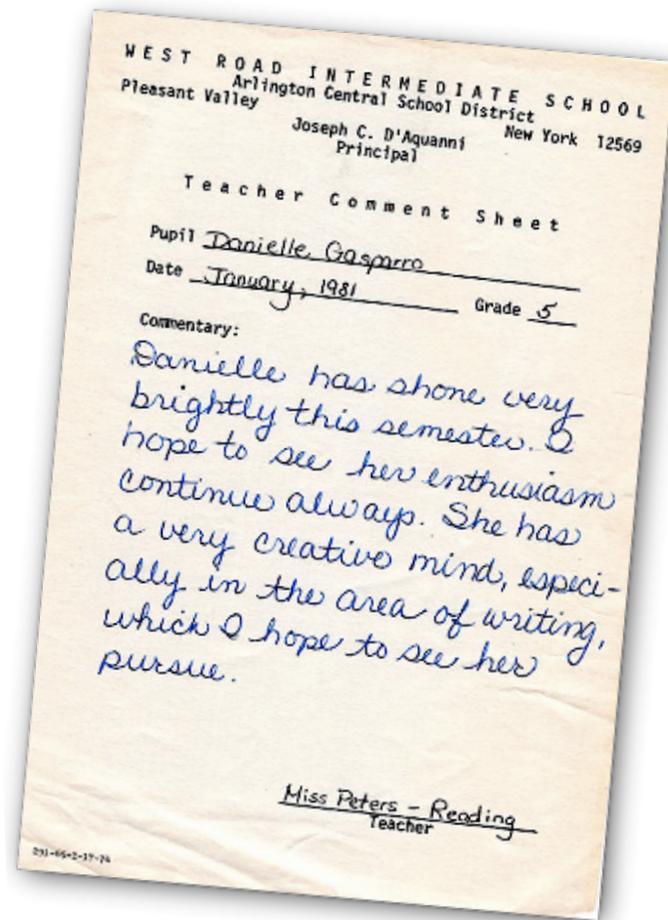


“Dear Miss Peters...” (Epistolary Essay/Memoir Piece)



Spring 2013

Dear Miss Peters,

Greetings from the American heartland!

I hope this missive finds you well. That is to say, should it someday travel beyond my imagined version of you, and greet the actual eyes, mind, and heart of you. All of which, I am well aware, may struggle at any point in real or fantastical time to recollect who I am. Or, to be accurate, *who I was*. It has, after all, been thirty-two years since you kindly extended through the gorgeously cursive, handcrafted words you penned into a teacher comment sheet two luminous gleams of hope as to how I might best flourish and serve others during this wild, evolutionary ride called

life. Nevertheless, in light of a recent and rather astonishing turn of events, I'm compelled to bring you (or at least, the gladdening idea of you) up to speed on my progress as a means to retroactively extend my deepest regard and appreciation for said gleams.

Regarding the matter of my enthusiasm, I'm thrilled to report that despite the various trials I've been summoned to endure since grade five, I believe it is at once fair and impartial to note that I've been, and yes, intend to





always be, above all else—*gung-ho* about the human experience. (NOTE: incidents of war, prejudice, physical violence against anything, racial injustice, corporate greed, environmental abuse, megalomania, and poorly made coffee, excluded.) Hell, for most of my adult life, I've felt so inclined to keep bucking any downhearted thoughts up into mental bell-kicks that for fifteen years I elected to stay the unstable artist-life course as an independent singer-songwriter—an insight I imagine may please you, given that the light of your other gleam was one that encouraged my thoughts to reach a pen to reach a page.

Still, not all of the writing I've done since attending West Road has taken the shape of a song lyric. I'd give just about anything to share with you and you alone the many musings-turned-crappy first drafts of poems and essays that have kept me up all night over the past three decades, agonizing over line breaks and comma placements and the fate of mankind and the tragedy of buying high-priced candles with malfunctioning wicks, including those years I first spent in college, from age 18-21, majoring in...that's right, you guessed/predicted it: Creative Writing. But truth be told, although I've always known way deep down where it critically counts that *words alone* are the fuel to my soulfire, when I felt called to leave higher education behind to follow my musical bliss, I gratefully (and ardently!) did. So, despite your prudent wish that writing be the domain I settle, I cannot claim my life and times have been spent in sole pursuit of it.

That is to say, I could not. Until now.

For as you, Miss Peters, were likely well-aware in January of 1981, evolution—as bumpy and as detour-riddled a ride as it might be—is essentially, and in its highest and most benevolent form, *change over time*. Had the wisdom of your comment sheet, a keepsake my dear mother knew (ah, moms) was worthy of a sacred spot inside her hope chest, reveal itself to me at any point prior to the precise moment it did—*April of 2011*—when I, at age forty, had



tucked away my tunesmith cap and been for months considering a return to college to complete the aforementioned Bachelor's degree I had abandoned so many years ago, your urging that I keep the

searchlight of my mind's eye tilted towards the page would have surely been cherished (as I "happened upon it" while searching for a photo of my then desperately ill father), but I suspect, not so fiercely heeded.

And the crazy thing is—no, make that: the luminous sequence of divinely connected dots that form the single remarkable thing that bids me to write you at last, and that on this brightly shining day in 2013 feels at once unbelievable and masterfully schemed (oh, do stick with me here) is...



Had I not followed your nudge to explore those wide open plains of the page at the exact calendar juncture I've noted—a juncture at which I was no longer willing or able to mute my poet-soul's siren—I would also have not ended up one year later an impassioned older student (read: traditional nonconformist!) in a senior-level course at Florida State University entitled Literature and Culture of the Great Depression, for which I was required to read the novel *You Can't Go Home Again* by Thomas Wolfe, a literary masterpiece that contains within its fourth chapter a closing passage so poetically intoxicating, so piercingly instructive that upon my first taste of its lyrical deliciousness, I knew somehow, in that only-a-day-seizer-who's-taken-countless-risks-and-enjoyed-great-success-and-delight-but-is-ready-

to-admit-they've-resisted-their-truest-calling-for-too-long kind of way, I just knew there would be revealed to me at some future moment an even greater, more personal significance to the riveting, incomparably encouraging lines:

Child, child...have patience and belief, for life is many days, and each present hour will pass away...you have been mad and drunken...filled with hatred and despair...all the dark confusions of the soul...you have stumbled...you have faltered, missed the way—this is the chronicle of the earth. Take heart...these things pass. Some things will never change. Lean down your ear upon the earth, and listen...The voice of forest water in the night, a woman's laughter in the dark, the clean, hard rattle of raked gravel, the cricketing stitch of midday in hot meadows—these things will never change...the glory of the stars, the innocence of morning, the smell of the sea in harbors...the thorn of spring—these things will always be the same...The leaf, the blade, the flower, the wind that cries and sleeps and wakes again, the trees whose stiff arms clash and tremble in the dark...will also never change. Pain and death will always be the same. But under the pavements, trembling like a pulse, under the buildings trembling like a cry, under the waste of time, under the hoof of the beast above the broken bones of cities, there will be something growing like a flower, something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life again like April.

Again like April.

Again like April.

Those words. That phrase. Wolfe's triumphant, crowning notion to his edifying wonderpassage became for me, for months, a kind of mantra. A magnetizing chant for mind and mouth to savor with no understanding as to why.

Again like April...

Although, I did wonder. Why? Why did this particular turn of phrase, amidst so many worth revering



inside Wolfe's sublime classic, tug at my heartstrings so hastily, so...intently? I suppose the power that this pithy simile had over me was on some level tied to having lost my father to cancer's swift, savage blow only eight months prior to encountering its charms. Perhaps Wolfe's overarching plea to mind the brighter sides of life, no matter its shadowy hues, was meant to imbue my grief with hope.

Certainly it was. I'm touched to say, it did.

But again, that was the spring of 2012 (or, to be cryptically clear, *April* of 2012), and by the time the calendar flipped to December—the month I would graduate and migrate north, returning to my beloved homeland of Skyscraper National Park [*bow to Sensei Vonnegut inserted here*], where I would, in a matter of a few weeks, shockingly score and move into a large, reasonably priced studio perch—Wolfe's transcendent affirmations hadn't so much faded as fused themselves into the circuitry of my curious mind... slipped themselves into the bin of truth-tinder I imagine I'd been stockpiling since...well, I'd have to guess (as perhaps you might, too, Miss P.), since I've had a thought inside a head to rest upon a palm. And as it most often goes when you've worked your straight-A-for-ass off snagging a college degree from one of the most regarded writing programs in the country [*hat-tip to my esteemed professors, and dollar store*



candles with strong wicks, inserted here], there was one pesky practical issue that needed tending to, pronto. The finding of a job.

Mind you, I don't mean just any job. No. For me, the day of the "day gig" was long since gone with the road-warrior wind and I was at last a bona fide seeker of some meaty role I could sink my abundance-craving teeth into. A solid "career opportunity." Some meaningful position that could never-not-ever-in-any-way include within its list of qualifications the following criteria:



- **STRONG ABILITY TO MULTI-TASK**—*specifically, as such skill can result in the averting of a colossal elk at three a.m. on a barren state Route 93 (hopefully) south, while experiencing heavy eyelids, a full bladder, a bright-red "low gas" indicator light, an uncertainty as to how many miles are between you and the next exit boasting any signs of homo-sapien life, and a throbbing pang of hope that the concert you're slated to perform the next evening will be attended by at least a few people who believe your music is worth some measure of their time, hearts, and hard-earned dimes—A MUST.*

Nope. For me, finally, after enduring more than a decade of indie-songbird strife (which to be clear was avidly self-inflicted and stitched over the years into a tapestry of meaning and whim) I was poised to find not merely some entry-level assistant position countless others would kill for that I now looked back upon as

a means to an album-or-rehearsal-space-funding end, but some advanced, respectable post. A real-dealio grown-up person's job that offered grown-up-people benefits such as an annual salary, and health insurance. Some coveted role I might spend forty-plus hours a week eagerly assigning my time and talents to in order to kick off life's bracing "Second Act." Sure, I might have to temp for a while, take some thankless short-term gig as head honcho to a petrified pile of administrative bullshit. Whatever. I'd be fine doing something I was "overqualified" to do, as it would only last a few months. Or six months to a year, but I could bear that brunt, big fake water-cooler grin and all. I was just psyched to have a solid, reliable plan: I'd reconnect with all the first-rate staffing agencies I'd worked with over the years, and secure some steady income while Multitalented-Writer-&-Communications-Specialist me set out to sail the ideal job-landing seas at last!



Yes, this job search 'round I'd keep the diligent faith as I applied with all kinds of savvy to all kinds of positions that I felt, for the first time across a truth-seeking life, genuinely curious to explore. Hour after hour, I'd meticulously dispatch varying versions of my resume, each one curated to complement a cover letter so compelling that it would not—rather, it *could not* be overlooked. Yes indeed as first-light dazzle turned to late-night frazzle, I'd apply with all my blurry-eyed might to a wide array of sexy, sophisticated mid-level positions in the literary arts, publishing house roles that would be challenging yet stimulating, and most importantly, *mean something* as I privately forged on each glorious Brooklyn morning, feverishly tending to that other, seemingly impractical issue at hand...making sure I had time for the all-encompassing, excruciatingly necessary, soul-satisfying endeavor of encouraging a thought to reach a pen to reach a page.

But that was early January.

And then...it was February.



Then, at some point around the first of March (as in, yes!—Operation: Stick With Me has led us back to this year!), somewhere in between the super-sized chocolate hearts and beer-guzzling leprechauns, one unremarkable afternoon following the sixty-two consecutive days I had spent feeling up then down, then up then down then down then downer then what the hell is going on why when how where what do you want from me God yeah yeah I know blah blah chin up everything for a reason dear hiring manager dear temp agency rep to whom it may concern Craigslist dot com hi just checking in temp-to-perm? no thank you dear staffing agency okay

I understand wait seriously office manager of a wholesale ceramics manufacturer—come on, God—sorry I know blah blah suck it up people are in fact starving dear hiring manager skills are well-aligned dear assistant to the editor look forward to your reply good fit good fit spell-check hit send hit send hit send...cricket...cricket...cricket... Then, on the very day I thought I just might lose my mind—my mind that you so long ago, Miss Peters, graciously qualified as “very creative” but was now as stale as an automated out-of-office reply—I was surged with a bolt of insight so energizing, so inspiring, that I knew I was forever



transformed when, by way of our trusty yet seemingly now old-fashioned US Postal Service, I held within my paws that precious, venerable voucher I had worked so hard to garner. That ticket to a brighter day I'd sweated through many a caffeinated night to procure. That deed I would forever treasure as a vital symbol of the arduous, unconventional trail I'd blazed so shrewdly, so manga cum laudishly—yes, there within my humble hands, tucked behind the massive cardboard mailer housing my Bachelor's degree, it appeared before my weary eyes, at last! My approval letter for food stamps.

That's right, Miss Peters. Food stamps. And yes, you've further read correctly: I felt *inspired* in that moment. Not frustrated or insecure, angry or desperate, worried or defeated. Rather, a splendid wave of (oh, how you nailed it!) enthusiasm flooded through me as I stood there in the entryway, enchanted by the thick ray of truthlight the setting south-Brooklyn sun was blazing before me to reveal the constellation of dust motes whirling in slow, magical circuit. Now, don't get me wrong, those signature human sentiments of doom and gloom were still present, simmering somewhere in the turbid corners of my mind as I subconsciously railed at the All-Knowing Supreme Love-Being: "Are you freaking kidding me? A thumbs up from Uncle Sam on 'Nutrition Assistance' alights the same day as my Bachelor's degree with big fat latin honors? Seriously? For this, I worked my straight-A-for-ass-off? Sixty-two genuine cover letters to sixty-two imagined hiring managers who were probably offering their second cousin's best friend from elementary school's adopted son's fiancé the job as I typed 'Sincerely,' and this is what I've got to show for it? This is where a life spent taking ardent leaps in the dark propelled by truth-in-spite-of-fear gets you? Really?"



Needless to say, given the paradoxical postmarks at hand, such mental banter was to be expected. But the thing that wasn't, the thing I could have never anticipated, was the deep ease I felt as I realized that, despite all the negative thoughts I might understandably be having as an intelligent, experienced middle-aged college graduate worthy of a fine career opportunity who was, for the time being, anyway, deemed a good fit for the role of *Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents Worthy of Receiving \$142 per Month for the Purchasing of Household Foods* ("such as breads, cereals, fruits, vegetables, meats, fish, poultry, dairy products, and seeds or plants which produce food but NOT beer, liquor, or wine"—wordsmith's honor, Miss P. that capital N-O-T is no embellishment)—the actual, singular thought that crystallized inside my harrowed, hungry mind was:

I have to write about this.

Well, okay. That, and “Christ, I need a beer. Or liquor, or wine.” But more to the point is how inside that brownstone entryway, within that odd, forlorn moment, it was not only the thought “I have to write about this,” but the realization that my knee-jerk directive was *self-initiated* that had me jetting back up to apartment 2F with a steadfast plan to lower the mast of my expedition a bit, re-chart my cum-lauded course and head down to snag an application from the nearest Starbucks ASAP for crying out loud! Or maybe from that cozy new cafe on Fourth Ave that my able body is too budget-weary to spend time in. Or who knows, maybe the guy with the cotton candy-mobile up on Fifth Ave could use a hand but anyway who cares, really, for...I get it now. I've got it now:

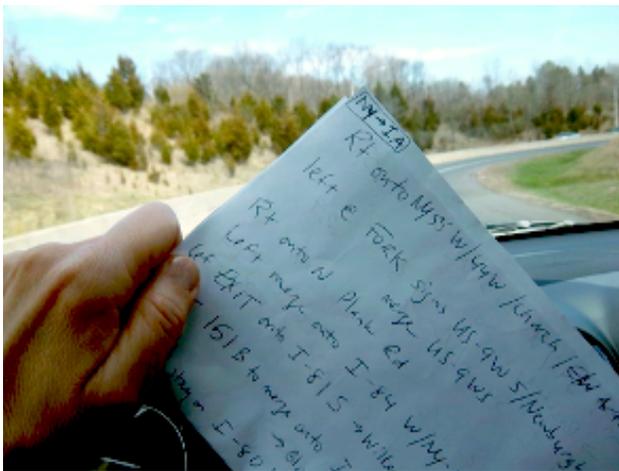
I have a very creative mind, especially in the area of writing, which I must enthusiastically pursue.

And so, Miss Peters, my keen and kindhearted teacher of yore. This brings me back to the matter of my God-given mind, which I am happy to report I not only didn't lose, but am beginning to discover the true depths and dimensions of as it ventures wholeheartedly each morning, noon, and night to reach for a pen...and then a thought...and then a page because, as it turned out...



My pride was barely halfway down my gullet that fateful, mail-fetching afternoon when the phone rang, and two beloved friends I'd not spoken to in over a year were on the line, eager to play catch-up from their Midwestern thrones as they reclined on the deck of the farmhouse they called home, nestled inside an apple orchard in Eastern Iowa. AKA, the charming locale I performed a house concert in while troubadouring back in (wait for it...) April of

2010, and which, by the end of our conversation, I would be graciously invited to come live in for as long as my soul and bank account deemed favorable. That is to say, if and only if I could meet my royal friends' single criteria of “being interested and able” well then heck yeah I was more than welcome to take a blind leap west, forego the hustle of the Big Apple bustle and take a more relaxed, manageable bite out of life as I once and for all got down to business and took up playful shop inside that literary terrain you once hoped I would traverse, and in which my mind has always felt most settled.



And so it goes that here we are. Well, here I am, anyway, in eastern Iowa, envisioning you digesting all of this narrative magic as a token of my gratitude for the role you played as its grand sorceress. Of course, as I arrived to greet the immeasurable beauty of the heartland sky, the essential matter of making ends meet still beckoned with a vengeance. But...as I hope to have made clear...any choice that's ruled by truth-over-fear is bound to reveal that magic brews within great burdens, too. As sure as I found myself subletting my Brooklyn digs within days and revving up a rental car destined for Dubuque, I felt a deep trust in whatever was to come, a knowing that the dismal, asphalt-jungled chapter of fruitless toil I had endured would reveal itself across a season of hanging my hat atop the fertile cropland to be the seed of promise it actually was. And by God—and a farmer named Myron in need of a springtide rock-picking hand—you betchya, Miss Peters, it did.



At any rate, I trust by now you're getting the mystical gist of this long-winded dispatch, so I'll close by saying, simply, that... Several other divinely composed moments have transpired since my lucid leap west, but rather than underserve them here, I shall work to render their significance through the many poems, essays, and images I intend to cultivate during my time here on the Iowa soil. All of which I hope will do your comments proud someday by shining bright, valuable truths onto the souls of my fellow stardusters. What I can say for sure is there could be no more encouraging way to close to this love letter than to note I do so as the sun-dappled apple blossoms burst from mother earth, coming into life again, as they so faithfully do...in April.

Always and enthusiastically yours,
Danielle

