well as her honest and sometimes blunt criticism of my work. She wrote letters when I needed them, and supported me vigorously at every step toward promotion.

All wasn't perfect with B., of course. I was assigned a faculty apartment in her building, so she literally lived on top of me for almost ten years. When she wanted to talk, she would peer into my ground-floor apartment to see if the lights were on, before ringing my doorbell insistently. Once I opened the door, she would sweep in, commenting on my clothes, the arrangement of furniture, the program on TV. When she didn't want to see me, she would pass by on the street with her eyes fixed somewhere

over my head. With time, her inability to listen became more grating than charming. I disliked the turmoil she created by sparring with our male colleagues and urging me to take sides. And while she was always enthusiastic about my work, I sometimes got the feeling she didn't like me. Once we left a dinner party together in the early hours of the morning and she insisted on taking the subway instead of sharing a cab. Another time, she told me I was the happiest person she knew. I was stunned at how little she seemed to know me, having spent my untenured years smiling through a haze of anxiety and depression. Worse yet, B.'s tone suggested she couldn't abide happy people.

None of this seemed to matter when I got tenure. My predominant feeling was gratitude for B.'s support. I looked forward to being her colleague, free from the constant threat of losing my job. But instead of evolving, my relationship with B. simply vanished. I moved to a different building and had children who demanded my time and energy. B. could no longer just drop by my apartment on her way home. As she prepared to retire, she reduced her hours on campus and stopped participating in department life. When we passed on the street, increasingly she swept by as if I were too short to be seen. Sometimes I catch sight of her, shoulders slightly rounded with age but still imposingly tall and thin. She never acknowledges me. I'm filled with appreciation for her support when I needed it, but find it hard to believe we ever ate a meal together, sat on the same couch, or had what she would call "a conversation."

When I decided to have children, it was clear that neither A. nor B. would be a mentor. Like many successful women intellectuals of her generation, B. had never committed to a life partner or parenthood. Once while I was in her apartment our visit was interrupted by a loud bang. B. leapt up, suddenly remembering the egg she had left boiling on the stove until it exploded. It was a scene of near allegorical significance: there simply was no room in the brilliant and preoccupied coils of B.'s imagination to care for the everyday world in front of her, let alone a child. But I also refused to take the path of A., who seemed to have vanished into motherhood, abandoning not only her writing but all professional ties and obligations beyond the bare minimum to keep her job.

This is where the essay gets stuck. In draft after draft, I elaborate the disappointments of A. and B. and then come up short, uncertain about where to go next. By all accounts, I've had a remarkably successful professional life. As a scholar of American literature, I'm skeptical of the classic narrative about a rugged individual who triumphs through her own hard

work and perseverance. Nobody becomes a tenured professor without a wide and supportive network of teachers, colleagues, and advocates. But I also want to write honestly about how those networks fall short, especially when powerful women speak the language of feminist solidarity while failing to sustain women coming up behind.

While struggling with this impasse I went to hear a panel that included Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, whom I've known as a colleague and friend for over twenty years. We've never lived in the same place or had an institutional connection, but I try to see her when she gives a lecture or we attend the same conference. On this night, I arrived late and only just managed to find a seat in the packed auditorium. I hadn't seen Rosemarie in at least a year and there was no time to say hello, but she caught my eye from the stage, smiled warmly, and waved.

In Rosemarie's gesture, I realized I had found my ending.

Throughout my difficulties with A. and B., Rosemarie was always waving in welcome. Rosemarie is a founding figure in the field of literary disability studies, which is one of my favorite intellectual communities. When I was a graduate student, she accepted the first essay I ever wrote for publication. Later, we met in person over dinner at a conference. Even through the fog of severe imposter syndrome that clouded my first years as an assistant professor, I felt her treating me as a respected colleague. Rosemarie introduced me to many of the colleagues I love and admire most. She even had a name for this process. "Recruitment" was her strategy for enfolding promising newcomers into the field of disability studies. Rosemarie wrote letters for me. She mentioned my name to editors and hiring committees. When I disagreed with her, she took criticism as an opportunity for discussion rather than fighting. And even as she became an academic celebrity surrounded by friends and admirers, I never felt forgotten or overlooked. Waving from the stage was a gesture of recognition and inclusivity that is vintage Rosemarie.

Rosemarie's wave also had other meanings. She used her arm, which is the most visible aspect of her identity as a person with disabilities. Rosemarie describes her arms as "asymmetrical," ending in hands that have a total of six fingers, rather than the conventional ten. I find them beautiful because they are such a powerful and unique expression of who she is. In my favorite portrait, Rosemarie stands with one three-fingered hand on her hip, her shorter arm curled at her other side. Sunglasses make it hard to tell exactly where her gaze is directed, but I think she's looking invitingly at an approaching friend. When we first met, Rosemarie didn't

speak openly about her disability but over time she has claimed disability as an identity, as well as an academic pursuit. "I have learned to be disabled," she writes, "what has been transformed is not my body, but my consciousness" ("Becoming Disabled"). I admire her optimism about how embodied difference can be a prompt for creativity and resourcefulness.

It seems obvious now, but until she waved from the stage it never occurred to me to write about Rosemarie. Maybe her affirmation has been given so generously and continuously it became transparent somewhere along the way. Maybe it's because we never had an institutional connection, or because it was such a part of my professional identity to understand myself as neglected and abandoned. Maybe it was because I imagined a mentor as someone who earned my admiration via an enchanted combination of intimidation, mystery, and self-absorption. I think of my own mentoring as shaped by a powerful imperative not to be like A. or B. Thanks to their negative examples, I believe myself to be a warmer, more responsive, and consistent mentor to my own students. I also discourage the cult of personality that led me to them in the first place. Sometimes, I'm exhausted by the effort of trying not to be them.

It is much less exhausting to imagine myself passing along the steady supply of warmth and affirmation Rosemarie continues to offer. In contrast to the limited resources of A. and B., Rosemarie's are freely given, with no expiration date. I don't think I have her charisma or tireless energy. But I like to believe that, like Rosemarie, I'm the person who waves in recognition rather than gazing coolly off into the distance; that there is continuity between the way I live in the world and the ideas I value; and that I encourage students to become the best versions of themselves rather than mini-versions of me. I had imagined a mentor to be a woman whom I respected, at least in part, because she held me at arm's length, hovering at a remove that I could aspire to but never truly match. Rosemarie, whose arms are shorter and less symmetrical, modeled a form of mentorship that recognizes and bolsters up what others bring to a relationship. Rosemarie has given me my ending. A mentor so sustainable, low-impact, carbon-neutral, that I almost looked right past her. That is, until she caught my eye and waved.

Rachel Adams teaches in the English Department at Columbia University where, for the first time, a junior colleague she mentored has recently received tenure. May he wear it well.

Works Cited

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Becoming Disabled." *New York Times*, 19 Aug. 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/opinion/sunday/becoming-disabled.html. Accessed 8 Oct. 2021.