

There's a Boy in the Girls Bathroom

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Summer 2010

***Roosevelt High School, school counselor Jared Morris's office
Monday, January 20th, 11:15am***

"So, Sascha, why don't you tell me what happened, in your own words." The counselor, Mr. Morris, was attempting to calm Sascha's nerves. He could tell Sascha was furious at Ms. Wendell, the teacher who brought him into the office.

Sascha replied in a defensive tone, "Why am I here? I didn't do anything wrong. Why can't I use whatever bathroom I want?" Sascha didn't want to get suspended for this, and was trying to fight off a latent sense of shame that had for years kept at bay any attempt at exploring Sascha's identity.

"Sascha, just say in your own words what happened," the counselor implored. Sascha was one of the only kids that Jared Morris really felt he understood and could reach since he started working at the school. Since meeting Sascha last year, he had been doing some research on gay issues, and wanted to help Sascha come out. The principal, Mrs. Wright, had made the decision to send Sascha to see Mr. Morris instead of the dean, because she had heard that Sascha might be gay. In the back of her head, Mrs. Wright was channeling the administrators' cultural sensitivity workshop she had to attend for the district back in November.

"I went into the girls' bathroom. So what? It shouldn't matter. And then some girl came in and made a big deal about it and screamed. None of the other girls in there seemed to mind. And then Ms. Wendell had to be all nosey and came by and took me to the office." Sascha trailed off. Then, looking down, added, "Am I in trouble? Please don't call my mom about this." Sascha began to regret dragging Simone, Sascha's best friend, into the bathroom, and wished Simone were there now for support.

"Well, I'm not the dean, but nobody has mentioned suspension to me yet." Mr. Morris paused, to try to open up space for Sascha to feel more comfortable and share more. "Sascha, do you feel like you have a right to use the girls' bathroom?"

Sascha felt Mr. Morris digging into personal stuff, and put up a wall, lifting Sascha's gaze to meet his. "Mr. Morris, I just wanted to use the mirror. No big deal. If there had been a mirror in the boys' bathroom, none of this would have happened. Honest. I didn't think anybody would notice."

"Well, why do you think Ms. Wendell brought you to the office about it?" Jared Morris was unsatisfied with Sascha's answer.

“Cuz she hates me. She’s always picking on me. I don’t know why.” Sascha was trying to turn the attention away, hoping to avoid a call home.

Mr. Morris decided to take a risk, because he could see Sascha pulling away. “Sascha, we’ve talked before about some of this stuff when you’ve been sent to me because some people at school have a problem with you wearing clothes that people normally think girls should wear. I think it’s really great how you don’t feel like you have to follow what everyone else does. You know, Sascha, there are some folks who think that bathrooms should be gender neutral. That we shouldn’t have bathrooms for boys and girls separately. Have you ever heard of the term transgender?” Jared immediately regretted his word choice, and felt he had gone too far in his prodding.

“What? No...trans-what? I’ve never heard of that, Mr. Morris.” Sascha was playing dumb. “That just sounds crazy. All I wanted was to use a mirror. Can you ask Mrs. Wright to put some mirrors in the boys’ bathroom, please?”

Roosevelt High School, second floor hallway at 10:42am between classes earlier that day

“Do you have a mirror? Hey Simone, do you have a mirror?!”

“Sascha, you look fine. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Simone, don’t just tell me that. I HAVE to look in the mirror. My hair is all messed up.”

“No Sascha, I don’t have one. I said your hair is fine.”

They only had a few minutes before the next period began, and Sascha wanted to look good for the next class. Sascha had a crush on a boy named Eddie, who sat next to Sascha. Sascha paused to think for a moment. “If you don’t have a mirror, we’ll go find one.” Sascha then dragged Simone by the hand, rushing down the hall and into the girls’ bathroom. There were about five girls already in the bathroom, who were too busy talking to care about Sascha being there.

Simone gave Sascha a nervous glare. “You crazy, Sascha,” she said, and giggled nervously.

At that moment, Jenny, a very shy freshman, walked into the bathroom. “EEEEEEEE!!!” she yelled when she saw Sascha, and ran out. “There’s a boy in the girls’ bathroom!” A crowd of students rushed around the noise to see what happened. Jenny tended to have panic attacks every now and then, and the crowd made her feel more anxious.

Ms. Wendell, a third-year English teacher, was walking by, thinking about how she should tweak the lesson plan she just completed to flow better for her next class, when she heard a scream. Aggravated at her proximity to the scream, she went around the

corner to the girls' bathroom to find Jenny standing outside with a small group of students around her.

Expecting the worst, Ms. Wendell ran into the girls' bathroom to find Sascha looking in the mirror with Simone. When she saw it was Sascha, she immediately thought, 'Of course, obviously it would be him,' and gave Sascha a glare saying, "Sascha, what do you think you are doing? You can't be in here." Obviously not amused, Ms. Wendell told Sascha that she had to report this to the dean, and that it could lead to a suspension. "You realize this could be seen as sexual harassment," she told Sascha.

"Don't TOUCH me," Sascha snapped back.

As Jenny watched Sascha being led down the hall by Ms. Wendell to the main office, it took a second to realize that it was Sascha who was in the bathroom. While Jenny was new, she had noticed Sascha around school due to Sascha's flamboyant wardrobe. She slowly felt her anxiety fade, as she realized it was a gay guy that had been in the bathroom with her. She then felt her anxiety turn to fear, worrying that she had just gotten Sascha in trouble. She felt a little sorry for Sascha, whom she recalled seeing getting shoved in the hall by some seniors a few times earlier that year.

School cafeteria, lunchtime

"Hey guys, did you hear what that kid Sascha did today? That boy is so crazy! I had class with him last year. He used to come in with a purse!" Michael sat down with his crew of tenth grade friends.

"Yo that guy is such a freak! What a weirdo!" interrupted Sammy. "Man, something must have happened to him growing up. I heard he was abused and his mom used to dress him up in her clothes."

Julie, Sammy's girlfriend, jumped in. "Well, I'm totally freaked out now. I'm not going near the bathroom anymore at school."

"I can't believe he came into our bathroom! So gross and creepy!" added Lisa, Julie's best friend.

"He probably had a gun and was jealous of you girls." Michael was now just trying to freak out the girls.

"Whoa, ladies, how do you think we guys feel? I'm not going to the bathroom with him in there either! I don't want him looking at my junk!" Jonathan made a face and shuddered at the thought of being alone in the bathroom with Sascha.

Simone, who was walking by with her lunch, could hear the conversation a few tables away. She decided to walk to the other side of the cafeteria to wait for Sascha so they wouldn't have to hear the other students. She knew kids made fun of Sascha, but she

really admired Sascha's independence and bravery. Sascha didn't care what anyone else thought. She wished she had Sascha's strength, and was glad to be Sascha's friend.

Faculty room, lunchtime

Sharon Wendell, a third-year English teacher at Roosevelt High School, walked into the faculty lunch room, ready to vent about the frustrating encounter she had to deal with earlier that morning. "These kids are getting out of hand. You all heard about what happened today, right? I mean, doesn't it feel like our school is falling apart?"

Natalie, the Spanish teacher, agreed. "You're right, Sharon. I don't know why Sascha thinks he can do whatever he wants. Why was he sent to the counselor instead of getting suspended instantly? It's sending our students the wrong message, don't you think?"

Alex, a veteran math teacher, remarked, "They all know better! A boy cannot be in the girl's bathroom. I don't see how there was any hesitation. He cannot break the rules like that."

Jared Morris walked in, and could tell what they were all talking about. Although Jared loved the kids and tried to be friendly with the teachers, he knew some faculty had grown to resent the way he would bring his radical politics into staff conversations, feeling that he derailed some meetings with unimportant issues of how to treat students fairly.

Jared knew not to discuss the details of students at lunch, given his role as counselor, but he couldn't help adding his two cents. "But what do you think a school should do with students who are different and stand out? Should they be punished for being different?"

Alex responded, "All I care about is that we are consistent. The fact that he wasn't sent home today sends a message to our kids that they can do whatever they want and not get punished."

Natalie questioned, "Just because Sascha is gay does not entitle him to do whatever he wants. I don't understand that. Kids seem to be getting more and more entitled each year. Why should he be treated differently?"

"How can you say that? Sascha is confused. We can't just cut him off from exploring who he is." Jared wasn't sure how hard he should push this issue. If he pushed too hard, staff members might not take his feedback seriously. He knew he should defend Sascha, but did not want to put himself in jeopardy.

"Yeah, exploring and pushing boundaries. And he's winning." Alex was getting annoyed. "Imagine what will happen if we start to let boys into the girls' bathroom. Chaos. Even if

he is gay, it doesn't matter. Think of what that would lead to! I can't believe we're even having this discussion right now."

Ms. Wendell, who had been quiet once Jared entered the conversation, chimed in. "Look, you know I respect gay people. But there are limits. This is going too far." While she had not grown up knowing gay people in her home town, since moving to this school district, she was proud of her growing tolerance for gay students. "These kids just come in with a sense of entitlement, that they can declare whatever they want and they expect the school to revolve around them. I'm fine with Sascha being gay. But that doesn't excuse a student like Sascha from following rules. It's like he thinks he's special or something. He needs to understand there are boundaries."

Jenny's house Monday night

Jenny lived with her father, and her sister who was home from college. She was used to doing well at her old private K-8 school, but was struggling to adjust to public high school. Jenny's parents divorced last year, and her mother lived across town. They couldn't afford private school anymore, and the public high school was conveniently located between both homes. Jenny's sister tried to help out as much as possible when she was home from college, and helped prepare dinner.

"So, how was school today, Jenny? Did you talk to Ms. Wendell about turning that paper in late?" asked her father as he handed Jenny a plate of baked ziti.

Jenny looked down at her plate. She had forgotten all about that due to the incident in the bathroom. "No, I didn't get a chance to. How was work?" She was hoping to change the subject.

Her father ignored her question. "Jenny, you're in high school now. You have to start being more responsible. You know you want to pull your grades up. I wish your mother hadn't insisted on you switching to public school." He was very protective of his daughters, and was sensitive to any signs of her slipping in her new school.

"I know Dad, I know! But it wasn't my fault. There was a boy in the girls' bathroom today," Jenny didn't want to be reprimanded, and resented what had happened to her earlier that day. If only she hadn't been distracted from talking to Ms. Wendell about her paper.

"What? Damn it! What is going on in that school?" He felt a wave of guilt and anger for not being able to provide better for his daughters.

Jenny just wanted to finish eating and go upstairs. "It was just...weird... that's all. I wasn't expecting it. He's harmless, dad. I think he's just gay or something. I don't want to get anyone in trouble. I just was freaked out a little bit."

"Well, I don't think it's right. I don't care what's wrong with that kid. It's not safe. I'm going to call your principal in the morning." Her father's determination felt reassuring and threatening at the same time. Jenny appreciated his care, but worried about his tendency to go overboard.

"Dad, you can't say anything. I'm new there. I don't have any friends yet. What if he has someone try to beat me up at school? He didn't do anything bad. I don't want him to get in trouble for it!"

"Jenny, you shouldn't have to be scared about it. That school needs to get its act together."

Sascha's journal entry

That evening, Sascha sat alone in bed, writing in a journal.

"School is so wack! I hate Ms. Wendell. She is such a snitch. She acts all nice, but wtf does she know? She acts like she is all down with us kids, but she don't know jack!

"Today I finally did it. I know I've said I was gonna do it a lot of times, but today I dragged Simone into the girls bathroom with me. Thank god I had her with me. We just ran in to use the mirror and it was great! I totally should get to use that bathroom. It's so much cleaner and smells so much better than the boys bathroom. And then that little ninth grade baby had to walk in and scream. Who does that?!? What am I? A spider?

"I was really freaked out, but when Ms. Wendell was talking to me, Simone squeezed my hand and that made me feel better. I can't wait to get out of here.

"I think I saw Eddie smile when he saw me getting yelled at. He looked so cute today. I wonder if he thought it was cool of me to do that. Mmmm-mmm! If only I could get his attention away from that little skank girl of his, Samantha. I hate her too. She does have a nice body though. I wish I had her body.

"Today the counselor Mr. Morris asked me if I knew what transgender meant. I acted like I hadn't heard of that before. At lunch I overheard some boy talking about some show on MTV that had transsexuals or something on it. I kinda wanna check it out. Sounds kinda freaky, but I'm kinda interested too.

"Ms. Wendell better not call my house. She probably will. I don't know what I'd do if mom finds out. I don't want her to cry again. I know she didn't think I saw her cry last year when Mr. Johnson called about my handbag. I'm sorry mama. I didn't mean for you to get upset. I'm sorry. God, why can't people just be who they want to be? Why can't I have a nice body like Samantha or Julie so that Eddie would notice me? I know Eddie would be into me more than Samantha."

***Conference between Sascha Carter, Mrs. Carter, Principal Wright, and Mr. Morris
Thursday January 23rd***

Mr. Morris walked into the meeting in progress, and quietly took his seat next to Mrs. Wright.

Sascha's mother fidgeted in her seat. She hated coming in to the school, and often felt like she was being judged as a bad parent by the teachers and staff. She had overheard plenty of teachers talk while waiting in the office over the years, and had grown not to trust the school. She knew too many stories of schools sending child services to pick up children, splitting up families. But she put on her best game face to prove herself as a good mother. "Mrs. Wright, I don't know what has gotten into Sascha lately. You know, he comes from a good home, not like some of the other kids here. He gets plenty of attention at home, I buy him whatever he wants and needs. I don't know what this phase is he's been in lately. Like he just wants attention or something. Sascha, you know it's embarrassing for me to have to come into school like this. Why do you do this?" Sascha's mother recalled going through this all before last year when she had to come in to speak to Mrs. Wright about Sascha's purse.

"Mom, it wasn't a big deal. It's not like I actually used the bathroom. Just the mirror." Sascha's mother gave an intense glare from across the table, making Sascha back down a little.

Mrs. Wright stepped in. "You know we did not suspend Sascha after this incident. And over the last year and a half, there have been several instances of students and staff complaining about Sascha's clothing choices being a distraction in the classroom. I want to let you know that we did receive a parent call concerned about safety issues on Tuesday. I told the parent that Sascha was no threat to the school community, but I thought you should be aware of how some of the parents are responding. I think you have met Mr. Morris. He's our school social worker. He spoke with Sascha after the incident. Jared, would you mind sharing with us your perspective? I know as the school social worker, what Sascha tells you is confidential of course."

Jared sat up straighter in his chair. "Yes...Well, you know Sascha is not the only student acting up in our school, and Sascha has been targeted by other students a few times since freshman year. He does alright in his classes, but you know it is completely normal for students to explore their identities, who they think they are, and to push different boundaries at this age. That's why I wanted to speak with him after it happened, to see what else is going on for Sascha in his life."

Mrs. Carter interrupted. "Well, like I said, there's nothing going on at home that should make Sascha act this way. God, I hope this phase passes soon, Sascha. I can't take much more of this." Sascha's mom was feeling embarrassed and frustrated with her son. "I mean, what can I do with him? Sascha, you know we've talked about military school for you. Is that what it's gonna take to get you to behave?" Mrs. Carter then worried the principal would feel she was being too harsh. "Are there counseling services

to help Sascha stop acting like this? You know, his father left when he was very young. I don't know. It's not right though. Sascha, this is not how I raised you."

"I'm sorry Mom. I didn't mean it. Honest. I really didn't think it was anything bad. I didn't think I was hurting anyone by doing it. I didn't mean to upset you. I'll stop doing it."

Jared Morris felt like he needed to defend Sascha but didn't want to offend his mother. "Well, we do have counseling services for students like Sascha. Our approach generally is not to stop students from exploring who they are, though."

Mrs. Carter felt reassured in her handling of this situation, showing her care as a mother, and supporting the school at the same time. "Well, I really think you guys should do what you need to make him stop acting out. I give you my full support to discipline him how you see fit. I don't want my son to be a troublemaker."

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What are the different power inequalities apparent in this case?
- 2) What impact do you think allowing Sascha to use the girls bathroom would have on the school community?
- 3) What should the principal be prioritizing in this situation? How does this differ from the priorities of the school counselor?