



The Death of Mrs. G

Mrs. Gadsden's only official connection with me was that she taught me freshman English at Howard University, more than half a century ago. But she and Professor Sterling Brown were my two idols when I was a student there — and both remained so for the rest of my life.

Mrs. G, as I came to call her in later years, was not only a good teacher, and a demanding teacher, but also one with kindness toward her students. I can still remember one very rainy night when a young lady from her class and I were walking up the street together from Howard University, when a car suddenly pulled over to the curb, a door was flung open and we were invited to get in. It was Mrs. Gadsden.



When I decided that I wanted to transfer to Harvard, both Mrs. G and Sterling Brown wrote strong letters of recommendation for me — letters that may have had more to do with my getting admitted than my mediocre grades, as a night student who was carrying too many courses for someone who worked full time during the day.

Mrs. G put me in touch with a lady she knew in Cambridge, who rented me a room, and also put me in touch with a lovely young woman who was a student at Radcliffe. Mr. Gadsden, her husband whom I had come to know by this time, said to me: "Oh, Tom, now she is picking out your women for you!" He had a great sense of humor.

In the decades that followed, Mrs. Gadsden and I remained in touch, usually by mail, even after we were both long gone from Howard University. Since she had many sojourns overseas, her letters often came from exotic places, principally in Africa.

She was my most important confidante, and her wise words helped me through many tough times in my personal life, as well as in my professional career. She encouraged my work, celebrated my advancement and, where necessary, criticized my shortcomings. All of it helped me.

At one point, I returned to Howard University to teach for a year. Among my students was a young African woman who had studied under Mrs. Gadsden in Guinea. This young lady, just recently arrived in the United States, seemed almost frightened by it — and by my economics class, which met two hours every night during the six weeks of summer school.

The class was moving ahead at a rapid pace and, when this young African woman fell behind, I knew it would be very hard for her to catch up. She failed the first two weekly tests and, when I spoke with her about it after class, she was thoroughly embarrassed and quietly began to cry.

I then went to see Mrs. Gadsden, who was back in Washington at this time, and who knew this girl and her family back in Guinea.



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“So you think she’s going to fail the course?” Mrs. G asked.

“Well, she’s not going to learn the material. Whether I can bring myself to give her an F is something else. That’s really hitting somebody who’s down.”

“You’re thinking of passing her, even if she does not do passing work?” Mrs. G said sharply. She reminded me that I had long criticized paternalistic white teachers who passed black students who should have been failed — and she let me have it.

“I’m ashamed of you, Tom. You know better!”

Now it seemed as if I could neither pass nor fail this young African woman. In desperation, I began to meet with her in the office for an hour before every class to try to bring her up to speed. At first, it didn’t look like these private lessons were doing any good, but one night she finally began to grasp what economics was all about, and she even smiled, for the first time.

The young woman from Guinea did B work from there on out — and I was tempted to give her a B. But her earlier failing grades could not be ignored, and averaging them in made her grade a C.

When I saw Mrs. Gadsden later, she said, “Our friend was overjoyed at getting a C in your course! She was proud because she knew she earned every bit of it.”

That was the Mrs. G I knew. And I never expect to see anyone like her again.

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