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Bosom

by Dan Beatty

I can still recall the blouse she was wearing the first time we got a good look.

Ms. Giardino—her name exotic, the G pronounced like “Zsa,” as in “Zsa Zsa,” as in Gabor—was our 6th grade teacher. She was one part educator, one part caretaker, one part goddess. She was cool enough to let us call her Ms. G, but stern enough to make you mind her.

Not that I ever called her Ms. G., at least not in class. I never really even considered it. “Ms. G” just didn’t have the same flare. It didn’t roll off the tongue as did the name Giardino—“Zsyar-dee-noh.”

It was 1973, and women—even teachers at Van Allen Elementary school in my small, Iowa town—were finally able to wear colorful, trendy clothes. Not that Ms. Giardino would ever wear anything unprofessional or provocative—but when you looked like Ms. Giardino, and half the classroom was filled with pre-pubescent boys who could think of little else besides women and girls (except, possibly, Hank Aaron’s pursuit of Babe Ruth’s home run record), she didn’t have to try too hard to appear provocative to us. She had long, straight, shimmering brown hair that cascaded—like a silhouetted waterfall. Her eyes were hazel, large—bright and round like the sun. She often wore a color of eye-shadow that matched a splash of color in her blouse—bright colors like teal or lavender or gold. And she sometimes wore high leather boots over flesh colored pantyhose, her skirt or dress meeting the tops of the boots just below the knees.

At the very least, all boys had a crush on her. For some of us, it was more than that. And even though all the sixth grade girls desperately wanted to hate her on the first day of class, Ms. Giardino immediately won them all over as well. She told Molly Finnegan how beautiful her dress was, asking if they made it in adult sizes. She approached Vanessa Singleton right after Vanessa found her desk, telling her she had read Vanessa’s poem that won the county poetry contest from when she was in 5th grade, complimenting her on her poem’s depth and splendor. Before the end of the first day, she had a compliment for every single girl in the class, an amazing, specific compliment that seemed to put a smile on their lips, a spring in their step.

At recess, my three best friends at the time—Rodney, Scotty, and Jeff—and I would often talk about Ms. Giardino, about her hair, her scent, her eyes, her body. Especially, to be honest, her body.

Rodney was the most mature of our group—mature being a relative term when speaking of sixth grade boys. Rodney’s brother Rick was a Senior in high school and his sister Katy was a Junior. Katy was a

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Lifeguard at the swimming pool, and Rodney claimed to have once snuck into the changing room at the swimming pool, watching his sister and her friends change into their swimsuits, describing what he saw in great detail. His dad also had a stack of what we called “nudey” magazines, and so he knew everything. Rodney also had many synonyms for parts of the private anatomy on women, synonyms that were usually crass—and sometimes made no sense at all. He’d make comments all the time, using these obscure synonyms:

You should see the beaver on this chic in last month’s Playboy.

Wow, she’s got some great tits.

Can you imagine her putting those knockers up against you?

Knockers? I thought. *Knockers?*

I was not the most intelligent kid in our group, coming from a bad home and all, but I was a very literal thinker—such as the time I drove my bike into the rich neighborhood on the outskirts of town, “Sunset Pines,” and I was determined to figure out why it was called that, from where it obtained its name. I asked a lady at her mailbox why it was called that.

“Just a pretty name, I guess,” she said.

But that couldn’t be it. So I broke down each word, *Sunset* and *Pines*, as I rode through the neighborhood on my bike. Finally, I noticed on the western part of the neighborhood there was a long row of pine trees, and I got it—the sun sets in the west. The sun will set over those pine trees. Thus, Sunset Pines!

So you can imagine how difficult it was for me to fathom how the term “knockers” could be synonymous with “breasts.” But I didn’t want to sound too naive, so I just kept quiet. Rodney could be brutal when you seemed naive, or innocent, or wanted to do the right thing.

I may not have been as crass as Rodney, but I will admit that I, too, was just as eager as Rodney, Scotty and Jeff—hell, probably of all mankind—to see any bare skin that might beckon us from Ms. Giardino’s celestial body. Even to see such innocuous parts of her body—shoulder, calf, toes in sandals—could cause my heart rate to increase, my neck to get splotchy, my mind to wander.

But then it happened. The second week of school. Ms. Giardino had on the most stunning outfit—professional, of course. But beautiful. She had on a skirt that went just below her knees. She had on turquoise eye shadow, which really caused her round, hazel eyes to stand out. I remember vividly when the sun hit her eyes that morning—my knees literally weakened. She had on a multicolored blouse—predominantly pink, but with splashes of yellow and teal, teal that matched perfectly

her eye shadow.

But that wasn't all.

The blouse was somewhat low cut—not enough that you could really see anything under normal circumstances. But if the fabric pulled forward just right, you could see the very tops of her breasts—just the slightest curves of her breasts at the sternum, juxtaposing the forbidden milky flesh against her otherwise tanned body. There was very little exposed, but what we could see was better than anything we could have seen in Rodney's dad's magazines, because this was reality. This was right in front of us. And this was Ms. Giardino. Ms. Zsyar-dee-noh.

We had a harder time concentrating on that day than usual, but we did everything we could to keep our mind elsewhere—or, at least, I did. I was terrified that Ms. Giardino would catch me looking, that I would be staring at her chest, suddenly looking up to meet her gaze, only to see disappointment in those hazel eyes. It would devastate me if she thought I was looking at her in that way, thinking of her in that way.

We were doing group math, and she allowed all of us to choose who we sat with to work on our problems. Rodney, Scotty, Jeff and I worked together, next to Diane Zimmerman and her friends. Diane raised her hand and Ms. Giardino walked over to her.

"We can't figure out how to get started on number 4," Diane said.

And that's when it happened.

Ms. Giardino leaned over Diane's shoulder, looking down to Diane's paper, and Ms. Giardino's blouse—it hung forward. And the florescent lights above hit everything just right, like the sun hitting a large field of wild Aster flowers after a rain. And we saw more—more milky skin, pushing out above a lacy pink bra.

All of us saw it, all at once—Rodney, Scotty, Jeff, me. My mouth probably opened a little. Maybe a lot. I'm sure my eyes widened. I felt one of my friends nudge me, just in case I was missing it. But I wasn't missing it. I swallowed hard. I think I started hearing ringing in my ears. And the ringing became the only sound in the room.

But after a minute or two—or possibly three, three at the most—I quickly looked back down to my paper, terrified that her eyes would meet mine. But the others kept looking, and this scared me just as badly—guilt by association, I feared. If she saw one of us doing it—or, especially, two or even three—she would have to assume all of us were.

I looked to my left, then my right. All three of my friends were still staring. Rodney was even making a noise, like a slight moaning noise.

Like a ventriloquist, I barely opened my lips: “Quit looking,” I said quietly. “Guys, quit looking. She’ll see us.”

Instinctively, Scotty and Jeff realized the precarious position we would have been in if caught. But not Rodney. It seemed he could not stop. Or didn’t want to.

My mind was still on Ms. Giardino. And when I could tell she was done reading the question, I knew she’d be standing back up within a second, a fraction of a second, and that Rodney would still be staring directly at her chest. I again could only hear ringing in my ears.

Without even really thinking, I looked in front of Rodney and saw his pencil on his desk. I quickly took my hand, jerking it at the pencil, slapping the pencil into his lap and then onto the floor just as Ms. Giardino raised up. Rodney instinctively looked down to the pencil before Ms. Giardino looked our way.

Crisis averted.

For the next few weeks, I could not get that image out of my mind. My friends and I couldn’t believe what we had seen. But the more it was discussed, the more I wanted it to stop. Rodney, in particular, kept making really derogatory comments about Ms. Giardino, but I never said anything back to him—not until he said something so horrific that I could no longer contain myself.

“Man, I swear,” he said, smiling, “I would *rape* her if he had the chance.”

And, finally, I stood up to Rodney, which surprised us all.

“Shut up, Rodney!” I yelled.

Scotty and Jeff couldn’t believe it. They snickered.

I wasn’t sure if Rodney was going to hit me or something else. But I knew he would do something.

“Ooh, Bradley’s in looove,” Rodney said, laughing hysterically. “Coming to the teacher’s aide. Why don’t you write her a looove note, tell her how you really feel. As if she didn’t already know.”

They all laughed, but Rodney the most. Then, to top it all off, he said, “Sorry, Brad—really, I’m sorry. Sorry that I sometimes forget how big of a *pussy* you are.”

A few weeks later, my dad—he beat me up pretty bad, showing no mercy. He was drunk, and I should have known better than to question him about something. I had asked him if he knew if my mom would ever

come back, would ever come back home to us. He slapped me, punched me, threw me into the refrigerator.

I hated to stay out of school. I loved school. And more than anything, I loved Ms. Giardino.

But I couldn't go to school with welts on my arms, with my eyes puffy and bruised. I had done that the year before—gone to school after my dad had beaten me—and it only seemed to make matters worse.

So I stayed home for three days, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. And the last thing I expected was for Ms. Giardino to show up at our place.

But out she came. When she hadn't heard from my dad nor me about why I was missing school, she came that Friday to our dilapidated trailer, which was way off the beaten path about a half mile from town. I heard a car pulling up, surprised. We'd hardly ever had company.

Our lawn was filled with junk—beer cans, cigarette butts, old tires, decaying cardboard boxes, black garbage sacks, an old lawnmower that didn't work—thus grass and weeds up to one's knees. The trailer itself was old, rusty, dilapidated, leaky. A homemade wooden front porch was barely standing in front of the doorway outside, the grass and weeds around it as high as the porch itself.

I ran to the window when I heard the car coming. My eyes widened as I saw who it was—Ms. Giardino in a big, beige Pontiac Catalina, dust rolling behind her on the dirt road.

"Who the fuck is that?" my dad asked.

"I...I don't know," I said. "Someone maybe lost. I'll get rid of them."

"Yeah, do that."

I walked outside as she pulled in front of me. My heart sank as I looked around, around to the junk, to the garbage. It was unbecoming of someone like Ms. Giardino to be there. She got out of her car wearing a bright, plaid dress, her hair perfect, white leather boots over her calf, looking so out of place against the tall weeds, the junk, the garbage.

I wasn't even thinking about the bruises and welts on my face and arms. I just didn't want her to come up to our door—the inside was worse than the outside.

As much as I loved Ms. Giardino, at that moment, I hated her. I hated her for being there, for seeing me for what I was.

"Where have you been, Brad?" she asked.

“Oh, just, you know—not feeling well. My dad neither—he’s inside, pretty sick.”

She walked closer. Her bright outfit really stood out in the sun, as did her hazel eyes, her gold eye shadow.

“Are you feeling any better now?”

“Uh, yeah—I think after the weekend, you know, I should...I’ll be back Monday.”

She got closer. I saw her eyes find their way to my arm, above my elbow. Suddenly, I realized my bruises—on my arms, my face, maybe my neck. I backed away.

“So, yeah,” I said, turning towards the house. “I’ll be there Monday.”

“Brad,” she said. “Wait.”

I walked slower, but didn’t completely stop. I knew my dad was inside, possibly spying on us, possibly listening behind the door.

“I’ll see you Monday,” I reiterated, walking up the rickety steps of my porch.

“Stop,” she said. Sternly. Like she’d say in class if someone was doing something dangerous.

I stopped, but couldn’t turn around. I felt her hand touch my wrist, pulling me slightly. My body turned partly around, including my face.

“What happened? To your face, your arms?”

I was silent.

“Bradley? Who did this to you?”

“I just got in a fight with the neighbor boy,” I said softly. “He’s in junior high. But I’m fine. Really.”

I pulled my wrist from her grip. Not hard, just enough to release it.

“I’ll see you Monday, Ms. G,” I said, calling her by the shortened version of her name for the first and only time.

On Monday, everything felt different. I was anxious about school. My bruises were lightened, yellowing, but still present. I stuck to my story that a boy in junior high did it to me. And I avoided eye contact with Ms. Giardino.

But as everyone piled outside for morning recess, I felt a soft hand on my shoulder from behind. It was Ms. Giardino.

“I need to talk to you, Sweetie,” she said, sadness in her eyes.

Scotty looked back. “You coming, Brad?”

Ms. Giardino said, “No, he might be out later. You all go on—this doesn’t concern you.”

As everyone left, she called the office, mumbling quietly into the phone.

She then looked at me, leaning slightly against her desk. Her large, hazel eyes looked sad—like an adult version of the Precious Moment porcelain dolls. I was too nervous to say a thing. I just shifted uncomfortably, looking down.

“You’re not in any trouble, Brad,” she said. “I just need to keep you safe.”

Soon, in walked a man, a man in uniform. My heart was pumping, my ears ringing. I looked with fear to Ms. Giardino.

She squatted down to my level, taking one of my hands.

“No one is going to hurt you anymore.”

They asked me questions about my dad. I denied everything. They asked me more questions about my dad. I sat silent. They tried to comfort me, then asked again if my dad did it to me. I looked into Ms. Giardino’s eyes, and those eyes gave me the courage.

Finally, I nodded.

I stood, stone-like, a tough exterior, a stiff upper lip. My ears rang, but I listened, I listened to Ms. Giardino explain what would be happening.

“We’re going to call a social worker,” she said, again on my level, again with her hand on my fingers, again trying to get me to make eye contact. “And the social worker will go to a judge and explain the situation, and a judge will likely say you can’t go back to your home because of how your dad hurts you. Do you understand?”

I nodded slightly. But I didn’t.

“So they’ll be putting you in a temporary home here in town, probably for a day or two, until they find a good foster home for you. They’ve got a lot of good foster home nearby, in Des Moines.”

She looked again into my eyes, her face close to mine, less than a foot

away. I could smell her perfume.

“Are you OK?” she asked.

I nodded. But I wasn’t.

“Do you understand why we need to keep you from returning to your dad?”

I nodded again. My face like stone. Or so I hoped.

“In a foster home, you won’t get hurt again. Would you rather be in a foster home, where you won’t get hurt, than be with your dad?”

I nodded again.

But I really didn’t know if that was true or not. I mean, where would I go? How would I know that a total stranger in a big city would treat me any better? What would happen if my mom returned?

And this meant a new school. New kids. A new...teacher.

That’s when the façade ended, when the tears formed.

Ms. Giardino immediately pulled me in, like my Grandma used to do before she died. A warm embrace. Her hand on the back of my head. She pulled me in tight, my face pressed against her—my forehead touching the bare skin of her neck; my eyes, nose, and cheeks in between her breasts, up against the soft material of her blouse. I could smell every bit of her. My arms hung by my side as she hugged me tightly. I had never felt more scared—but more safe—as I did while in her embrace. As more tears formed, they were quickly absorbed into her blouse.

I didn’t go out to recess that day—I went with the officer to see a social worker. I went to a judge—the magistrate on duty—admitting what my father had done to me, how often he had done it.

The year before, my 5th grade teacher once called Social Services when I had some bruises, but I lied then too, and nothing was done. And Ms. Giardino knew about this—she knew something about every kid in her class before they even entered her room. She knew our strengths, she knew our weaknesses, she knew our favorite subjects; and, as in my case, she knew what she was going to do if anything seemed suspicious about my home life. That’s the kind of teacher she was. The kind of person she was.

I only went to Van Allen Elementary one more day, staying that night in an emergency foster placement in town before getting sent to a foster home in Des Moines.

At recess that day, Rodney talked about how, on the day before during recess time, he had looked into the window while I was in the classroom with Ms. Giardino. He said he saw Ms. Giardino holding me, putting my head directly between her “titties.”

“Oh, God!” he said. “Hey, Brad—did you get a boner?”

They all laughed.

“It wasn’t like that,” I said. I couldn’t expect them to understand. I just wanted them to stop.

“I know I would have gotten a boner,” he said. “The biggest boner the world has ever known! God, you’re the luckiest guy ever! I just can’t believe your face was buried right into those huge jugs of hers!”

I snapped. “Quit...quit calling them that.”

“What? Jugs? What are you talking about?”

“Just quit—it’s not like that. Just quit calling them names like that.”

“What? OK, so what do you want to call them?”

“I don’t know. Like—“

Then I remembered the word my Grandma used when referring to a woman’s chest. And my grandma’s word came out.

“Bosom,” I said.

I knew it as soon as it left my lips. I wanted so desperately to suck it back in. But I couldn’t. The word had left my lips, lingering, festering, in front of me, like the smoke of a pipe. But unlike the smoke of a pipe, it would not disappear, it would not soon fade into nothingness

“Bosom?!” Rodney yelled. “Oh my God!”

He grabbed the side of his stomach, rolling, laughing exaggeratedly on the ground. The others laughed as well, jeering me.

I walked away, tears in my eyes, to calls of “Bosom Boy, Bosom Boy” from behind.

As much as I hated to leave Ms. Giardino, I was thankful I would not have to face Rodney ever again.

After a few years of getting bumped around in the system, I was

fortunate enough to be adopted by a wonderful family. I've strived my entire life to become the type of person inherent in the qualities of both my mom and dad.

I also married a wonderful woman, Jenny, nearly 30 years ago. We have three adult children and are a very close family. Jenny reminds me a lot of Ms. Giardino—not physically, but in all that truly matters.

Jenny taught me how to be patient with our children. I watched in wonder as Jenny raised three amazing children, never using corporal punishment; or, really, even yelling at them. Her patience and kindness have always been on full display in everything she's ever done, in every relationship she's ever developed—most notably with our three amazing children.

I also used to watch, in amazement, as Jenny breastfed each of our kids in the first year or so of their lives. They would gaze into each other's eyes, creating a bond that could never be broken. Each child would feel warm, safe, secure as Jenny nourished their little bodies, strengthening them.

Ms. Giardino died recently. I had never seen her again after that October day in 1973 in my little town of Laxton, Iowa—but I tracked her down about five years ago. She was living in southern Missouri, and we wrote each other often, sharing family pictures, sharing stories. I was able to thank her for all she had done for me on that day, even though I had no idea at that age just how pivotal of a moment it would be. As it turns out, it was probably the single most important day of my life.

Jenny and I drove from Des Moines to southern Missouri for the funeral. Seeing Ms. Giardino in the casket, almost nothing had changed. Yes, her eyes were closed, her hair was grey, her face had demonstrated the 41 years gone by—but she was still the same, the same Ms. Giardino. I looked at her hands folded just underneath her bosom—the bosom that once provided me such comfort. It's not such a strange word: "bosom." There was no reason for Rodney and the others to make fun of me for that. And I was ashamed of myself for once thinking of her bosom in sexual ways.

As I thought back to that day in her classroom, to the day I left a bad life behind for a much better one—all thanks to this beautiful woman lying in the casket below me—tears formed in my eyes.

Jenny came over, hugging me from behind, as my tears fell in front of me, dropping onto Ms. Giardino, her blouse once again absorbing all the tears my eyes could release.

Contest. Originally from Chariton, Iowa, Dan now lives in Hickory, NC, with his wife and two daughters.

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