Letters to Keats

Seniors at Addison Academy were allowed to take two quarters of electives, and since the only subject I showed the slightest bit of promise in was English, I decided to take a literature class. Being a reputable college preparatory school, Addison offered a number of senior English courses with provocative titles designed to lure students - “Literature of Exile,” “The Dark City: Detective Fiction ,” “Ex-Patriot Literature: Paris in the 1920’s,” “Family in Crisis - American Drama.” And although they all seemed enticing, I suspected they required a good deal of work, and I, for one, preferred to take it easy my senior year. So I signed up for a class simply titled, “The Romantics,” without bothering to read the course description and having no idea what was in store for me. The name, “The Romantics,” appealed to my adolescent and girlish sentiment. I’m embarrassed to admit it, even now, but I had images of shirtless men with bulking chests, leaning over swooning women with small waists and cascading hair - a genre course in Harlequin paperbacks. What could be better, I thought. And whether we were going to read them seriously or critique them ruthlessly, I was in. I remember being a little surprised that none of my friends had signed up for the course, but I held out hope that it would be a fun elective.

The class met at the conference room in the school library, which was a good ten to fifteen minute walk from center of the campus. It was an afternoon class, and after spending lunch break with my friends, I found myself running up the path to the library in an effort to be on time and to leave a good first-day impression on my teacher. I was a few
minutes late. When I walked in, the room was silent, and there was no sign of a teacher, and only two other students -- Jeff Moore and Eric Wagner - sat at the conference table in the center of the room. They seemed relieved to see another student, especially a member of the opposite sex. I, on the other hand, was rather surprised to see boys in a class about sappy romance novels.

We sat patiently for a good ten minutes, tapping our pens, listening to the soft buzzing of the florescent lights, waiting for our teacher and the rest of the class to show up. No one else did. Finally, about fifteen minutes into class, the door opened and our teacher, Elaine Fisk waddled in, panting and barely visible behind the large cardboard box she was carrying. She slammed the heavy box on the table, looked at us, and managed a smile.

“Well, I’m glad the three of you are here,” she said as she took off her jacket. “In case you haven’t noticed, it’s going to be a small class, but I prefer small classes. Don’t you?”

No one responded.

Small indeed! I was used to having “intimate” classes of ten to twelve students at Addison. After all, one of the attractions of the school, and one of the reasons many parents were willing to spend fifteen thousand dollars a year for tuition, was the small classroom size - the pampered attention their child would receive. But three students? That seemed ridiculous, even for Addison.

“However,” she continued, “if any one of you decides to drop this class, it will be canceled. Three is the
minimum. And if it were canceled, it would be a shame. A real
shame,” she repeated as she shook her head in disappointment.

This was a bad sign. I wanted to run. There had to be a reason for the small class size – something the rest of the school hadn’t shared with the three of us.

“I suppose the Romantics must scare a lot of people” Ms. Fisk said, laughing.

Eric, Jeff and I looked at each other. I could see the panic on their faces, and they must have seen it on mine.

“Let’s get started, shall we?” Ms. Fisk said as she began to take books and other course material out of the box.

Elaine Fisk was a relatively new teacher at Addison, and I had only seen her from a distance, but did not know her by name. She was middle-aged, extremely short, about 4’8” and stout -- as wide as she was tall with a disproportionately large chest. Her middle button – the one that went across her sizable breasts - on her polyester shirts seemed always to be on the verge of popping. It was distracting, but not in a sexy way though. Yet we couldn’t resist looking down through the gap, and at her dull-colored, highly functional bra, waiting for the last thread holding the button to give way. She had short gray hair, sprinkled with course black hairs. When she turned her head to the side, one could see wispy grayish hairs, hanging gently over her lips and covering her receding chin that was indistinguishable from her neck. Her general appearance was gray – her hair, her outfits, her complexion, her teeth. And to be honest, as a young and mostly shallow girl of sixteen, who spent a great deal of time consumed by my
outer-appearance, I was appalled. I had never seen a woman who cared so little about her looks.

Ms. Fisk settled into her vinyl swivel chair, leaned back, and put on her reading glasses as she pulled out the roll sheet. My name was always first.

“Ho-mi- er-ah. Abi-di… wait…Adi-bi -zaa-day!” she read with some difficulty.

“That’s me,” I mumbled. I had gone through this ordeal my entire life.

“What a beautiful name! How do you pronounce it in your language?” she said with her head tilted down, peeking over her reading glasses.

I hated it when teachers did this to me. Why would they assume I wasn’t American? I wasn’t, but the question annoyed me. “Homeyra Adeebzaadeh,” I said it with an exaggerated Farsi inflection.

“That sounds Arabic – is it?” She seemed genuinely interested.

“Yes. But I’m Iranian.” I didn’t want to elaborate. I was still a little sensitive about the whole American hostage situation, even four years after the fact. I wanted her to move on and thankfully she did.

“Well, welcome to the class, Home-a-eeyraa."

After taking roll and handing out the book for the class, a thick Norton Anthology of Romantic Literature, (which I still have, held together by a frayed yellow rubber band), she asked us what the word “romantic” meant to us. The boys remained quiet, staring down at their sneakers.
“Love?” I whispered.

“Hmmm…” she replied as she rolled her eyes upwards. Clearly, I was wrong. I knew I shouldn’t have said anything. But with only three students in the class, I felt burdened by the eerie first-day-of-class silence. “Well,” she went on “that’s definitely what we nowadays associate with the word romantic, like a romantic movie or a book. However, the word romantic comes from the word ‘roman,’ which finds its origins in adventure, fantasy, imagination. Not necessarily just love in the sense of a love story.”

She continued with her lecture, as we fumbled through our backpacks in search of a pen, and quickly began scribbling down notes.

“So, I hope none of you was expecting a course in trashy supermarket, bodice-ripping novels.” She laughed a smoker’s laugh that turned into a coughing fit, all the while looking right at me with glistening eyes, as if she knew that I had mistakenly signed up for a course I thought would involve lusty romance novels.

“No,” she went on, after she cleared her throat.

“Romanticism was an artistic and philosophical movement, developed in the 19th century, as sort of a counter-reaction to the rigid confines of Neo-classicism. It mostly focused on the importance of the imagination and the emotions. A favorite subject among the Romantic poets was Nature; they viewed it as a reflection of their inner emotions and sensibility.”

The more she went on, the more I wanted to run. I should have been with my friends, who were at that very moment sitting in the Detective Fiction class, having the time
of their lives, with the new “young and cool” scarf-wearing English teacher, Ben Radford, while I was stuck in a class taught by a she-beast. I was convinced I was not going to survive an entire semester of reading poems about trees, rocks, and the English countryside. I knew I had to drop the class.

I stayed. Initially, because I didn’t want to be blamed for the class being canceled; however, as the weeks went on, I found myself slowly, and secretly, enjoying the class. I soon came to realize that I wasn’t the only one that looked forward to her class. Eric and Jeff, my fellow classmates, also delighted in Ms. Fisk’s crazy, animated, but always enlightening lectures. In fact, the three of us would often hang out together before class discussing, of all things, Romantic poetry. We soon started to perceive ourselves as sort of a special or elite literary group, not unlike Miss Jean Brodie’s “Crème de la Crème” club. Ms. Fisk had cast her spell on us. After all, it was no easy task to excite surly teenagers about the revival of folklore in 19th century poetry or Shelley’s use of the Terza Rima in “Ode to the West Wind,” but Ms. Fisk always infused her lectures with unforgettable stories about the poets: Byron’s sexual escapades, Shelley’s tragic drowning in Italy, Coleridge’s drug addiction, and Wordsworth’s inflated ego. I specifically remember Ms. Fisk telling us how Wordsworth, in his poem “The Leech Gatherer,” attempted to write about the simple and dignified life of a common man – a leech gatherer, no less, but ended up writing mostly about himself, pontificating on the life of a leech gatherer. Years later, I took a course in college on
Romanticism and was sorely disappointed in the professor’s lack of colorful anecdotes.

One day, Ms. Fisk came into class with a wide grin on her face, exposing her gray teeth.

“Guess whom I had tea with last night?”

“Who?” we asked in unison.

“John Keats!” she said proudly, as she looked out at our confused faces.

“Well, not literally, of course...he’s quite dead,” she said, laughing and coughing. But this time the coughing turned into a full blown fit. We waited. She finally cleared her throat and continued, “I had the craziest dream that Keats and I were sitting in -- what I assume was -- his patio, overlooking this beautiful garden. And we spent what seemed like hours talking about everything from poetry to philosophy, politics to Fanny. It was wonderful. I was only too sad to wake up before we had finished our talk.”

The three of us sat there staring at her. We didn’t know what to believe. Had she really dreamt about Keats? It didn’t matter. She was mesmerizing. Ms. Fisk had transformed before our eyes: her moustache and her receding chin were no longer visible, and what we saw before us was no longer a mythical she-beast, but a mythical beauty, a Helen of Troy. I wanted to be her, and I desperately wanted her whimsical bohemian life. I imagined her house with red walls and a purple sofa, bookshelves everywhere, with books piled in every corner, even lining the shelves in her bathroom. I imagined Ms. Fisk having exciting dinner parties with her poet
friends from Berkeley, smoking opiates, and getting into heated discussions over whether Blake could truly be considered the first romantic poet. I wanted her life.

Like many teenage girls, I kept a diary throughout high school, but the content of my entries seemed to change around this time. What had once been entries on problems with boys, friends, family, had now taken on a strange turn. Instead of addressing an imaginary “dear diary,” I was now writing letters to John Keats, a dead poet. A strange hobby for a seventeen year old girl, I realize, but it comforted me. For some reason, out of all the romantics, I had connected with Keats the most. His poems moved me. And one of his poems in particular, “Ode to a Nightingale,” spoke to me and for me. Like many teenagers, I was self-indulgent, in constant emotional turmoil, and believed that no one could possibly understand my woes. So I had this strange notion that if I wrote letters to Keats, his spirit would somehow listen. I saw Keats as a young fragile soul who was in pain, like me. And even though our struggles were not alike -- his issues centered around more serious matters of death and the mutability of life, while mine primarily focused on unrequited crushes – it didn’t matter. We both suffered. I was convinced we were one soul, separated by time and space. What on earth did a seventeen year old Iranian girl in California, in the 1980’s, have in common with a sickly, genius poet from the 19th century? Not much. But I was thankful for Ms. Fisk having introduced us.
A few years ago, while I was in London, I decided to visit Keats’s house in Hampstead Heath. I got a late start and managed to get lost in the neighborhood, (although if you’re going to get lost in London, I highly recommend that neighborhood). I finally made it to the house, right at sunset. When I got there, the curator, an older English woman, informed me that the museum was about to close for the day. I pleaded and bargained; I even lied about going back home to the U.S. the next day. She felt sorry for me and allowed me to take a quick look around. I rushed through the creaky house, cherishing every object in the musty rooms – Keats’s writing desk, his deathbed, and his collection of distressed looking leather-bound books. I thought a lot about Ms. Fisk that day. Somehow I sensed she had been there too, and that she had probably looked upon the very same objects that I had seen. On my way out, I remembered there was just one more place I had to see, so I snuck out to the patio. As I stood out there, I couldn’t help but imagine Ms. Fisk and John Keats drinking tea and sharing tales. I thanked the curator and walked back out to the street, which was now completely dark.