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Grace Period

Mike Vanden Bosch
Dordt College

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Grace Period

Peter Jensma was sprawled on his back on the gymnasium floor, his shaggy head cocked awkwardly to one side. His left arm hugged his chest tightly, as if it were in a sling. Sweat drops dotted his forehead, and bubbles of spittle formed on his lips. Hovering over him were the half dozen puzzled ninth grade boys who had been playing basketball with him.

"What happened to 'im?"

"He just keeled right over."

"Did somebody run into 'im or trip 'im?"

"No, he had the ball an' I was guardin' 'im. All the sudden he pulls a face somethin' awful, drops the ball, an' falls flat on his back."

"Somebody better go call Mr. Brant."

"I'll go," said one, starting toward the door. The others watched the prostrate figure of Peter in consternation.

"Is he breathin'?" asked one.

"Sure 'e is."

"I wonder if you kin feel 'is pulse?"

"I'll see once," said one of the braver boys, and he knelt on one knee beside Peter. He started to take hold of the left wrist, pinned so awkwardly to the chest. But he stopped, as if afraid, and placed his fingers on the right wrist instead. "Yeah, he's got a pulse all right," he cried with an air of discovery. The other boys observed him with envious admiration.

The door to the gymnasium opened and Mr. Brant, the principal, strode in. The boy who had called him came in after him, then ran past him to where Peter lay. The boys opened an aisle for Mr. Brant.

"How did this happen?" he asked.

"We were playin' basketball an' all the sudden Pete jist passed out," said the boy who had taken his pulse.

"Yeah, I was guardin' 'im an' he had the ball. All the sudden he pulls a face, an' drops the ball, an' falls flat on his back."

"I took his pulse an' he's got a pulse."

Mr. Brant knelt on one knee beside Peter. In the seven years he had been principal in the high school in this Dutch community, this was the third case of epilepsy he had encountered. Defects, abnormalities in people bothered him. If the victims would only admit their defects they could be helped. But they usually spent all their energy trying to convince people either that they had no defects or that their defects were quite natural—that everybody had such defects. He hoped he could help this boy, who, according to his parents, hadn't had a seizure lately. But now the school year was only two weeks old and he had had his first one already. Mr. Brant feared it would not be his last. Then, as he intently observed Peter's breathing, the fifth hour bell rang.

The group of boys dissolved slowly, unwillingly. Mr. Brant noticed Peter's hand twitch. Suddenly Peter sat up, jabbed his hand into his shirt

pocket, pulled out two pills, tossed them into his mouth and gulped them down dry. The mechanical rapidity of the movement told Mr. Brant that the pills were supposed to save the boy from his weakness. But only when the boy struggled to his hands and knees did Mr. Brant find his voice. "Take it easy," he cautioned, placing a restraining hand on Peter's shoulder. "You'd better lie down a while and rest. You need a doctor."

"I don't need a doctor. I don't need any help. Jist had a spell. Us'ta git 'im ev'ry day." Peter's voice was hard for a boy. His eyes stared blankly at the floor in front of him. He lifted them momentarily, only to drop them quickly at the sight of the lingering classmates. He blushed in embarrassment.

"Sure you're okay?" asked Mr. Brant doubtfully.

"Yeah," he said staring straight ahead. "It was jist a spell. Us'ta git 'im ev'ry day. Stayed home from high school three years because of it. Then got some pills from a doctor in Chicago on Good Friday. The pills take care of me. Only had two spells since Good Friday. I gotta git ta class." With that he was gone before the astonished Mr. Brant could stop him.

Mr. Brant, his face lined with thought, followed him out of the gymnasium. He would have liked to talk to Peter for a few minutes, but Peter was not to be talked to just now. He seemed to resent having been "caught" having a spell, as he called them. But since he had been caught, he seemed determined to establish its unimportance. And strangely, he seemed more belligerent than ashamed. Why wouldn't he confess his defect and present himself as he was—an epileptic?

A week later a group of freshman boys were timing each other at climbing a rope attached to the top of the gymnasium. First one crawled up. "Eleven seconds," shouted the timer. Then another. "Ten seconds," he shouted. Peter stood on the sidelines, watching eagerly, painfully. A third boy scooted up. "Nine seconds," shouted the timer. "Who's next?"

Finally Peter could resist no longer. He'd prove he could beat everybody. He grabbed the rope and skimmed up it like a monkey. "Eight seconds," the timer shouted in amazement. Peter came down the rope hand over hand. Hardly had his feet touched the floor when his face twitched, and he fell backward in a spasm. Some of the boys standing near had seen his earlier spell. Some had not. But all of them knew of Pete's condition now, and they watched intently.

The seizure was short-lived this time, and Peter came out of it surrounded by gawking, whispering classmates. They didn't laugh. They just looked and whispered, and backed off a little now that Peter was trying to sit up.

"You okay, Pete?" asked one, reaching to help.

"Yeah, I'm okay," he replied bitterly, shaking off any help. Then he stalked off without another word. The eyes all followed him out of the gymnasium. Whether they looked in pity or scorn, Peter did not know or wonder. That they had noticed was in itself the most maddening thing imaginable to him.

During the next few days Mr. Brant began to hear complaints about Peter's behavior. When a study hall teacher had informed him, "We don't talk in study hall," Peter had brazenly replied, "I do." When the history

teacher had told him to stop whispering, he had replied, "I'm not whisperin'. I'm talkin' out loud." He seemed to be breathing defiance at teachers and students alike.

Then, one October morning before school, just three weeks after Peter's first seizure, Mr. Brant heard a loud shuffling and shouting in the boy's coat room. He interrupted his stroll through the halls and investigated. The door opened to a room packed full of boys. One angry voice rose above the rest.

"You're jist a dirty thief, that's all. A thief."

"Call me that again and I'll smash you one," replied another voice.

"You steal things. Dirty rotten thief."

Mr. Brant elbowed his way through the crowd of boys just in time to prevent a new flurry of fists. Then he saw, to his surprise, Peter Jensma railing denunciations at an opponent a foot taller than he. The opponent, physically too large to allow anyone to call him names without losing the respect of his friends, was ready to take another swing at Peter when Mr. Brant restrained him. "Take it easy Fred. You've done enough fighting for one day."

"I'm not going to just stand here and let him call me names."

"He's through calling you names," Mr. Brant assured him. "Let me take a look at your mouth. It seems to be bleeding a bit." Fred wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and looked at a streak of blood.

"Dirty thief," spat out Peter from across the room.

"Peter, I don't want to hear you calling anyone names again. Being an epileptic doesn't give you the right to call anyone names."

"He's a thief. My brother said so," muttered Peter, half to himself, as Mr. Brant was leaving for the wash room with Fred.

Mr. Brant stopped and looked at Peter. "Well even if he is," he said calmly, "that doesn't give you a right to call him one. Just remember what Christ said to the thief on the cross."

Fred had a front tooth hanging loosely from his upper gum. Mr. Brant took him to the wash room and left him there, holding a cool wet cloth to his mouth. Then he went back to check on Peter, alone in the coat room now that the bell had rung. He noticed the blue, bruised cheeks and puffed eyes. "You better come with me," he suggested. "We'll get some ice on that eye before it closes completely."

"I'm okay. I hurt 'im more'n he hurt me," Peter sneered. Mr. Brant took him to the kitchen for ice. He tried to chat casually.

"Why do you want to go around calling people names, Peter?"

"My brother told me Fred was caught stealing at the county fair two years ago. He's a thief."

"Well, if he is, does that give you a right to call him one? Besides, that was two years ago. Fred confessed and hasn't been in trouble since. Does your eye hurt?"

"No. I'm not hurt. I hurt 'im more'n he hurt me."

"And what does that prove?"

"Proves I'm tougher'n he is."

Then a thought occurred to Mr. Brant. "Why don't you play ball instead of getting into fights? Your older brother was a pretty good ball player. You

don't have to fight to prove you're good."

"I can't play ball. Ev'rytime I run hard I get a spell." Peter's voice was somber. Mr. Brant had the feeling that he had said the wrong thing. And he knew he should have known. Physical dexterity impressed Peter, but physical activity brought on the dreaded seizures. Neither pride in the past nor hope for the future was an option for him.

Mr. Brant left Peter in the kitchen, an ice bag against his eye, and went to his office to call the dentist that Fred would be coming in shortly. When he returned, Peter was gone. He quickly looked around the ground floor, but Peter was not to be found. He must have gone home, he thought, surprised at the unexpected good feeling that surfaced within him.

During the remainder of the morning Mr. Brant called in a few witnesses to the fight. They agreed unanimously that Peter had started it by calling Fred names for no apparent reason.

That afternoon Peter's mother, father, and sister came in to see Mr. Brant. They moved suspiciously into his office when he invited them in. They looked as out of place as boots in a bedroom.

"You've come to see me in regard to your son Peter, I suppose," said Mr. Brant when they had all crowded into his tiny office.

"That's right," replied Peter's father, still standing though an empty chair waited behind him. His thumbs were hooked behind the suspenders of his bibbed overalls.

"Did he make it home all right this morning?"

"He called an' we got 'im from town," replied the father.

"How's his eye?"

"It's way shut," cried the mother, on the edge of her chair; "his whole face is swollen. He must've been beat up somethin' awful."

"I'm sorry about that, Mrs. Jensma," Mr. Brant consoled her. "I came too late to prevent it."

"Did you expel the other boy?"

"No, I didn't. I plan to punish him but I don't think I'll expel him. Peter seems to have started it, you know, by calling him names."

This ignited Peter's father. "Pete says two big boys grabbed 'im and drug 'im in the boy's room. Then one held 'im while the other hit 'im." He was shaking his finger in Mr. Brant's face now. "Are you gonna b'lieve Fred Bonstra before you b'lieve my son? That boy's been caught stealin' more'n once. He's got bad blood. His gran'dad us'ta cheat his neighbors out of ev'ry penny he could. You gonna b'lieve that boy before my son?"

"Do you want to blame Fred for what his gran'dad did?" asked Mr. Brant calmly, but sternly. "As far as the fight this morning goes, those who saw it start agree that Peter started it by calling Fred names."

Peter's mother was in tears now. "I think you're jist pickin' on Peter because you don't want an epileptic in school," she sobbed, taking her handkerchief from her purse. "You're blaming him for something he can't help. Now I s'pose you're gonna expel him."

Mr. Brant leaned forward on his desk. "No, Mrs. Jensma, we won't expel Peter. We want your son to get an education as well as the next boy. We have a grace period for kids who get into trouble."

"What's a grace period?" asked Mrs. Jensma.

"Well it's something we extend to students who deserve to be expelled but who we want to give another chance," explained Mr. Brant.

"He don't want none of your grace," interrupted Mr. Jensma. "He's as good as the next boy and he deserves to be here."

"Mr. Jensma," replied Mr. Brant, "education is a privilege, not a right. Students who come here enter into an implied covenant to live peacefully and obediently. Those who break that covenant are given a grace period in which to mend their ways."

"If Peter's gotta go here on grace, I don't want him here," said Mr. Jensma. "It's not gonna be said that any son of mine was allowed in school because of grace."

"Mr. Jensma, we're not insulting Peter when we grant him a grace period," said Mr. Brant. "Those who need a grace period should accept it gladly."

"You don't fool me," countered Mr. Jensma. "I know what grace means. It means kids you like can do what they wanna, but kids you don't like better watch it. If Peter wants to come back under your conditions, he may. But you don't fool me."

"Well, I'd suggest you send him back to school and we'll let him get a fresh start."

"His left eye is way shut. He won't want to come back now," sobbed Peter's mother, clutching her handkerchief, by now as soggy as a ball of dough.

"Then let him wait a few days until the swelling goes down," advised Mr. Brant.

The next week Peter was back in school. What was said at home during the days he was not in school could only be conjectured. But when he returned, he seemed to have been coached into belligerence. He walked into his first period class, and methodically pulled all the shades down to the window sills. As he pulled the last one down, the teacher came in.

"Peter, put those shades back up, please, before you sit down."

"Do it yourself, you devil," Peter muttered in a low voice meant to be heard only by the surrounding students. But the teacher heard it also. His face flushed, his fists clenched impulsively, then gradually relaxed.

"Peter," he said firmly, "you'd better go see Mr. Brant right now. Just take your books with you because I don't want you back in my class today."

Peter picked up his books and shuffled out of the room. When he came into the office, Mr. Brant shook his head in disgust. "Peter, what's the matter with you?" he asked. "Don't you want to go to school? You knew you were in your grace period."

Peter stared blankly at the floor. He seemed hardened since Mr. Brant first met him. "Have a chair, Peter," offered Mr. Brant.

Peter sat on the low, cushioned chair, his elbows on his knees. Two useless books still stuck to his clenched fist. But it looked better to see him sitting. At least he seemed more at home physically. Mr. Brant began to speak hesitantly. "Peter, you've had a tough life. I know it's not easy for you to live with your condition. But . . . but don't you think it would make more sense to admit to yourself and to the world that you have this defect? Admit that you can't change it; and then proceed from there and see what you can

do in life. I sometime get the feeling that you are more troubled by pride than by shame.”

Peter’s eyes moved up the floor to the base of the wall and then back down.

“Look, Peter,” continued Mr. Brant, “I’m not going to condemn you for your epilepsy. Nor will I condemn you for your misbehavior if you will show some penitence. But if you won’t change your attitude . . .” Mr. Brant did not finish his sentence.

Since Peter was not inclined to talk, Mr. Brant decided to allow him to go to his next class if he would promise to behave. He assumed that Peter’s grunt was that promise, and dismissed him, hoping common sense might be descending on him at last. But the next day Peter was not in school. The explanation came in the afternoon mail. In an envelope with no return address on it was a letter from Mrs. Jensma. Mr. Brant sat down at his desk, then, glancing first at the signature, began to read:

Dear Mr. Brant,

We’ve decided not to send Peter to school anymore. You insulted him, putting him on a grace period. If he’s not good enough for your school, we don’t want to send him. But it does seem funny that you allow sinful girls and boys who are thieves to go there and yet Peter isn’t good enough. I guess he can just thank you that he can’t make something of himself.

Mrs. Sam Jensma

He reread the letter in disbelief. Then he grabbed the telephone receiver, thought better of it, and slowly put it back into its cradle. Instead he took his suit coat from the back of his chair, and started out of school. He was going to pay a visit to the Jensma farm and settle things. But by the time he reached the door, he wondered whether it might not be best to wait a day for tempers to cool.

That evening, shortly after dark, Mr. Brant heard a car drive up in front of his house, followed shortly by a heavy pounding on his front door. He got up from the supper table to open it, and was confronted with Peter’s big brother.

“Com’on out ’ere a minit, Brant. I’ve got a few things ta say ta you.” Mr. Brant stepped outside hesitantly. “What’s the big idea runnin’ my kid brother out’a school? Ain’t he good ’nough fer yer school? You’ve got thieves and robbers an’ whores in yer school, but it’s not good ’nough for my brother, huh? Well, I’ll show you how good the Jensmas are.” With that he let fly a right fist that sent Mr. Brant sprawling to the ground.

From the ground Mr. Brant began to mutter curses on the whole Jensma clan. He looked up at Peter’s brother, sensing in himself for the first time a hatred of which he had not been aware. In pain, he struggled to his knees as Peter’s brother retreated to his car. When the car door opened the top light flicked on, and there, looking out of the front car window, was the smiling face of Peter. He had never looked happier. Then the door closed and the Jensmas sped into the darkness.