

"I Don't Care"

By Dr. T

Butch was a bully. Why was he a bully? I don't know. I never wanted to get close enough to ask him. He did all of the classic bully stuff like taking lunch money, going through your lunch bag and taking what he wanted . . . you know, all that typical junk. Just to make his threats of "You tell on me and I'll beat you up" believable he would pound a few people just to prove he meant it. It's funny to think of such a jerk concerned about being credible.

This bully was very creative and showed "special" bully qualities. He would punch you in the belly and places that wouldn't leave a mark for all to see. He would wait and catch you when no one was around to witness it. No punishment worked at school because he didn't care about anything. Little did he know that his attitude of not caring was about to change in a dramatic way.

When Butch was kicked off the baseball team for mouthing off to the coach, he said, "I don't care." Butch was suspended for threatening a teacher if she didn't give him a "B" on a test that he clearly failed. What did he say? Right . . . "I don't care." Butch said, "I don't care" about everything.

One day I went to class. Butch was in his usual seat three desks in front of me. He ruled his area and his seat was like the throne of some exalted ruler who governed by terror. This day brought a new kid to our little world. The teacher introduced him. His name was difficult to pronounce. As the teacher stumbled over the name like my little sister walking in my dad's shoes, the boy said, "Just call me Sammy."

The teacher asked Sammy to tell us about himself. I observed that Sammy was short with very black hair that had an incredible shine to it. It looked so clean! He had dark skin. He was from India. His English was surprisingly good, though his words were spiced with a distinct

accent. He said that it has been a dream of his family's to come to America. He continued to say his father and mother were willing to work any job to make a living and he looks forward to being a productive part of this classroom. He made a statement that I know was a disaster looking for a place to happen. He told us if there was anything he could do for us he would be honored.

What could he do? This kid had the most lame clothes and shoes you could imagine. It was obvious that his family was dirt poor. Something about his words rang in my head all day. I found myself watching him watch the teacher. He was riveted and listened as if these were the most important words he had ever heard. I couldn't help but notice that he had an old notebook that was well worn and second hand, however, he had a beautiful pen. It looked expensive and I couldn't read it but I could see there was some kind of engraving on it.

The day finally ended. We were all headed home at last. In the mass of people and chaos that is the end of the day, I saw Butch moving in on Sammy. "Hey Shammy," Butch bellowed.

"Hello, my name is Sammy."

"I don't care," quipped Butch. "So you want to do something for us do you? I don't believe it." (I told you that statement would come back to bite him on the backside!)

"I will do whatever I can," replied Sammy.

"How about starting by giving me all your money?"

"O.K., I'll give you all my money." Sammy reached in his pockets and pulled them inside out. There was nothing in either pocket.

Butch's big bear paw reached out and grabbed Sammy's shirt. "Do you think you're funny, you weasel?"

"Yes I am, once you get to know me!"

Just then a teacher walked by. "Is there a problem Butch?" Butch tried to look calm as he took his hands off Sammy.

Sammy spoke. "No problem, I'm just telling my new friend a joke. Did you like it?" asked Sammy.

"It was hysterical," was Butch's reply.

"O.K., fine. Stay out of trouble," the teacher said as he walked away.

"See ya Butch," Sammy called as he walked away leaving Butch standing there with a very confused look on his face.

I looked forward to the next day of school. I knew two things; one, Butch would have Sammy set as his target and two, as long as Sammy would be "it," the rest of us would not be. Butch was very loyal that way. He would usually haunt the life of one victim at a time. What a faithful fellow (ha, ha).

When I walked into class that next morning I still felt half asleep. I wasn't at all ready to get started. Even though my mind was only partially engaged, I noticed that something had changed. What was it? Aha! All of the bookshelves had been straightened. Wait a minute, all of the chalkboards had been washed and looked almost new! There were several people gathered around Sammy's desk. Our teacher said "Everyone in your seats." No one was really following directions. "Excuse me, let's follow instructions. Get seated now so we can start," she said with more volume and force. The students went quickly to their seats.

"Before we get started, I would like to thank Sammy for coming in early to clean the room and straighten the shelves," said our teacher. The students half-heartedly applauded as if to indicate that he might be starting a trend they might not like.

Sammy merely replied, "I shouldn't be thanked for doing something that is the right thing to do."

"Well thank you anyway. By the way, what is that that you were sharing with all of the students?" she asked.

"This is a very old book of poetry. My grandmother gave it to me. It has poems about . . ."

Before he could finish his sentence, the door burst open. It was Butch. His face was draped in a scowl that was even scarier than his usual look of intimidation. He made his way to his desk and slammed his books down on it. The room was silent for a moment that seemed like forever because I know for that time, I didn't breathe.

Butch broke the silence "What are you looking at jerk face?" he growled at Kim, a quiet little girl who quickly turned away in an attempt to be invisible.

"Well class lets get back on track. Where were we? . . . oh yes, Sammy was telling us about his book. Please continue."

"It is a book of poetry about, well, why don't I just read one of the poems. This was given to me by my grandmother."

Sammy stood and began to read in a soothing voice that for a moment calmed every bit of the tension in the room. The poem took us to a place of peace, calm and hope. The calm was shattered by a shrill voice. "This poem smells like . . ."

"Butch, don't say it," the teacher interrupted before Butch could finish his sentence.

Butch backhanded the books on his desk. Before they had time to hit the floor, Butch was out of his seat and out the door. The teacher buzzed the office to have them deal with Butch.

The day went well. It was nice having a "Butch free" day. Before the bell, the assistant principal escorted Butch back to the room in time for dismissal. He said to the class that Butch was a little upset because his grandmother had been killed in a car accident. We knew that was particularly bad since he lived with his grandma because his parents were gone. We didn't know for sure what happened to his parents. Perhaps hearing Sammy talk about how his grandmother gave him the book pushed his button.

At dismissal, it was like Butch had a force field around him. No one got close until a very bold, short little guy walked through everyone and walked up to Butch. "What do you want Shammy?"

"I don't want anything except for you to call me by my name, Sammy."

"O.K. Shammy, when I'm pounding you, I'll try to remember that."

"Here I want you to have this," Sammy said offering Butch his precious book.

"For what?"

"To help you have peace, especially now that you have lost your grandmother."

Butch slapped it from his hand. As it fell to the ground Butch said "I don't care." He turned and walked out of the class.

I said to Sammy, "Why don't you just leave him alone?"

"Because we are called to comfort our brothers and he needs peace in his heart."

I thought to myself, this guy is weird.

The next morning we got up to a very bad storm. The temperature was dropping and ice was forming on the ground. Would we be blessed with a day off of school? No such luck! The news said the schools would be open, so off we went. As we were headed to class I saw a group of people circled around something. Kids were pushing in to get a look. Now I was just as curious as the rest of the crowd. I squeezed my way in just in time to see Butch rear back and take a huge swing at Sammy. Sammy ducked just enough so that only part of the punch landed. Sammy fell down. Butch's glancing punch caused him to lose his balance. The icy ground gave his feet nothing to grip. His feet came out from under him. Butch fell with such a thud. His back and his head hit the cold hard ground. Butch's breath escaped like air from a popped balloon. He was silent except for his gasping for air. Sammy got up holding his eye. He moved toward Butch.

"Are you O.K.?" asked Sammy.

Butch was trying to form words as he tried to regain his breath. "I, . . . I, . . ."

"What Butch, what?"

"I, . . . I, . . . I'm gonna kill you," declared Butch.

Just then some teachers came. Butch couldn't move. They saw Sammy holding his eye. "What happened?" inquired a teacher. As the story was being told they determined that Butch needed an ambulance.

Turning to Butch, one of the teachers said, "Butch, you have finally done it. You are going to be suspended for a long time this time."

"I don't care," was Butch's response. You know, I'm sure he didn't.

As the day went on, Sammy was called in and out of the office. Sammy had quite a bruise on his eye. The rumors were that Sammy was going to press charges with the police. Butch was in big trouble.

At dismissal, we all asked Sammy "So what are you going to do? Are you going to have Butch arrested for assault? That would be great. We'd love to see him carted away by the cops. What will you do?"

"I will be going to visit Butch in the hospital. Why don't you come too?" answered Sammy.

We were disappointed. What kind of stupid thinking was that? I said, "Hey, it's Friday! I'm not going to waste my weekend on that jerk Butch. Besides, what kind of fool would go visit someone who just punched your face? He'll never change! Oh, I know! You're going to crack him over the head while he can't hit you back!" We all laughed.

Sammy spoke in a calm voice, "Do you think I'm a fool? Compassion is the refuge of the righteous and caring the sword of the servant. A fool's vision is clouded by selfishness. I have known many fools. May I prove not to be considered one." With these words reverberating in my head, Sammy started to walk away. He suddenly stopped, turned and looked at me. He came back. As he walked toward me he was fumbling through his coat pocket. As he reached me he pulled out that ornate pen I had seen the other day. He offered it to me and to my credit, I turned it down. I couldn't take what looked like his only valuable possession. He insisted I take it.

As he walked away I thought to ask, "Sammy, this engraving on here. What does it mean?"

He said, "Blind is the man who sees with the eyes, but the heart is the wise man's vision."

All weekend I thought about Sammy. Compassion, caring, righteousness, servant...What causes a kid my age to think of these things? He is the one who is so obviously poor. His clothes, his shoes, his books, all second hand. If anyone should be bitter it should be Sammy, yet he was just the opposite. I started looking around my room and my house. Look at all these "things!" Stuff that we rarely use. So much money spent on junk to make us happy, to make us comfortable. I'm thinking that all these things do is make us numb.

Monday morning came. It was cold yet clear. The wind was brisk and almost burned as it slapped my face. I made it in to my class just as the bell rang. Everyone was seated. Only two empty seats, mine and . . . oh joy! No Butch! This was shaping up to be a nice day.

As I sat down, in walked Butch, or should I say, in hobbled Butch. He went to the front of the room. He said, "I have something to say. Let me speak to the class . . . please." I thought, "please" coming from Butch's mouth?

Butch reached in to his heavy brown coat. I was nervous.

"I think he has a gun!!" screamed Eddy.

Butch turned and said, "Shut up and sit down Eddy."

With that he pulled out a book. Wait a minute, that was Sammy's poetry book! Butch fumbled through the pages and finally settled on one in particular. He began to read.

"They called me things that cut me deep,
But I don't care.
The things I saw might make you weep,
But I don't care.
They stripped me of all the things I owned,
But I don't care.

I saw others lose and so they moaned,
But I don't care.
I am so poor with little to eat,
But I don't care.
I have no shoes to cover my feet,
But I don't care.
But if I ever lost a friend like you . . .(he looked at Sammy)
I would surely care."

Butch closed the book and began to speak. "I really wanted to hate Sammy. Hating is easy. The problem is, I never met someone like Sammy. The more I hated, the more he loved. He was the only one who came to see me in the hospital. He read from his book. He's weird, but there's something different, something special about him that stirs your heart to compassion."

I learned a lot of things that day. I learned that it was easy for me to show compassion and caring to people that were easy to love, but if it was any work at all, I thought only of myself. I learned that people can change. The way to change someone was not with fists but through the love you show them. Violence changes outward behavior but only love can change what is in the heart.

Sammy had something special. I didn't quite understand it because it is the opposite of what my world has taught me. Love the unlovable? Be caring? Give to those who mistreat you? How foolish! But there again, the contradiction. Is Sammy a fool or is he wise?

I felt around in my coat. Aha, here it is . Sammy's pen. The engraving held the answer. "Blind is the man who sees with the eyes but the heart is the wise man's vision." I hope to learn to see with a heart like Sammy's . . . a heart of caring and compassion.