

On Authority

Janet Rogowski was five feet and two paltry inches, or so I judged as I towered over her. But that did not check the cold sweat and constricted throat that came over me as soon as I entered her domain on the second floor of the high school, midway down the linoleum corridor. She was one of those figures you remember with shudders now just as you did then—a person with whom a direct confrontation was the last thing you wanted. Maybe for you it was an implacable, derisive grandfather. Or, maybe it was that smooth, sardonic kid two grades ahead that dribbled your words like a basketball, shooting any chance you had of a comeback way down the far court. Maybe now it's a boss that plows your composure under every time just by entering your cubicle and looking unsatisfied—personalities with the unalterable power to make you weak and foolish and unable to defend yourself.

From the front of my 10th grade classroom Mrs. Rogowski's eagle eyes would swoop down to nab someone: You. She would ask, "*qu'est-ce que c'est la réponse correct?* What is ze answer, mademoiselle? *Qu'est-ce que c'est!?*" But it was no use, I couldn't understand her in French or English. It took the class five or six weeks to adjust to the heavy Russian accent. It took me the better part of the school year to realize that she wasn't actually going to bite me or possibly pin me to the wall with all her East European force.

She turned out to be funny, even if she wasn't very good at teaching French. Her hands would fly up, as she said several times the hour, "I'm going to commit Su-ee-cide, there is none of you who can conjugate ze verbs!" The class laughed as usual—and then waited. One of us would be the next one to be scanned by those eyes gleaming behind the oversize glasses. The awkward, impervious darling of the class was Danny Cohen. He was tall and gangly and somehow oblivious to

the terror. He would raise his hand a lot, but not to offer an answer. Most of the time it was to ask for a Kleenex in his congested voice and always in English. To which she would respond “What am I, a trugstore?” I laughed with the rest, but was privately dumbfounded that he could ask for something personal, be so presumptuous as to ask for consideration. I assumed—didn’t everyone?—the box of Kleenex was for her use, not ours.

Class was after lunch, which meant I spent all morning trying not to think about Madame Rogowski. I was not a timid teenager, had a B+ average, and I raised my hand enough in other classes, but never in hers. “In Russia we have ways of making you talk, no?” My fellow students gave out nervous titters, but I for one didn’t doubt the statement. I even remember wondering if she herself had been made to talk *over there, back then*. But it was just a flicker of awareness. Soon enough I was back to being flustered and embarrassed, too absorbed with how she affected my existence to be curious about hers.

I don’t think she was aware of her authority, the effect of her personality. I was unaware of her concern. One day she met me in the parking lot. “Anna, why is it you don’t talk in class?” She looked quite small without the classroom walls behind her. But you can’t tell the person who makes you stammer as though your teeth are chattering that there is a problem. She later accosted my parents on Back to School night and asked them what the problem was, why didn’t I speak up. “What a character! She’ll keep you awake,” they reported back the next day. They liked her and thought I should too. But they didn’t have to be with her for 52 minutes every day, trying to perform. What would parents really know about that kind of anxiety?

Perspective is usually gained with time and distance, not with an effort of will at the moment. This may be why advice to those on the flustered end of power relationships so often fails: “Don’t take it so seriously,” “teachers (parents, bosses, celebrities...) are human too,” “why don’t you go tell her how you feel?” Nobody could convince me that saying anything like this was a

good idea; how would she tolerate such an impertinence? My older self understands that authority is just as much conferred by the intimidated as it is demanded by the intimidator.

In getting older I notice how few people have the power to utterly terrify me the way she did. Intimidation comes now from way-bigger-than-me social crises. My shoulders tense over the bank statement, the suffering of prisoners in hellish American facilities, nuclear disasters, my father's endless job hunt. I am afraid of things, conditions. Perhaps this is growing up.

My father will find a job eventually; this month's bank statement will be replaced by the next. But like it was yesterday, I recall coming up to her desk as we approached one by one to get our papers. Was her short hair also dark red or was it just those huge glasses that were red framed? These details are not clear. But other, somewhat astonishing things are. How often does it happen that you snap a photo of your friends or the scenery and the photograph shows something in plain sight that escaped your notice at the time? How could you have missed the one element that changes the meaning of the moment? In my memory-photo from that tenth grade year I can easily conjure up an image of this fierce woman, exclaiming with raised hands. But it has taken years to understand her scolding as dedication to the task at hand. I recorded, but failed to wonder about the glimmer of repressed anguish in those snappy eyes. Now I see her smiling, but back then I never saw the smile.

And something else comes wiggling in now, a scrap of something another student mentioned in an offhand, parenthetical way near the end of that school year. Something undefined and terrible about what had happened to Madame Rogowski. In Russia. The War. Something about leaving or losing her family. I had had such a careful, cared-for life. This one hint of a suffering so much bigger than anything I'd experienced must have labeled itself 'do not discard' and inched its way into consciousness, waiting for a time when I could pin my gaze on her compassion and her heartbreak, which had apparently always been there.