

End of Term · *Tom Whalen*

WHEN THE STUDENTS HAD LEFT, I allowed the woman into my classroom and sat with her at the table beside the tall windows. I did not want to talk to this woman, she had come to complain about her child's grade, about the way I had admonished her child for not proofreading her papers. It was the end of the semester, I wanted to be home, feet up, drink in hand, anywhere but here still at school at the end of term. All the other teachers had left, only the custodian and the principal were still in the building. I did not want to listen to this woman, I assumed she would be hysterical, but in fact she looked anything but hysterical, in fact she looked quite self-contained, her makeup was without flaw, I thought at first I was looking at some kind of doll, her eyebrows were pencilled in neatly, thin arcs of black. At first her hair did not appeal to me, dyed leafbrown, a bit teased, much too tense, stiff, but after a while I found it suited her and was, in its way, attractive. Her cheekbones were high and thin, which I've always admired. We sat at the table beside the tall windows, the afternoon sun still falling on the table where I had laid my grade book in case I had to consult it during our discussion. What could I tell the woman other than that on this test her daughter failed and on that test her daughter almost failed and on this paper she did poorly and on that paper not so poorly, and that she still did not know how to punctuate and that she obviously, despite all my attempts to change her ways, did not bother to read what she turned in before she turned it in. Also that she did not speak well in class, seemed always off the point, never did she answer the question as I would have liked her to, never did she seem to be thinking about the question, I never once recall her saying anything pertinent to the discussion at hand, and despite my talking with her, despite my using all the techniques in my arsenal as a teacher, she did not improve at all. Not once did I notice any improvement in her daughter's work, not once did I see her do better than she had before, neither in her papers nor in her oral discussion, not even after the session I held with her after class, not even when, the next day, despite all I had tried to do for her, she did just as poorly as she had before the session I held with her after school. That session, I recalled, had occurred on a day much like this one, the same light, the same emptiness to the whole building, except now instead of talking with the daughter I

was talking with the mother. We sat at this table, in these same chairs, the daughter and I, Lara and I, her name is Lara, the daughter and I, Lara and I, I here and she there, she with her long black hair falling over her shoulders, the sun on the backs of her white hands, white hands with blue risen veins, she there and I here, and I tried to help her, just as now the mother was sitting there and I here, but I did not expect I could help the mother, I have long since, after eighteen years of teaching at this school, given up trying to help parents, parents are beyond help, I try to avoid them as much as possible, and only when called upon do I have conferences with them, which is what had happened here, the mother had left word at the office that she wanted to see me today, that she would come by after school, she wanted to talk to me about her daughter, about her daughter's progress, but since her daughter had not progressed, I thought to myself as I read the note standing at my mailslot, what could we possibly talk about? I had nothing to say to this woman sitting across from me, with her hands spread out in front of her, aging hands, though she must only be, what, thirty-five, forty at the oldest. I admired her hair, yes, and, yes, she had gone to some trouble with her makeup, and her dark beige suit, I had to admit, was tasteful, professional, perhaps she was a banker, or a lawyer's secretary. She held her hands steady on the table, she did not look at me, she looked at her hands, she did not look about the classroom, which, by the way, I had spent some time on, the posters of Renoir and Degas on the walls, the fern in the corner, she did not notice any of this, not the tall old windows out of which one could see two firs and beyond them the western sky. A few pleasantries passed between us, I don't remember what bits of innocuousness I uttered, but at last I said, How may I help you, Mrs. Dillard? knowing full well that in no way could I help this woman with whatever problems her daughter was having, I had done all I could, I'm not responsible for what goes on in my students' homes, her daughter did not take to learning, she did not try, as best as I could ascertain, to improve, anyone can reread what they write and correct the obvious errors, no matter what drivel they've put on the page. But not this child, lovely though she is, not this young lady, I thought, watching the woman who was her mother sit stiffly beside me and not look at me, this mother of that girl who did not learn anything, as far as I could tell, in my class. Had it crossed her mind, does it ever cross any parent's mind, that their daughter or son simply is not above average, not, in

fact, even average? They all think, my son or daughter is above average, they don't think, though they may say they do, that their son or daughter is a genius, because then their child would be a freak, a real freak in our society, then their son or daughter would not fit in anywhere, and above all they want their daughter or son to fit in, that is what is foremost in their minds, and that of course is what we teachers are supposed to teach their children, how to fit in, how to behave, how to be like the other children, adolescents, adults. That's the purpose of my job. I can't help them if they're geniuses, and I can't help them if they are dull, dim-witted students who don't care about learning or about fitting in, then they're not above average or even average, they are indeed below average, they in fact are beyond my help, just bodies breathing in my classroom, they never notice the Renoir posters or Degas posters on my walls, they don't notice anything, only sometimes, as was the case with Lara, sometimes they have an emotional spell, something troubles them, something sinks into their brains or more likely their blood and they are troubled, they can't articulate what the problem is, but they are troubled. Then they don't even pretend to be listening, pretend to be comprehending what I am trying to tell them, they usually just look dull and dim-witted, but then, when something troubles them, when an emotion washes through their blood, they become teary-eyed, they may even, given the opportunity, cry. I looked at the woman who was looking at her hands spread out before her on the table, the table where not over a week ago I saw her daughter's lovely hands spread, and I thought, What is it you think I can do for you, you silly woman? And I asked her what I might do for her. Then, suddenly, she turned toward me and I saw her eyes were teary-eyed, black pools, and her perfume roared through my head, a noxious perfume, something like a mixture of forest and urine, and suddenly I could hardly breathe, I wanted to get this over with, what was I doing here at the end of term after school with this woman whose eyes were open wide with yearning or anger, I couldn't tell which, with this woman whose perfume was making me nauseated? *You*, she said, and then stopped, she said nothing, just that one word, just that pronoun, but what did she mean by that *you*, what was she getting at, what did she want with me? Her daughter, yes, her daughter had almost failed the term, but, I said, Your daughter did not fail, I did not fail your daughter, she did not do well, perhaps next term, I said, next term I am hopeful, I lied, that she will do better, I said,

next term I plan to monitor closely her progress, but she did not fail, I gave her the grade she deserved and she did not fail, I said, and added, absurdly, Madam. But apparently she did not hear or did not understand me, for she continued to look at me teary-eyed, then she said, I'm sure she said this, I remember it clearly, *You have abused my daughter*. Madam, I said again using that absurd address, I do not know what you mean, I have not abused your daughter, it's true I gave her a *D*, but I have not abused your daughter and might I request that you be careful what allegations you toss around here, what you say has no basis in reality, no basis in reality at all, I assure you I have no idea what you are talking about and whatever your daughter has told you, no doubt in a moment of extreme stress, was fabricated from her distraught condition, but I assure you there is absolutely no truth in such a ludicrous allegation, though as soon as I said that, rather *while* I was saying it, I remembered that session after class last week with Lara, remembered that she, too, was teary-eyed, that in fact she began to cry, I had no idea why, she just began to cry, I was not being too harsh with her, I simply pointed out that not reading her work before she turned it in was a gross error, one that I simply could not forgive any longer, that she had no excuse for such behavior, and as a consequence her grade was being lowered from a *C* to a *D*, and then she was crying, her black hair covered her face, but I could hear her crying, in the immense emptiness of the building all I could hear was her crying. The light fell across her arms, across her bent head, and I stood, then, and moved behind her, and said, I'm sure I said, There's no need to cry, Lara, then I put my hands to her shoulders and, slowly, gently, began to massage her shoulders, her neck. Shortly thereafter she stopped crying, thanked me and left. You are mistaken, Mrs. Dillard, I said, you are grossly mistaken, I don't know what your daughter may have told you, but in no way did I abuse your daughter, though I admit she is a lovely child, that is quite obvious, your daughter is a lovely child, perhaps not highly motivated, but quite lovely, and I did not fail her, I have hopes, I said, I have hopes, and while I said it the woman continued to look at me with those forest-pool, black eyes, and I thought, while I continued to try to appease the woman, that she, too, was quite lovely, I could see, beneath the few wrinkles, beneath the inevitable spreading that takes place in women in middle age or earlier, usually after they have given birth, I could see the lovely child that she once was, that within the body in front of me was the body of someone

younger, more lithe, that this spread-out body (and it is this spreading out that I abhor though others find it seductive, fecund, earth-motherish, I find it depressing), this body contained the younger form within it, and suddenly I found myself attracted to this woman sitting at the table with me at the end of term after school while the light in gradations faded and she continued to look at me, distraught. *I'm sorry*, she said, *I don't know why I said you abused my daughter, I don't know what to do*, and then she, too, just as her daughter had, began softly to cry. And I, as I had with the daughter, while the light gradually left the room, said, Mrs. Dillard, I assure you there is no reason to cry, I assure you there is no reason to cry, but she continued to cry, and so I moved behind her, put my hands on her shoulders, as I had with her daughter, began to rub her shoulders, slowly, gently, I could feel the muscles beneath the cotton of her beige suit, feel them at first stiffen, then gradually loosen, become pliable, relax, and I continued, I don't know for how long, to rub gently her neck and shoulders, and while I rubbed her neck and shoulders felt her loosen and relax beneath my fingers and I looked out the window, looked out the tall window at the fir trees and the sky behind them where the sun was doing its dissolve, looked out the window at the sun and rubbed gently her shoulders, thinking about nothing, I suppose, and then, I don't know why, I turned my head around and looked at the door and saw through its window my principal bobbing up and down his moon-like face. With my left hand I continued to rub the woman's neck and with my right hand I motioned for the principal to enter, but all he did was continue to nod up and down his moon-like face for a few more moments, then vanished. *Is this*, the woman then said, *what you did to my daughter?* I beg your pardon, I said, taking my hands away from her body and sitting down again, I beg your pardon, but I was simply trying to . . . *Seduce me*, she finished. There were, I noticed in the waning light as I looked upon the woman again, no longer tears in her eyes. Mrs. Dillard, I said, but again she interrupted me, though I was only going to ask her if she weren't becoming cold, the custodian must have turned off the boilers in the basement now that we were at the end of term. She said, *You are filth, don't think I don't know what you are, you are filth*, she said, *I know what you've been teaching my daughter, I know what kind of things you do in class, what kind of things you'd like to do to my daughter, filth, filth, and my daughter is a filthy seductive bitch, but she's a child, a sad, sick child, a below average child, I know she has no talent, but she*

does try, you don't know how much she tries, but she is a filthy little seductive bitch, and teachers like you are to blame, you teach nothing but dirt and sickness, sickness and dirt, trash is what you have them read, trash is what you have them write about, yours is a sick mind, let the filth flow is your motto, you don't care about my child, you only want to put your filthy hands on her as you did me, you don't know what I and my daughter have gone through, you don't know about her father, you don't know about her brother, you probably haven't even looked up her records to see what her reading percentiles are. Of course she can't do well in your class, you teach only filth, she can't understand the stories you have them read, she only knows she can't understand them, then she starts thinking about her body, always she is thinking about her body, she stands at the mirror thinking and touching her body, I've seen her. I know you are a godless and sick person and in a sense I don't blame you, it's a godless and sick world, but you shouldn't be allowed to teach the filth you teach, you shouldn't be allowed to teach children. You have destroyed my daughter, she said. Her father cares about her, her brother cares about her, but not you, she said. Her father has to be away a lot, she said, he travels a lot, she said, it's his job. The light in the room, the light outside was granular, the features of the woman, of the fir trees outside the window were indistinct, but I did not turn on the light, I sat in the chair and listened to her harangue, though sometimes I thought, while I listened to her harangue, this is the end of term, I don't want to be here, I shouldn't have to be here, it's been a hard term, I thought, I should be at home, feet propped up, drink in hand, thinking nothing, I thought, not listening to this monster, I should be home, I'm not paid to work after hours, it's the end of term, classes are over, the students have gone, all the teachers have gone, only the principal and the custodian in the entire emptiness of this building, this school where I have worked for eighteen years, listening to parents drivel their sorrows, watching students sit dim-witted, speechless in my classes, read thousands of their drivelling papers, marked millions of their stupid mistakes, it's the end of term, I thought, I should be at home, not listening to this. You need to hear this, she said, don't you understand you need to hear this, that someone needs to tell you what you are, you are filth, you are sickness, you shouldn't be allowed to teach children the filth you teach them, you think my daughter is something you can mold, you can play with, you think filthy thoughts about my daughter, about other mothers' daughters, all day you think filthy thoughts about my daughter and other mothers' daughters. You aren't a teacher, she said, you are a filth thinker, a filth spewer, all that comes out of your

mouth, all that you have in your head is filth, you swim in your own filthy filthiness, you swill your own filth, swallow your own filth, excrete it, regurgitate it, and day after day you feed your filth to my daughter and other mothers' daughters, and you call this teaching. You are, simply, sick, she said. You are, she said, simply a sick person. You think I didn't notice the Renoir posters on the wall, she said. Sickness, she said. Filth, she said. You think I didn't notice the Degas posters. All sickness, she said, sickness because they've been touched by your sick mind, by your mendacity, your shallowness, your filthy thoughts. You are nothing but filth, she said, but, in a way, I envy you. I thought, Over the years I have had to deal with many sick parents, I have had to deal with many sick parents over the years, this woman is just one of the many sick parents I have had to deal with over the years and there will be many other sick parents I will have to deal with during the years to come. I envy you because you don't know how sick you are, she continued, you have no idea how sick you are, or, for that matter, how sick I am, though my sickness is different from yours, I am not sick in the way you are, but we both are sick, we both have a sickness that is eating us from the inside out, your sickness is in your head, she said, and my sickness is in my stomach. You didn't notice, did you, when you looked at me, you saw a fairly attractive woman, perhaps you saw my daughter in me, you didn't notice, did you, the lines on my face, the loose skin on my hands, you didn't notice, did you, that I am dying, didn't notice that I am dying of stomach cancer. Of course you didn't notice, and even now you don't notice, even now you are thinking of something other than death, which is your sickness, that you can't think about death even when you think you are thinking about death. In the darkness, I could make out nothing of her features now. You know nothing, the voice continued, you think you know so much about this and that, think you know so much because you read this book and that book, because you are a teacher, because you have authority over people many years younger than you, but you know nothing, you know nothing at all about anything that matters. Death, she said, a word. Emptiness, she said, just a word. You think you know, but you don't know, you think you are helping others but in fact you only cause irredeemable harm. That's all you do, she said, cause harm, she said, all you do is cause harm. You aren't a teacher, she said, you are a harmer, an inflicter of harm. You aren't a teacher, she said, how could you possibly ever have thought you were a teacher? I could hear her breaths, quick short gasps, and I could still smell her, but I could not make out any longer what her expression was. Many parents, I kept thinking to myself over and over, many parents, many parents, all of them with prob-

lems I can't help them with, all of them with problems. Shortly thereafter she left. I covered the fern in the corner with plastic to protect it from the cold, locked up and went home to a troubled sleep. In the morning I awoke feeling desperate.