

# Moral Dilemma©

## A Short Story by Cherie Clement

“Would the defendant please rise?” I stand nervously, facing the Bench. “Diane Erin Radnor, how do you plead? Guilty, or not guilty?”

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Tom was my pride and joy – the reason for getting up in the morning; for working hard in a boring job; for smiling; even for living. My happy, beautiful little son was my whole life.

Two years ago, he started school. I was the one who was overwhelmed by it all, worried about losing my baby. Tom just took everything in his stride. His sunny nature and smiling face made friends easily and quickly. Everybody loved Tom, and he loved everybody. Everybody, that is, except Billy Miles.

Billy’s family moved into the area a year ago and, right from his first day, it was obvious that Billy Miles was going to be a real problem. To put it bluntly, he was a bully - a thoroughly nasty child. He pulled the girls’ hair and poked them with pencils. He kicked the boys’ shins and punched them in the stomach. No child’s schoolbag or lunchbox was safe from him. He took whatever he wanted whenever he wanted to.

Even the teacher seemed afraid of Billy. He was a big-built boy, taller than the other children in the class, and he used this to his own advantage. None of the children liked him and it didn’t matter how often or how many of the parents complained about him, the headteacher refused to acknowledge the problem, telling us that he was new to the school and he was just settling in. Or that he was a bit over-excited and would calm down soon. But it just got worse.

By the Christmas of his second year, Tom was an emotional wreck. He hated school. Every morning he begged and pleaded with me to stay at home – he had a bad tummy, a bad head, or he felt sick. From being a happy, sunny-natured child, he was now sullen and moody. In a few short months my loving little boy was almost unrecognisable.

I spoke to the other parents as we waited at the gates for our children to come home at the end of the school day. They were as worried as I was. We wrote to the Governors and the Education Authority, but still nothing was done. I felt so helpless; I just didn’t know what to do.

After Christmas things eventually came to a head. Tom had obviously had enough of Billy Miles and one day, during the second week of the term, decided to stand up for himself. The result was a black eye, a broken collarbone and a concussion. At least this time Billy was suspended for a week. And, for good measure, I also reported the assault to the police.

Tears trickled down my cheeks as I watched over my son in his hospital bed. The purplish bruising of his swollen eye was the only colour in his pale little face. He was so tiny – nothing like his father. Michael had been a big man, over six feet of solid muscle. But his internal organs had proved less impressive than his outer physique. He played rugby for the local team and, just after Tom was born, Michael had hit the ground hard after a resounding tackle and never got up again. It seemed that he had been born with a hole in his heart. Naturally, I had Tom checked immediately, but everything seemed fine at the time.

It was three weeks before Tom was fit to return to school. Three weeks of comforting hugs, long discussions, and a determination to overcome the fears caused by Billy Miles. After talking with the instructors, I enrolled Tom in Judo classes. His self-confidence grew with his prowess and he slowly began to return to his old self again, though rather more subdued.

It was May 16<sup>th</sup>: Tom's sixth birthday. He had invited several of his friends home for a birthday tea and I was waiting apprehensively at the school gates. This was the first time that I had given Tom a proper birthday party and I was anxious that everything should be just right.

Tom came running out of the school gates, his friends gathered in a happy, chattering group around him, when suddenly Billy Miles appeared out of nowhere, hurled Tom to the ground and started thumping and kicking him, screaming at him for not inviting him to his party.

All the parents stood frozen in shock. All except me. They say that the most dangerous wild animal is a mother defending her young. Well, that day, it was certainly true of me. In a few short moments, I had reached Tom, cradling his still form in my arms as I flung Billy Miles away from him. I certainly didn't see the car. I hardly heard the squeal of brakes or the thud as metal hit flesh. My only concern was for my son - my beautiful, precious, silent little boy.

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The police officer who dealt with my case was a very nice man, sympathetic and understanding as I told my story. It was the same officer who knocked at my door six weeks later to tell me that Billy's life-support machine had been turned off: the same officer who advised me in my choice of a solicitor. The same officer who would today, together with all those parents who had witnessed the incident, give evidence at my trial.

As I stand in the Courtroom, I consider my plea. It was an accident in every true meaning of the word, but there is no escaping the fact that without my actions Billy Miles would almost certainly be alive and well today. Yet I am forced to admit that, given the exact same set of circumstances, I would do precisely the same thing again. Wouldn't any mother?

Guilty, or not guilty? My voice is surprisingly firm as I make my reply

**THE END**

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