

# 19. February 12, 2021

Barbara Robinson, braving the bitter cold in her red winter attire, nervously approaches 70 Ridge Road, the residence of her idol, Olivia Kingsbury, a venerated American poet with ties to T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Contrasting her youthful inexperience with the legacy of Kingsbury, Barbara is fraught with self-doubt about her own poetic ambitions. Yet, Olivia had invited her over email after reviewing her poem – an invitation that both honored and intimidated Barbara.

Upon her arrival, Barbara meets Olivia, a centenarian poet living in a modest Victorian home, filled with the unexpected like a large-screen TV, and furnished minimally. Olivia's interaction with her assistant, Marie, reveals a blend of command and affection, setting a comfortable tone for Barbara's visit. Olivia, dismissing formalities, insists on equality in their discourse, propelling Barbara into an unforeseen sense of belonging.

Their conversation meanders through Barbara's personal life before delving into the essence of why she writes poetry. Olivia's probing questions challenge Barbara to articulate the chaos and clarity that poetry brings to her perception of the world. Olivia critiques the academic approach to poetry, encouraging Barbara to value the organic rhythm and personal voice over prescribed formats.

Unexpectedly, Olivia offers Barbara regular mentorship sessions, signaling a rare opportunity for Barbara to learn from a literary icon, far removed from the collegiate criticisms of Emily Harris, another professor who had shown an interest in Barbara's work. Olivia's blunt caution against the influence of the Harrises adds layers to the academic landscape Barbara navigates, wedging a distinct divide between genuine mentorship and authoritative instruction.

The closing conversation shifts toward race and poetry, where Olivia, in a poignant moment, inquires if Barbara's poems were compelled to reflect "the Black experience" as per Emily's inquiry. This exchange subtly uncovers the layered expectations and pressures on Black artists to conform to thematic narratives. Olivia's insistence on honesty and authenticity underscores the core of their emerging mentor-protégé relationship.

Throughout the visit, Barbara transitions from a trembling newcomer to an inspired poet, emboldened by Olivia's validation and support. This chapter sets the stage for a profound exploration of creativity, mentorship, and identity, against the backdrop of generational and cultural intersections within the realm of American poetry.