

*The Last Workshop*



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John Minichillo

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# I

Lydia's boss, the famous writer, tasked her with making contact with as many former students as she could find. This meant poring through file boxes of old graduate school applications to try to determine which students had been accepted, and whether they attended the program. Because when she asked her boss if she should limit her search to those who graduated, which would be easier, he said, simply, "No." As a writing program it wasn't the degree that mattered as much as the experience. A student who had dropped out may have continued to write and managed to make good. He wanted to hear of their successes, but he also just wanted to know where they all were. He wanted to make contact with them again, however slight.

Lydia created a list of names and she Googled everyone to determine if they had ever been a writer. For some she had come across stories they had published in online journals, but often the bio line would proclaim, "So and so lives in Petal Mississippi and is a student of the Deep South Writers Workshop." So these kids had made a splash while they were here, under her boss's tutelage, but they'd often gone off silently into the world with no way for Google to find them again. After so many dead ends she went back over the applications and discovered she could make phone calls to the per-

son listed as an emergency contact, usually a parent or close family member. The phone calls went like this: “Yes, hello. My name is Lydia Barrow and I’m calling from the Deep South Writers Workshop. I’m trying to reach so-and-so who was a student of ours. They did such fine work while they were with us and we’re putting together an anthology of the writing of former students. We just wanted to make sure so-and-so knew about it. Is there a contact address where we could send a letter, or a phone number or an e-mail address?” Sometimes this meant explaining what an anthology was, and this was a chance for Lydia to exaggerate the impact such a publication would have on so-and-so’s future career as a writer. But most often the family members on the other end of the line were forthcoming and more than happy to tattle on the whereabouts of those who had once dreamed of being writers. They were working in restaurants, they were store managers, they wrote for nonprofit agencies and big-name corporations. They taught in high schools and universities. They switched careers and went back through more prestigious graduate schools to earn degrees in disciplines with better career prospects. So there were lawyers, social workers, software techs, and even a doctor—a real *medical* doctor, not the kind who doctored over language and letters. One kid had even gone back to run for mayor in his town. He’d lost, but he’d run a solid campaign, and the father at the end of the line, who sounded tired, his voice dry and his words muddled with the enduring fatigue that comes with old age—he pepped up when he talked about his son’s unsuccessful bid for city patrician. His mind sharpened, his cadence sped a beat, and he spoke with beaming pride: “He had finally decided to *do* something with his life.”

This was an attitude she’d often encountered from the parents of the starry-eyed. The value of a writing degree was doubttable or



even contemptible. Lydia knew that if these parents saw what the school was actually like they'd feel even more justified and explicit in their critiques: with the worn-out buildings where all the liberal arts classes were taught, and likewise their offices, and even the office of *The Deep South Triannual*, one of the most respected literary magazines on the market, or so her boss had said.

Lydia's boss was a man who loved to make things difficult for those around him. He called this "joking around," but his jokes were often at the expense of someone else's feelings, and she'd seen him tightrope the line of verbal and psychological abuse with some of the students. Lydia could take anything he said because she saw right through him and could even bite back. He seemed to enjoy this, having a subordinate with some spunk, and she took this approach with him because it was in her nature but also because he'd hinted that his previous secretaries were unable to get along with him, and so he'd sent them packing.

It was with his abusive nature in mind that she started to wonder why he suddenly cared about all the young writers he'd come into contact with. At first, she supposed it was his getting old coupled with feelings of loneliness even as the literary establishment trumpeted his latest book. Though it wasn't until she'd gotten through to a former student on the phone that it all coalesced for her.

"Why is he asking about me now?" the former-student had said. "Is he dying?"

And without any evidence other than a vague suspicion that when he took afternoons off he was going to see an oncologist, she said, "Yes. He is."

"That's rich," the former-student said. "So the old atheist wants to apologize? And he's getting you to do it for him?"

“He hasn’t told me to apologize,” Lydia said. “He hasn’t told me he’s dying.”

“But he is?”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t look well in his last author photo.”

“He’s not well.”

“Shit. I did learn a lot from him. He was my only writing mentor, for whatever that’s worth.”

“He would like to hear it.”

“I’m supposed to send a card or something?”

“I don’t know what you’re supposed to do. Maybe an email?”

“I can do that. Does he still work there? Have they tried to kick him out?”

“They’ve tried. Unsuccessfully. He still resides, prestigiously.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear it. About his dying. Are you holding up?”

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine.”

And then Lydia hung up the phone and she had a whole new tactic to get through to them. Her story was that the famous writer was dying. She made sure to tell them it was a secret and they couldn’t say anything. He hadn’t quite come to terms with his mortality and they absolutely did not want the story in the press. And so even if they brought up his cancer he might not acknowledge it, or he would deny it, but a few kind words would mean a lot to him.

And so Lydia’s lie about the famous writer’s terminal illness spread around the country through the networks of the people who knew him, and out of loyalty to him they only talked about his condition with their spouses or the old friends they knew during that time of their lives when they dropped everything to go live in Mississippi to learn to write fiction from a Minimal Realist, and they’d

holed up in air-conditioned shotgun shacks where they wrote as if their lives depended on it.

§

When Allison Avett saw the email from Trent she dreaded opening it. His subject line was simply, “Important,” and she had run out of delicate ways to tell him she didn’t have the time to give him feedback on his latest novel manuscript. She admired his pluck. Despite sticking with the unpublishable name Trent Sanivaugh, he wrote more than anyone she knew, and she had a lot of writer friends. She had met all these other writers at conferences, retreats, and an exclusive Facebook group called Fifty Under Fifty, which wasn’t true of some of the members anymore, but it was for Allison, who was forty and had published two novels and a collection of short fiction. In her mind she was tied among the Deep South graduates with Maya Drake, who had a great writer’s name and though she only had two books, one had been a best-seller, briefly, and she also had a story in *The New Yorker*.

Allison was extremely jealous of Maya’s literary agent, who had visited the Deep South Writer’s Workshop their last year there, and she and Maya both had stories up that week, by design of the famous writer, but it was Maya’s story the agent had come away impressed with. Allison didn’t think Maya cared too much and never saw it as a competition. Allison knew she should have workshopped one of her old standby stories, like “The Existential Egg Salad,” or “The Saddest Motel.” Instead she had handed in something new, and she buckled under the pressure, because like everyone had said she didn’t take any risks, her story about a graduate student in Mississippi no less, and so it was Maya who came away with accolades, for what was