

THE MASTERHARPER IS GONE

I have a shelf of comfort books, which I read when the world closes in on me or something untoward happens.

—Anne McCaffrey

I miss her fiercely, more than I have any right to miss her. I remind myself of this whenever I run into her at the library and am stricken with tears. She was not kin, was not connected to me by family ties, not even a distant cousin. Not even Jewish.

I have no right to miss her this much.

And once in a while, when I chide myself for my silly sentimentality, the sudden lightning that pierces my heart gives way to a duller, deeper pain. One I can live with, perhaps.

Like today, waking to a terrible cold, with headache and foggy brain I reach for solace. Put on my red flannel comfort shirt, add my favorite PJ bottoms, then a pair of fleece-lined slippers. Make my favorite tea, cover myself with an old patchwork quilt, and reach blindly for a book on my “comfort shelf.”

Of course. I can’t escape her. Hours later, still miserable, I finish *All the Weyrs of Pern* for the umpteenth time, and scold myself for the tears that fall – first, because she is gone, and second, because I never really succeeded in telling her just how much she meant to me.

I’d never heard of her when I stumbled across *The Ship Who Sang* at my local library. I wrote to her, saying that it had moved me profoundly, wondering how a prose writer could have such a clear understanding of a musician’s soul. Being one myself, I said, a musician that is, [and](#) would like to send a copy of my last record in gratitude.

She responded with a laugh that she had never heard of me but oh my, her children had, and could we trade books for recordings?

And so, we began. I raced through everything she sent – such generosity, so much that it took two large boxes to ship it all. She, in turn, told me that while she appreciated the beauty of my “Jesse” and the clarity of “At 17”, she was writing her current novel to the beat of my one disco hit, “Fly Too High.”

I laughed aloud because it made an artist’s sense to me – dragons flew, and Anne flew with them, regardless of the beat.

It was the third or fourth email that she began with the salutation “Dear Petal.”. Petal. Me? I responded that of all the things I’d been called, no one had ever dreamed to name me “Petal”. She answered briskly that obviously, they’d never seen me bloom.

From that day forward, I was her Petal, and she my Orchid.

We corresponded ferociously, both all-or-nothing no-holds-barred types, Aries to the hilt. Weekly, daily, sometimes hourly. Dropped out at times when one of us was “on tour”, came back to it as we could.

The time passed. Her beloved agent died. My parents passed away. She got a scathing review; I sent a few of my own. She was stuck on a chapter, I was stuck on a verse. We got unstuck, stuck again, and through it all we talked, comforting one another as only a “good hot cuppa” can.

She picked me up herself in Dublin, leaning on a cane, nervous to meet in the flesh until I ran into her arms and smothered her with hugs. She drove between the hedgerows with complete abandon, a total disregard for ruts or speed limits, while I clutched the seat and wondered who’d get the bigger headline if we crashed. Annie, I decided, for she was truly a two-column, bold print kind of gal.

By then, she was always “Annie” to me, or “Annie Mac”. My larger than life friend, who consorted daily with dragons and starlight, her own luster never dimming beside them.

Once, after she showed me the rock cliffs of the Guinness Estate and explained that Benden Hold looked just like that, she asked if I would write a theme for it. *For the movie?* I said. “Yes”, she said, “A theme. Because if Mennoly came to life, it would be with your voice.” I say this not to brag, but to indicate the trust between us – such trust that when I got home, with no film in sight, I began sketching out some notes for “Lessa’s Song”. I wanted it to be haunting, the way her words haunted me. I wanted it to be sweeping, like the thrust of dragon wings. I wanted it to be everything I could bring to her, a gift for someone whose words took me out of my world and into hers.

As she said herself, “That’s what writing is all about, after all, making others see what you have put down on the page and believing that it does, or could, exist and you want to go there.”

I hope someday to finish that melody. I hope it’s good enough for a MasterHarper to sing. I hope she regarded me worthy of the title. Because that’s what she was for so many of us – the MasterHarper, singing in prose, songs that reminded us of where we’d been, and what we could become.

She came and stayed with us in Nashville, bringing a broken shoulder and trusting me to care for her. We visited Andre Norton, Annie insisting I not just drive but sit with them and listen to “a bit of gossip”. These two women—one writing at a time when pseudonyms were necessary for a woman to get published, the other cracking the New York Times bestseller list with, of all things, a science fiction book, and by a female at that!—talked of publishers, rumors, scandals old and new, while I sat as silent as an unopened book, wishing I’d thought to bring a tape recorder.

At first, as her health declined, she bore it cheerfully. “I’m bionic now, Petal, complete with metal knees!” she declared. “Better than ever, and no pain.” She kept to her writing schedule, doing what she could to help her body retain its youth. Swam every day, bragged about her granddaughter’s accomplishments at school – “First prize, don’tcha know!” and commiserated over our various surgeries. *We sound like a couple of old Yiddishe mamas, comparing whose surgery was worse!* I laughed, and she laughed along with me.

Neither of us reckoned on the psychic toll. “Old age is not for the faint of heart,” she quoted, as her energy began to leech away.

How is it we artists always forget just how *hard* it is to write? how much *work* it is? How can we ignore the vast psychic drain that accompanies every act of creation? We both knew it from her Pern books, when going *between* enervated even the hardest of dragon riders. But somehow, we never expected it in “real” life.

It’s only when we lose that effervescence, through age, through illness, through sheer attrition, that we realize how necessary it is to our work. How fundamental to our beings.

“I can’t write.” She confessed the shameful secret to me not once, but dozens of times, as if repetition would prove it a lie. At first, playing the friend, I tried to reassure her. *Then don’t! Take some time off, Annie. Restore your body, and the brain will follow. Talent doesn’t just disappear, you know – it lies in wait.*

But she knew better. “I’m still not writing. I think I know how Andre Norton is feeling, too, because I suspect that she’s finding it very difficult to write, as the wellspring and flexibility that did us so much service is drying up in our old age. And no false flattery. AT 76 I AM old, and she’s in her nineties. It takes a lot of energy to write, as much as it takes you to keep on adding flavor to your song presentation. Sorry to blah at you but you’re one of the few people who does understand the matter when an artist questions their output.”

No worries talking to me about not writing... I sure as hell know the amount of energy it consumes. Every time you sit down to write, it's a performance. Only you don't have the luxury of props - no lights, sound, other actors to step behind when the inevitable fatigue hits. Heck, Annie, I'm feeling it more and more now, and you've got a quarter century on me. I notice it mid-show; two hours used to be a piece of cake. Now I feel myself flagging at 45 minutes, and I really look forward to that 20 minute intermission, if only so I can have some water and sit for a few minutes.

Same with writing, for me. Used to be able to sit and write for 6 hours at a stretch. Now I'm good for two if I'm lucky. Part of it's my back, but most of it is - I fear - just that I'm older. It sucks.

“Must write. There are IRS problems. You wouldn’t believe. Mouths to feed, people depending on. Advances already spent and gone. Must write.”

And so, she wrote, but for a while there was no joy in it. Still, I loved what she wrote, and told her so. I was proud of our friendship, not because she was so damned famous, but because she was so damned *good*. She even used my name in a book – Ladyholder Janissian in *Skies of Pern* – and roared with laughter when I admitted I’d been so wrapped up in the story that I hadn’t even noticed.

But she knew – as artists always do – that while her ability to plot continued apace, the actual *writing* of it was becoming an endurance contest she couldn’t hope to win.

“Turn more of it over to Todd,” I argued. Her son had a real knack for a sentence, but it was hard for Annie to let go. Of course. What artist can?

“His words may not sing the way yours do – yet. He doesn’t have your lyrical grace – yet. But he will, Annie, you’ve just got to let him breathe!” I said it and said it and said it, to no avail.

Then came a day when, 25 years younger and an ocean away, I finally lost patience and angrily berated her. “Damnit Annie, quit complaining and just *stop!* By God, you have created a *mountain* of work, an incredible legacy that will endure and be read by zillions of people long after both of us are gone – so quit whining about what you *cannot* do and start looking at what you *have* done. It’s time, Anne. Take this unbearable weight off your shoulders and *stop!*”

I sent the email off and waited for her response, fearing I’d gone too far. A day. Then another. Finally, sure I’d lost a friend, I called to ask just how angry she was with me. Oh, no, not at all, she’s “in hospital.” She took a fall. She’d write soon. And she did, quoting me and saying “I knew you, of all people, would make sense.”

A sweeter absolution I’ve never had.

We continued our friendship, bitching about our bodies, menopause, the inevitable “drying up” of everything that comes with the feminine mystique. You cannot imagine the luxury, for me, to have a compatriot a quarter-century older. As an artist, I admired her work. But as a woman, I was relieved to have someone relentlessly honest about what was to come in my own life.

We traded constantly. I sent her Lhasa de Sela, Sara Bettens. She sent stories about her animals, and the garden. One spring she changed my salutation to “Dear Crocus Petal – there are eight coming up now!”

We planned to visit Prague together in September ’01, but then came 9/11, and I chickened out. To be brutally honest, I was afraid to fly. Annie gently took me to task, then went off with someone else instead.

I will regret that for the rest of my life.

She went into the hospital for the last time while I was touring the UK – just a ferry boat and an ocean of commitments away. Knowing how out of touch she’d feel, how fretful she’d be, I tried to call every day. We fell into a pattern – I’d wait until I was in the van, then phone her up and tell an off color joke, a bawdy story, a bit of kindly gossip. Sometimes about people we knew in common, Harlan perhaps, or Scott Card, whose work she admired. Sometimes just a silly series of puns I’d found on line. Whatever it was, I wanted to make her laugh, because I loved to hear her laugh.

She died while I was on vacation, just days after the tour’s end. I’d brought a copy of *Dragonsinger* with me because on vacation, I always brought a few “comfort re-reads.” I’d fallen asleep over it, waking to an email from Gigi. *Please keep it quiet until I can reach everyone*, she asked. *My older brother Alec is still in flight, and we don’t want him seeing it in the paper before I can reach him.*

I called with sleep still in my eyes and heard the hum of people behind Gigi's answering voice. It was fast, it was painless, it was everything Annie had wanted. No lingering. A "good death" for her. But not for me.

It's hard to open my computer knowing there will be no "Dear Petal." It's hard, after knowing such a warm and giving shelter, to go without. Sometimes I run across a sentence that sings to me, and jot it down to show her. And sometimes, when she leaps out at me from the cover of a book, I remember she is gone, and it hits me like lightning, fast and lethal and completely unexpected. It stops my breath, until I remind myself that she is gone, but I am still here.

When the lightning hits, I comfort myself with this. The beauty of Anne's writing is that she makes it all seem, not just possible, but *normal*. For men to go dragonback. For women to become ships. For young, unwanted girls to become MasterHarpers. For brains to pair with brawns, and sing opera under alien skies. And for an unlikely friendship to bloom, a pairing no one could have imagined, between a petal on earth, and an orchid in flight.