

Heart
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“Garret, come here, please.” Dan was so angry. His heart felt like someone palmed it in a big, dirty fist. He was practiced, though. He didn’t show anything. Only his boyfriend would have known he was as angry as he was because, after nine years of being together, his boyfriend would know Dan didn’t blink when he was that angry.

Garret looked at his paper where he had been crafting a draft of street art, a bleeding heart motif, which bordered on the baroque.

“Leave me alone, Dan!” Garret screamed, loud enough to get the intended effect. Dan’s ninth grade class giggled at the oddness of the response. Dan knew they likely laughed because they wanted to say the same when he called them out on their disruptive behavior.

With a mighty groan that further disrupted a unit test the class had spent two weeks preparing for, Garret trudged from the back of the room toward Dan’s desk. He knocked pencils and books off the desks of his classmates as he went, a smirk on his face the length of the trip. Dan felt the knot pull tighter. There was then adrenaline which made Dan want to yell.

“What, Dan?” Garret said. His grey eyes locked up with Dan’s. It was, really, a challenge more than a question.

“Sit down. Here. This chair next to my desk. If you can’t behave like a ninth grader, you will sit with me so the rest of the class can take this test. You want babysitting? You want to be a baby? Fine. You’ll stay here.” There was a sharp twinge of regret in Dan’s chest as he said that last part but frustration had finally won.

Garret stared directly into Dan’s eyes and quietly, so as not to disturb those finishing their work, let loose a torrent of unprintable words. Those not directed at Dan were offered up to his mother. Dan waited it all out, breathing and trying to believe that this angry young man did not really hate his mother. The knot, he noticed, loosened toward the end of Garret’s verbal torrent. There was a letting go. Garret crossed line after line. It was, what, freeing? Maybe, Dan thought, somehow, for both of them?

Dan inhaled and closed his eyes. Then he opened them and looked at this boy who was – what? Little? Sad? Real and human and angry?

“Okay,” Dan whispered, finally. “Time to go, my friend. Here,” he said, handing Garret a form to send him out of the room. “You’re out. Maybe Glenn can help you focus in

class?” Glenn, the school’s principal, had little patience for kids not taking their education seriously. All the kids in school knew it.

“No. Wait, Dan. I’m sorry. Dan, I...”

Dan thought, “The little man is panicked. Enjoy it, little man.” Dan said “You can say sorry – and everything else you want – to Glenn. And. . .” Dan inhaled and tried to feel compassion fill his chest before he continued, “while this may not be nice,” he lowered his voice, “you can tell him I hope to hell you’re suspended. My mother would ask for the same if she could, God rest her soul.” Garret looked confused, then shocked, and then a little ashamed. Dan, seeing the transformation, smiled.

Garret: always a steady stream of profanity-laden talk with everyone around him. And that was only when Dan could get him in his seat! Dan tried taking Garret out into the hallway during class to talk with him about his behavior, to reason with him, to search the folds of this boy’s elegant mind for some good reason that might justify his inexcusable behavior. All the while, kids snickered about his off-the-wall conduct on the other side of the door. The result of letting Garret back in for the duration of the period was, unfailingly, utter chaos.

Dan tried everything he knew. Everything learned in almost 13 years of teaching had done nothing. Somewhere, that really worried Dan. There was always a place where kids stopped. Dan’s influence was enough to realign them. He could make sense with them, of them, he thought.

Garret waited patiently for Dan to write up everything that just happened, took the form and, looking at Dan, smiled before he left the room. On his way out he curled his fingers into fists, crumpling Dan’s form. Dan was left with a room full of students settling in half-heartedly to finish the unit test. Dan felt: I have lost. The school lost Garret, somehow, the same way he had lost his mother. It was uncontrollable and it felt like a small thing that was too quick to hold; he didn’t know how to control it. He wanted to and couldn’t, and was only then just having a hard time inhaling and slowing down the tire-heavy thump in the middle of his chest.

The school lost a lot that year, its first. Glenn Diamond, the principal, wondered as he sat at his desk close to nine most nights, how so many bad things were allowed to happen at the same time. Students transferred in one week, disappeared. (Sometimes, if Glenn was lucky, a cousin or friend of one kid would mention off-handedly – at lunch or in the hallway hurriedly between classes – that a student had moved to Georgia or the Dominican Republic or Queens.) The school was small and so it lacked the staff to track kids accurately; they had, at the end of the day, no idea who was cutting school and who was never coming back.

Two teachers quit the second week of November, one three days after the other. Neither was able to give reason for their departure as they rushed amidst sobs from the building in an early ochre sunlight, fall coats, and brown-bagged lunches stuffed under their arms. Permanent subs were now doing their best each day. Glenn was counting down until they, too, just quit.

Most tragically, a student was jumped and stabbed on his way home from school the previous Halloween, forcing him to withdraw and spend the bulk of that year in and out of surgeries, physical therapy, and sessions with a therapist no one could afford. That little boy lost half his liver. His parents had no insurance. Kids tried (and failed) to hold a bake sale to help with bills of a size they could not wrap their heads around. Some students visited him after school, though they eventually tired of being told by hospital staff that visiting hours were soon to be over after they had traveled an hour-and-a-half on the train. That boy, too, was just lost when the kids stopped going. His grandmother said he'd be back to try again next year, "the Good Lord willing." Glenn, breathing, tried in desperation to remember the boy's name by the end of December. Nothing. There had been so little time for contact.

Glenn's school, Global Preparatory High School (GPHS), was supposed to be his homemade safe haven; that was his vision, anyway. The school has a student body composed largely of students who struggle with poverty and violence and were left, at night when homework was supposed to happen, with little energy to give to school and to their futures. Glenn wanted a family in that school where family might not exist for all concerned. His progressive vision was evident in everything from the first-name basis on which students and teachers interacted to the re-naming of the disciplinary office as the "Wellness Center" to the presence of yoga and meditation on the school's roster of gym activities. In reality, however, a string of all-but-crippling budget cuts had left Glenn with little chance to hire the hands he needed to tackle the tremendous need of all the kids he wanted desperately to help.

Anton Keating, the school's guidance counselor, was convinced he should meditate with the kids. He was, daily, besieged. Each morning he'd leave his studio apartment in Hell's Kitchen thinking, "Way more than I could ever help. Can't help, no, cannot help. What. Am. I. Doing?" He closed the door to his office and his eyes at lunch most days and tried not to breathe shallowly. He wanted to rest his heart, but the whole of his sternum felt like a wet, dark, late, shut box. He was almost always afraid the kids would see him like this. They wouldn't tell him anything, anymore, then. He'd always think: then what?

There were "only" 104 kids. Anton lay awake a lot, that first year, watching his alarm clock climb through the fours and into insidious fives on its way to his wake-up time of six a.m. He lay awake then and thought about students by name, knowing their issues were bigger than him, despite his indomitable six-and-a-half foot frame.

A teacher in New York City public schools for three years before leaving the classroom to get his MSW and move into counseling, Anton regretted the move initially. It was, he thought at first, a chance to continue moving through the world in an honorable and peaceful way, a way more focused on students' needs which, he realized, had consumed his thoughts and energies to a degree far surpassing that which he could ever give to his kids or his curriculum while he taught.

Anton knew for sure it was time to leave the classroom the night he sat past dark with a sobbing sophomore admitting for the first time that the girlfriend he had been telling his family about was really named David and how would his Dominican grandmother ever love him again? This, Anton had thought then, was the student with the third grade reading level he was supposed to help prepare for Regents tests? How? Tell me how?

Having left Dan's room, Garret opened the door and walked into Kara's room. Ninth grade students looked up, puzzled. He didn't belong here, they thought. Maybe he's a student from one of Kara's other classes come to ask for a lost worksheet? Help with an essay? The fact that this school allowed them to call their teachers by their first names made kids feel a little protective of Kara.

Kara knelt next to one of her students' desks, conferring about themes of friendship and loneliness in *Of Mice and Men*. She felt Garret at the door. Kara was used to navigating crowded hallways during passing periods, kids walking at her quickly, standing all around her, yelling her name in daily and relentless cacophony. On that level this sudden awareness of someone near or around her wasn't odd.

But then she realized she could actually feel this new person wasn't her student, wasn't another teacher. (When she thought about this later on that day she realized it was because he was standing too close to be one of her own.) This being ninth grade, she was clear from day one with her expectations about boundaries and appropriate classroom behavior.

Kara looked up. This student's short, dark hair was shaved close to his scalp. Stubble. He was wearing a necklace of woven rubber bands, a set of unmarked dog tags, two rosaries. "I have been a school teacher too long to see rosaries and think "gang-related" she thought.

"Can I help you?" she asked. He might hit her, she then thought. He might just swing. It was November and she didn't know these kids well enough yet – even her own, she realized.

"Is it open?" he asked, unblinking. His fists – no, she looked. His hands – thin feminine fingers, not flexed – remained at his sides and serene.

“I’m sorry. Is what open?” Kara stood as quickly as she could, not moving fast enough to scare him.

“Your heart?” he said, looking up at her. “Are you leading with your heart or are you leading with your mind? Is your heart open?”

She looked. He didn’t blink. The room was silent. Side-talk, which often accompanied essay revision, dried up. Especially odd since it was right before lunch and the kids were usually fidgeting, ready to go by now. All eyes, all at once, were on this boy too close to their teacher.

“Get out of here, Garret,” one of her students, Sage, said. Sage looked at Garret and didn’t blink. Still: more playful than threatening, Kara thought. There was a wave of barely stifled laughter through the class. Garret turned to look at Sage but only turned at his neck to look at her. There is the hint of threat in his gaze. The rest of his body was still square with Kara’s. He took one step away from Kara – stepping backward as opposed to turning around – still looking at Sage. Then he took another. And another, and another.

Before he left, Garret said to Kara, “I think Dan likes you.” Then he literally backed out of the room and reported to the Wellness Center. The bell rang 15 minutes later, signaling the start of lunch. Sage left the room with her friend, Fahrudin.

In the hallway the lunch bell crushed students into the hallway. All was a mash of sound and faces lit by cell phone screens mid-text as kids made plans to meet for Chinese food down the block. Black coats hurried onto shoulders, students moved in tempered waves to exit doors.

Sage stood outside Kara’s English class laughing at Fahrudin’s joke. Garret approached Sage, pulled a lighter from his pocket. He flicked the lighter and pushed it into Sage’s side, shoving her toward the closest wall. Sage stumbled and righted herself only by reaching out and grabbing Fahrudin’s arm.

“What the hell?” Fahrudin said, smacking the lighter from Garret’s hand to the ground where it was kicked into the stream of moving feet. “Quit it, man. What are you, stupid or something?”

“Back off,” Garret says to Fahrudin, “or I’ll get you, too.” Garret looked him in the eye.

Garret gave Sage a look somewhere between confusion and pity. Looking at him, she couldn’t help but think he looked like a small, wet bird. To him, she looked like an open hand offering up a grand and singular gem.

Kara mentioned Garret's strange comment to Dan later in the teacher's lounge. Dan apologized for Garret interrupting her class.

"I knew I should have called the office and had him escorted to the Wellness Center. Something about him worries me," Dan said.

"Me, too," Kara admitted. I honestly feel safe around our kids. But, Garret? Something feels off, there. What kind of boundary problem makes a kid think it's okay to wander into a class and ask the teacher wacky questions?" They decided to say something to Glenn.

Five minutes later, Kara and Dan sat across a conference table with Anton and Glenn. "Sorry, guys, but this has to be quick," Glenn said, silencing his Blackberry and placing it on the conference table in front of him. "Anton and I need to be in the cafeteria for lunch duty. What's up?"

Dan and Kara looked at each other; Dan dipped his head slightly, motioning for Kara to go ahead.

"Well, Glenn," Kara began, haltingly. "It's Garret Koso." Anton nodded. He wasn't surprised they were talking about Garret. While Anton wasn't a veteran teacher by any stretch he felt there was something up with Garret. "He came into my room and, well, creeped me out. He looked at me and in this weird way asked me if my heart was open. What does that even mean, Anton?"

"Don't know. It's clearly attention-seeking behavior but I don't know that much about him. His Global Studies teacher sent him to me a week ago because he was refusing to sit down. He was standing near a window and looking across the street."

"At the very least," Dan said, "we've got to do something about his mouth. You should have heard what he said about my mother this morning."

"I know," Glenn says. "Anton showed me the referral you wrote him. Anton has consulted the discipline code and..."

"Discipline code?" Kara asked.

"Sorry, Kara," Glenn said. I meant to do some professional development about it at the start of the year but things got away from me. There's a clear set of student behaviors and matching disciplinary responses for those behaviors published by the Department of Education. Your question reminds me we need to take care of that."

"Great," said Kara. "I could use a better sense of where I'm supposed to take action and where I can lean on the school to back me up." Kara thought: If the rules haven't been defined, it's hard to tell when teenagers break them.

“We’ve got your back, no matter what,” said Glenn. “Anyway, we’re going to give him a detention for the language and interrupting the class and a call home to see if we can’t set up a meeting with his grandmother. That’s who he lives with, right, Anton?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t bet on that plan, Glenn. The grandmother is a much older lady who doesn’t seem to have that much control at home. I called at the start of the year to introduce myself and talk about the school and she went into this long, sad story about how she hopes we can do more with him than she can. She said she felt overwhelmed and was hoping we could do something about him cursing her out. She called his behavior verbally ‘abusive.’”

Kara took a deep breath. “Sage – the girl who told Garret to leave my room – told me, just now, that Garret tried to do something to her coat with a lighter. Her friend said Garret had a lighter, shoved her into a wall? Maybe said something about getting him, too?”

Glenn’s eyes widened. “What? When did she tell you this?” Damn it, he thought. Policy like the discipline code was supposed to help you cover your bases, make kids afraid of doing stuff like this. Wasn’t it?

“After class. Before she went to lunch. Just now.” Kara’s heart clenched. Why did she feel like being at a small school only amplified problems that small schools were invented to circumvent? She relished working in an environment where she had fewer kids, could know her students better, but it always felt like there just weren’t enough “hands on deck” when it was time to fix a problem as big as Garrett.

“Will you head to the cafeteria and see if you can find Garret now, please, Kara? Bring him here.” Glenn so wanted to include Garret in this big family he thought he was making. Failing to do that was, in some small and undeniable way, failing the heart of his family.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Anton, what does this lighter business mean? Is that a suspension? I want him here but I can’t imagine someone getting hurt because he’s here.”

“Actually, it depends,” Anton said. “Bringing a lighter to school requires only that we ‘admonish’ him for doing so. It’s a level-two violation in the discipline code. Shoving, however, is a level-three violation. That requires we give him an in-school detention. There’s a level-four violation for starting a fire which is an automatic superintendent’s suspension. . .”

Dan said, “I don’t know, Anton. I’ve spoken to a few of Garret’s teachers to see if his behavior in their classes was anything like the behavior I’m seeing. They all said he wasn’t like any of the other kids in his classes – that he was just off. I don’t know how to say it other than I don’t trust this kid. I don’t like the words even coming out of my mouth

without more – I don't know – evidence? But this feeling is really strong. I would say we go strong with Garret and make a point. It's still early in the year. Maybe we can take care of this before he brings something more dangerous to school or goes after some other kid who says something to him? What do you think, Glenn? Anton? This decision has to come from the whole administration, right? What do we do?"

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What is the best way to educate a staff about the Discipline Code (the "Citywide Standards of Discipline and Intervention Measures") that Kara knew little about? Glenn says he means to take care of it in professional development but is there another, perhaps more effective path? How might the administration include teachers talking to students about the Discipline Code with their classes in a "student-friendly" way?
- 2) What is the optimal level at which to set behavioral policy standards for schools: the school level? The city level? The state level? Why?
- 3) To what extent should a school be responsible for students who need more support than the school is able to give?