

Discipline

A Short Story By

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Dr. Marvin Eugene Applewaite, Ed.D., had no idea what drew him to open his eyes in the middle of the night, but when he did, and he saw the child's battered face staring at him, he screamed. His body jerked like a grounded fish as he struggled to flip from his stomach to his back to defend himself. His legs tangled in the covers, rendering him momentarily defenseless.

His reaction startled the ten-year-old, who reflexively stepped backward.

Marvin sputtered, "Who . . . what do you mean . . . good God."

He'd seen this boy before. He was a student, in fact. Because of the adrenaline coursing through his system, he couldn't remember his name. In fact, just this afternoon—

"Headmaster, my father says he would like to speak to you," the boy said.

"Jon Gravenow?" The name popped into his head at the same moment when he realized that the boy had turned on the bedside lamp. "Get out of my house. Who do you think you are?"

The boy looked down and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. Denim jeans and a T-shirt to visit the headmaster's house. This was exactly the kind of disrespectful behavior that made the boy a perpetual discipline problem at Northern Neck Academy.

"He, um, said he wanted to see you *now*."

As the adrenaline drained and awareness returned, Marvin sat taller in his bed. He adjusted his pajama blouse to make the buttons align.

“He did, did he? Well, it must be very urgent if he sends his son to burglarize my house. Do you know that you can go to prison for this? Do you know that you can be *expelled*?” That last point was a certainty, Marvin thought.

The boy continued to stare at his sneakers.

“Look at me, young man,” Marvin commanded. His head was completely clear now. If there was one thing that an experienced educator knew, it was how to project authority over a child.

Jon Gravenow did as he was told. His left eye was still swollen from this afternoon, and it appeared that someone had applied a new butterfly bandage to his lip.

“Get out of my house at this moment, or I will call the police. Tell your father that if he wants to see me, he can call for an appointment.”

Jon’s face showed nothing. The rebuke triggered neither anger nor fear. “We’ll be waiting in the living room,” the boy said. He turned on his heel and left through the open door to the hallway. Sure enough, the far end was illuminated in the wash of light from the parlor downstairs.

The temerity! Marvin rolled to his side and lifted the telephone from its cradle. Just who did these people think they were? Maybe a chat with the police would set them on the right—

No dial tone.

The fear returned, fueled by a new rush of adrenaline. He realized for the first time that this was more than some childish prank; that he might truly be in danger. They’d cut the phone line, for heaven’s sake, and now a man he’d never even met sat perched in his living room.

Marvin ran his options. The first was to flee, but he dismissed that out of hand. He was forty-six years old, not in the best of shape, and on the second floor of a home that boasted

twelve-foot ceilings. As if that weren't bad enough, a leap from either of his bedroom windows would send him into a nest of wrought iron patio furniture. Even if he survived the fall, he would likely wish that he hadn't.

He could dash down the stairs and try to make it to the front door, but that path would take him directly through the living room where his uninvited guests sat waiting.

He could try hiding, but then what? Would he just wait for them to become bored and leave on their own?

No, he thought, the only reasonable option was to face them. He would summon as much dignity as the occasion allowed, and he would hear what they had to say. After all, if they had desired to do him harm, they could have hurt him in his bed.

His options, then, boiled down to only one: He would hear what his visitors had to say, and when their conversation ended, he would take the necessary actions to ensure that the adult went to prison, and the boy never again set foot in Northern Neck Academy.

Marvin took his time getting dressed. There was no time to shower, but he could certainly comb his hair and brush his teeth. That done, he donned the navy blue suit he had laid out for today. White shirt, yellow tie, black socks and matching shoes, shined to a high gloss. When he was buttoned and cinched, he tucked the loops of his wire-rimmed glasses behind his ears and headed for the stairs.

The man he saw waiting for him could have been his brother—better yet, his business partner. He, too, wore a suit—a slightly out-dated gray three-piece, complete with a watch chain that stretched from pocket to pocket in his vest. He stood as Marvin entered the room, and beckoned for his son to likewise rise from his perch on the sofa.

“Doctor Applewaite,” the man said, extending his hand. “Simon Gravenow. Forgive the intrusion. It’s very nice of you to meet with us.”

Marvin made no move to accept the gesture of friendship. “I will not forgive the intrusion,” he said. “How dare you invade my home in the middle of the night—”

“Doctor,” Gravenow interrupted. “Shake my hand.”

Marvin felt a chill. The man’s voice remained soft, and his tone reasonable, but his eyes projected danger. As if working on its own accord, Marvin’s hand allowed itself to be folded into that of his guest.

“Please take a seat,” Gravenow said, nodding to the only remaining piece of furniture in the small room—a wooden chair with a padded seat which in Marvin’s previous assignment had been part of a dining room set. “You, too, son,” he added, nodding to the spot on the sofa that still bore the boy’s impression. Simon kept Marvin’s leather reading chair for himself.

Marvin felt heat rising in his ears. This seemed to be an effort to embarrass him in front of one of his students. “Might I ask—”

“No, you mightn’t. Just sit. Listen and answer.” Simon smiled as if he’d just told a joke at the dinner table.

Marvin sat. He’d long considered himself to be a good judge of character, one whose first impressions rarely were wrong, and Simon Gravenow was projecting a level of danger that he’d never witnessed.

“You remember my son, don’t you?” Simon asked.

“I do indeed. He’s the one who frightened me out of a very sound sleep.”

Gravenow nodded. “Is that all you remember him for?”

Marvin sighed. “Clearly, you’re here for a specific reason. Perhaps if you could share what that is—”

“Listen and answer,” Gravenow said again. “Do you remember his name, for example? As headmaster, I’d think that would be simple enough.”

“His name is Jonathan,” Marvin said.

The visitor smiled. “Very good. Thank you. And does he look at all different to you right now?” To the boy, he said, “Look at the headmaster, Jon.”

“Clearly he’s been in an altercation,” Marvin said. “But surely you don’t think that I had anything to do with those bruises on his face.”

Gravenow’s eyes turned even darker. “If I thought that, I’d be driving your teeth into your skull with a hammer.”

A fist gripped Marvin’s intestines. He knew without question that the man was speaking without hyperbole.

“Tell me what you *do* know about his bruises.”

“Your son was in a fight on the playground today.”

“Over what?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. Children fight all the time.”

“But in this particular case, Jon told you specifically what the fight was about.”

The fist in Marvin’s gut grew tighter. Certainly, there had been an explanation, just as there was *always* an explanation when boys fought. But the explanations were never more than empty excuses. “Northern Neck Academy has very strict rules that prohibit fighting for any reason.”

Gravenow pounded the arm of his chair with his fist. “Listen!” he boomed. Then, more softly, “And answer.”

Marvin glanced at the front door. Was there any way, he wondered to get past this lunatic and run for his safety? “Someone had allegedly taken something from him.”

“*Allegedly?*”

Marvin saw the trap right away, and reconsidered. “Someone had taken his property,” he said, correcting himself.

“That someone would be a boy named Raymond Carnes, right?”

Marvin’s mind raced ahead to this same scene being played out in the Carnes household.

“That’s okay,” Gravenow said. “I understand your hesitancy to speak of the other boy. Particularly under the circumstances. But to refresh your memory, the Carnes boy had stolen a Saint Christopher’s medal that was given to Jon by his mother before she died. Jon told you this, did he not, the day before yesterday—the day when it was stolen?”

Marvin rolled his head on his shoulders. “His teacher did mention it to me, but when we asked the other party, he denied it ever happened. Without corroborating witnesses, we had no choice but to let the matter drop.”

“So, the thief went free.”

“The *alleged* thief. What else could we do?”

Gravenow leaned forward in his chair. “Let me tell you what I did,” he said. “I told my son to get the medal back, and beat the shit out of the kid who’d taken it.”

Marvin couldn’t believe that he’d heard correctly. “Then you must be very proud,” he said. “The other boy—”

“A broken nose, two broken teeth and a sprained wrist,” Gravenow finished for him. Indeed, he was proud. He fairly glowed with pride, in fact. “And after you pulled the parties apart, what did you find in little Raymond’s pocket?”

Marvin rolled his eyes. He’d seen this coming. “The medal,” he said. “But in a civilized society—”

“My son’s medal,” Gravenow clarified. “In the pocket of the boy who *claimed* he had not taken it.”

“Mr. Gravenow, surely you’re not suggesting that the kind of violence your son delivered can be justified under any circumstance. It was only a *thing*. An object. Apparently an object of high sentimental value, but no reasonable person hurts someone for the sake of things.”

Gravenow smiled. “Because we live in a civilized society?”

“Exactly.”

“I see.” He turned to his son. “Jon?”

Marvin watched as the boy shifted his position on the sofa and reached behind the cushions to pull something out. When he saw what it was, Marvin thought he might cry.

Gravenow held out his hand, and Jon handed him a fifteen-inch wooden paddle, varnished to a high gloss and emblazoned with the Official Seal of Northern Neck Academy.

“This look familiar to you, Headmaster?”

“Please don’t,” Marvin begged.

“Don’t what?” Gravenow said.

“Please.”

Gravenow stood. “Come now, Headmaster. Don’t get all shy on me now. Please don’t what? Hit you?”

Marvin felt tears on his cheeks. It was all he could do not to cower. He'd used that very paddle on Jonathan this afternoon. Fighting could not be tolerated.

"What, you think it would hurt to get hit with this little bit of wood?" Gravenow walked to Marvin's three-month-old 27-inch television and took out the screen with a golf swing. Something flashed inside the box as the glass shattered. "Whoa, that's got some heft to it. What do you use it for?"

Gravenow walked past Marvin into the dining room, where he took out the glass of the breakfront with three overhead chopping strokes.

"For God's sake!" Marvin yelled. "Please stop!"

"They're only *things*," Gravenow mocked. He zeroed in on the china that had once belonged to Marvin's great grandmother, and he reduced them to shards. "We don't worry about *objects*, remember? What do you want me to take out next, Jon?"

The boy looked like he wanted to dissolve into the fabric of the sofa.

Gravenow poked Marvin's shoulder with the rounded edge of the paddle. "You were going to tell me what you use this for," he said.

Marvin wanted to hide. He wanted to run. He was in the presence of a madman. Whatever he said, nothing would be understood. "Discipline," he said. Might as well spit it out and get it over with.

As Marvin tried to avoid his attacker's eyes, Simon Gravenow kept moving his head so that they could lock gazes. "Do I frighten you, Headmaster?"

Marvin was crying openly now. "Please don't do this."

"Listen and answer! Do I frighten you?"

"Yes," he mumbled.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

“Yes!” He shouted it.

“But I haven’t even hit you,” Gravenow said. “I’m not even bigger than you. Imagine what it must be like to be a child when someone twice your size beats you with this.” He made a show of holding the paddle like a baseball bat and took a few practice swings.

“We don’t *beat* the children,” Marvin said through a sob. “The paddle is a tool, not a weapon.”

Gravenow took out the dining room chandelier with a full swing. “And what a fine tool it is. Share the procedure with me, *Doctor Applewaite*. How exactly do you use this tool?”

Marvin thought he might throw up. He’d never in his life felt so terrified, so helpless. “We paddle the students’ backsides when violations of policy are particularly egregious.”

Gravenow nodded dramatically, as if finally understanding a great discovery. “You paddle their backsides.” He spoke the words as if they tasted like vinegar. “Jon, stand up.”

“Please,” the boy said. “I don’t want to.”

“Now, boy. Show the good doctor the souvenir he left for you.”

Slowly and hesitantly, Jonathan Gravenow slid to his feet from the sofa turned his back to them. His hands trembled as he lowered his jeans and underpants just far enough to show the purple bruises. Just a quick flash, and then he hiked them up again and retreated back to the sofa where he began to cry.

“So, tell me, Doc. When does paddling a backside become the *kind of violence that can’t be justified under any circumstance?*” He leaned on the words that had come from Marvin’s own mouth.

Marvin was shocked. He had no idea he'd hit the boy that hard. Sure, he'd been angry, and the ambulance had just taken the Carnes boy to the hospital, but never in a million years did he think—

His chest exploded in pain as Gravenow landed a full-force swing in the center of his breastbone.

“That, for example,” Gravenow said. “Would you call that a paddling or a beating?”

Marvin struggled to catch his breath. “Please don't kill me.”

“Tell me how it works, Jon. Where do you have to stand while he beats you?” After a moment of silence: “Answer me, son.”

“At his desk,” the boy said.

“Uh-huh. Well, the dining room table will do. On your feet, Headmaster.”

“Please don't do this,” Marvin begged.

“Up to you, Doc, I'll beat your ass with this thing, or your face. Decide now.”

This was so disproportional. Gravenow had it all wrong. This was so much more violent than any punishment meted out in his office.

“Face it is, then,” Gravenow said, and he set up for his swing.

“No!” Marvin yelled. He scrambled to his feet, despite the screaming pain in his chest, and darted to the dining room table. He faced it.

“Is this right, Jon?” Gravenow asked.

“His pants have to be down,” Jonathan mumbled.

“You heard the boy.”

His face burning with humiliation, Marvin undid his belt and pants and let them slide to his ankles. Now the world knew that he wore black Jockey briefs.

“He has to rest his forehead on his hands,” Jonathan instructed, and as Marvin did just that, he heard the boy giggle through his tears.

“See, Doc, it’s more about humiliation than pain, isn’t it?” Gravenow asked. “Take a look at him, son. Put that image in your mind, and you’ll never be afraid of him again.”

A camera flashed. Marvin raised his head, but Gravenow pushed it back down. “If you want a copy, I’ll get it to you,” he said, close enough that he could feel the hot breath on the back of his neck. The paddle rested on his ass and he jumped.

“My son took back what belonged to him,” Gravenow said. “And you beat him for it. You humiliated him. You tried to break his spirit.”

Marvin’s panicked, choking sobs filled a brief silence.

“Listen very, very closely to me, Headmaster. Touch my boy again, and your next beating will come with a baseball bat, and a ball peen hammer. It will last for hours. You’ll get a lesson in discipline that you will never, *ever* forget. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Marvin nodded, trying in vain to keep his snot from leaking onto the table. “I understand,” he said.

“I know you’ll be tempted to report our little chat to the police,” Gravenow went on. “I caution you that that would be a mistake. Of the many people in my employ, I assure you that I am among the most reasonable. Now, do you plan any further discipline against my boy?”

Marvin’s terror swelled like a foul balloon, all but squeezing out his ability to breathe. “No,” he choked.

“No what?”

“No sir.”

“Because he’s a nice boy, don’t you think, Headmaster?”

Marvin wanted to turn and look—wanted to demonstrate how truly committed he was to treating Jonathan Gravenow with the care of fragile china. “Absolutely,” he said. “I’ve always thought he was a nice child. And I swear to God that from now on, I’ll never—”

The front door closed.

They’d taken the paddle with them.