

## **A LOADED QUESTION**

Kimberly G. Frazier  
Stephanie M. Foote  
Kennesaw State University

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*A classroom presentation is interrupted by an unusual outburst of laughter from Pete, a usually withdrawn student in Professor Smith's First-Year Seminar (FYS 101). When Professor Smith and the students in the class ignore the outburst, Pete asks a question that leaves everyone in the class shocked and concerned for their personal safety. Both Professor Smith and John, a student athlete in the class, then ask Pete to clarify his question. When he fails to respond, Professor Smith dismisses the class and asks Pete to stay after and talk with her. As she approaches Pete's desk she wonders how she can help him when she is concerned overcome with fear about her own safety and the safety of the campus.*

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"I just want to know, what is the busiest part of the campus where most students gather and at what time?" A hush fell over the room...students' faces were blank, and John, the presenter, was quiet. Professor Smith was shocked, and she wondered, "How could he ask a question like this. After what happened at Virginia Tech...I just don't understand." She looked at Pete and at the classroom door. "I have to do something" she said and out of sincere concern for Pete, as one of her students as well, began to move closer to him rather than the door.

### **JUST AN AVERAGE DAY**

It was the thirteenth week of the semester, and time for year-end projects where each of the 25 first time, full-time students in the first-year seminar, FYS 101, was responsible for sharing a final project that focused on significant moments and experiences during their first semester at the university. Although this day began like Professor Smith planned, the students in his FYS 101 class had been pre-assigned to specific dates for their presentations, and today's presentations were going well, however this was not an average day. John, a well-spoken, engaged, student athlete was the last to present before class ended for the day. However, this would not turn out to be the presentation that the class, John, or Professor Smith has expected.

John began to talk and halfway through his presentation, Professor Smith heard laughter and not just a giggle but hysterical laughter coming from another student in class. The unusually timed laughter was coming from the middle of the room from Pete, a student who most times was very quiet and subdued, and not very engaged at all. As a matter of fact, Pete often gave the impression that he was intentionally medicating to maintain normal daily activities. This was a conclusion Professor Smith drew because most days Pete was quite unresponsive, however, occasionally he would come to class and appear more alert at which times, he would make out of place comments or awkward gestures. Most days, the class and Professor Smith would ignore these incidents because they were harmless. This was one of Pete's more active days, but as quickly and curiously as the laughter began, it stopped. Like usual, the students ignored the strange outburst of laughter, and Professor Smith said to herself, "It's just Pete being Pete."

### **THE QUESTION**

After a brief pause, John continued with his presentation, at least until the laughter began again, and this time it was even louder and with an eeriness that could not be ignored. Professor Smith asked, "Pete, can you please share with us what's so funny?" Pete looked at Professor Smith and responded very clearly and robustly, "NOTHING, but I do have a question..." Professor Smith reluctantly asked, "What's your question, Pete?" Pete responded anxiously, "I just want to know what is the busiest part of campus and where do the most students gather and at what time?"

A hush fell over the room... student faces were blank, and John, who was still at the front of the classroom, was quiet. It was obvious what everyone was thinking... it was just after the horrific Virginia Tech incident and campuses around the country were on high alert, and now that same feeling of concern and fear was present in Professor Smith's classroom among her students. Professor Smith was shocked, and she wondered, "How could he ask a question like this. After what happened at Virginia Tech...I just don't understand." She looked at Pete and at the classroom door. I have to do something, she thought out of sincere concern for Pete as well as for the rest of her class.

As Professor Smith got closer to Pete and even sat down in an empty desk beside him, she asked Pete, "Could you please tell me why you're asking this question?" Pete responded, "No reason, just curious." Then, John, the student athlete presenting, bravely, yet vulnerably commented, "Pete, you are scaring me, what are you talking about?" Pete, once again responded emphatically, "NOTHING."

Professor Smith kept her eyes on Pete as well as observed the other students in the class. Sensing the tension and uncertainty in the room, she said to Pete, “Okay, I’m now asking you to clarify your statement, not only as your professor, but as a university official and in light of recent campus incidents, you need to answer. If you don’t tell me why you’ve asked this question, I will have to report the incident to the campus administrative authorities, and to the police.” Pete looked at Professor Smith, but said nothing.

### **CLASS DISMISSED**

Professor Smith leaned in closer to Pete, stared at him, but he would not even make eye contact with her. She felt both frustrated and anxious. John and the other students were still completely silent, but visibly scared. “That’s enough for today. Everyone, you’re dismissed. Pete, please stay here to talk with me.” Although she knew she had to confront him one-on-one, she wondered if he would snap and do something to harm himself or her. Once the other students were gone, Professor Smith, once again moved closer to Pete who was now hunched over at his desk and said, “Okay, now tell me what you really meant.”