Rhodes Tower, Room 1801

The adjunct faculty office has six desks in it, but there are never more than two of us using the office at any given time. The room, while windowless, is not bad; however, the building is named for James Rhodes, governor of Ohio in May 1970, at the time of the Kent State shootings, and though some make the case that if it weren’t for him, our Cleveland State University itself would not exist, I cringe every time I say, “My office is in Rhodes Tower.”

Still, at times, good fortune has come my way in Rhodes Tower. Three years ago, Nancy McMahon and I met and became friends when we shared Room 1801 on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. In our first weeks together our talk was desultory. We’d work at our desks for a while, then one of us would say, “Take a listen to this,” and read a passage aloud from an anthology or a student essay. Then one day, she came over to my desk and handed me a paper, “Would you read this and see if you think those sentence-level problems interfere to such a degree that this student ought to get a ‘C’ on this paper?” We examined the essay, identified the pattern of sentence-level errors, marked them, and struggled to understand their cause. The young writer had skill, too, and we noted the sophisticated vocabulary and an authentic voice. Best of all, Nancy and I discovered that day that we were alike—we could never get enough of grammar and rhetoric!

When Nancy went back to her desk and took down her stylebook, the Fourth Edition *Allyn and Bacon Handbook,*
I wanted to see what she was doing, so I looked over her shoulder. “Jennifer, see pages 248 to 255 in our Allyn and Bacon,” she was writing in an endnote to the student, “and especially look at Section 12b, about dependent clauses, because that’s going to help …” I was impressed. I’d never thought about taking the time to look up exercises that exactly matched student errors. But Nancy? She was that kind of teacher. She tailor made the advice to each student, and her written comments were both useful and kind.

We spent a lot of time in our office. Every morning, at 6:30AM, we’d come in from our commute from the west side of town through Cleveland’s urban streets. With the office door closed and locked, in the light from the green banker’s lamp, we’d sit, companionably, and grade papers or polish our lesson plans. An oversized, grim portrait of Dame Edith Sitwell dominated one wall, looked down over us; it was always good for a laugh. The campus was quiet. Janitors polished floors in empty hallways. There was a hint of coffee being brewed in the kitchenette down the hall.

When we took a coffee break, our talk drifted to the personal. Nancy kept a gallery of snapshots of her grandchildren pinned up on the bulletin board, and we’d stand near there, coffee in hand. “Look at that,” she’d say, pointing to a snapshot, “the twins, Xavier and Curran, the eleven-year-olds. Jo, they are alike, because they are both so handsome and personable. But they are so different. Let me tell you what they did last week …” and she’d tell me a cute story, usually involving one boy being mischievous, and the other not. She’d talk about Josie, the little one jumping up and
down in her crib; about Victor, the grandson from Mexico and how grown-up he looked, dressed in a blazer for school; and about Shannon’s wedding, her first grandchild to marry.

Every spring, Nancy would take down the photos and rearrange the bulletin board to make room to post one poem, “Spring,” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. The first time she posted it, three stanzas prettily arrayed in black type against a picture of a blossoming fruit tree, I was delighted. Here was a Hopkins poem that I was not familiar with. I told her I was glad she’d introduced the poem to me, and recited my favorite lines aloud, with verve, “What is all this juice and all this joy?” We laughed. I waited every spring for her to post that poem.

In August 2007, together again, we started fall semester. She photocopied her syllabus, organized her desk, lined up her books, and posted the latest snapshots. One day in late October, when I offered her a coconut cookie I’d baked she turned it down, “I’ve got to have a test at the doctor’s and can’t eat solids. Sorry! I arranged to have someone cover my classes tomorrow and Monday so I can take the test.”

“Oh, I’ve had that test,” I said. “It’ll be fine.”

Nancy was out on Friday and Monday as planned. But then she wasn’t in on the following Wednesday or Friday, or the week following that, or ever again, and it wasn’t fine. The test told Nancy she had cancer. Following surgery and chemotherapy, less than three months after she left our office, after Christmas, after New Year’s, and after saying goodbye to her family and friends, she died.
I had felt so honored when her daughters invited me to visit Nancy one day a week before her death. I held her hand and talked for a while. I reminded her of the Hopkins poem that would have to be posted in the spring. “Oh, yes, it’s in my desk,” she whispered, her eyes closed. I recited the lines I liked, and, with a smile, “There’s no one like Hopkins,” she said.

At the funeral, there were bagpipes. Xavier and Curran were the altar boys. Her sons carried her casket.

After, I sorted through Nancy’s desk, knowing that the family would want her books and her notes, the student evaluations, and her grade books. I boxed it all up for them. All the snapshots. Her book about feminist literary theory. The grammar textbooks. Folders with lesson plans. Her coffee mug with a Joyce quotation and illustration on it. The totes and carry-alls for her books.

Finding the Hopkins poem, I hesitated. Then, I kept it. It stays in Rhodes Tower, Room 1801.

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