

WISDOM'S CHILDREN

It had been a beautiful summer's morning... blue sky, fluffy white clouds and a long leisurely walk around the park. Now Shannon was relaxing contentedly at the shaded picnic table, enjoying a cool glass of lemonade with her son. Timmy was five years old and the joy of her life. At the moment he was relating his great "a'venture" that had taken place the other day at his friend's farm. Shannon listened with delight while Timmy enthusiastically recounted all the details of tractor rides and jumping in the hay. Beginning to describe the various animals he had encountered, his eyes grew brighter and wider.

"And they had a turkey too, mommy, with black feathers and a red head. Peter said it was a daddy turkey and his name was Tom! And he chased the dog!"

"Oh my!" Shannon responded with appropriate amazement. "He must have been a big turkey."

"He was, mommy!" And puffing up his chest and flinging his arms wide, Timmy enthused, "He was THIS big!"

In the excitement of the moment Timmy forgot about the refreshments on the table, and his little hand crashed into a glass full of lemonade and ice cubes. Pink liquid sprayed through the air as the glass flew off the table, shattering against the concrete patio. There was a moment of horrified silence while mother and son stared helplessly at the spill. Shannon's eyes began to water and she whispered in despair, "Oh no, Timmy. Oh, Timmy."

"I'm sorry, mommy!" he quailed. "It was a' accident! I didn't mean to!"

"It's okay Timmy, it's okay," her voice quavered. "You run in the house and play while I clean up. Daddy and I will deal with this later."

When Daryl returned from the store he could immediately tell from the subdued atmosphere that something was not right. A teary-eyed Shannon came to give him a hug and broke down sobbing on his shoulder.

"What are we going to do, Daryl? It's the third time! Timmy spilled his drink for the third time!"

He held her close while processing the information. Finally, with a deep breath and a long sigh, he reached his decision.

"We'll have to call them; it's what we're supposed to do."

"But Daryl," she pleaded, "they don't have to be told. He's just a little boy. Boys do things like that. It's only normal."

"I know, Shannon, I know. I used to feel the same way, but maybe they're right. You've seen the ads on TV, and we've already had a long discussion about the pamphlet they mailed us. I think we need to call... for Timmy's sake."

He gave her a reassuring hug, then headed into the kitchen. After a momentary hesitation, Daryl picked up the phone and dialed. He was soon greeted by a pleasantly efficient voice.

“Hello, Bureau of Family Affairs. How may I help you?”

Daryl cleared his throat, “Ahem, yes... I’d like to report an acci... uh, I mean an incident.”

In less than an hour the doorbell rang. Daryl opened the door with some trepidation and was met by a young, slightly over-weight, unsmiling man. The short black hair and dark green uniform gave him a definite military bearing. Under his left arm he carried a large zippered binder, while his right hand rested casually on a polished black holster. He removed his reflective sunglasses to reveal intense blue eyes.

“Mr. and Mrs. Becker,” he began with authority, “I’m officer Switt, Ken Switt. I’m an investigative agent for the Bureau of Family Affairs. I believe you reported a disruptive incident.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” affirmed Daryl. “Please come in.”

As the trio entered the living room, officer Switt spoke up, “I want to assure you that you did the right thing to call the B.F.A. No doubt it was a difficult decision, but we can’t let these incidents go unchecked.”

Rather than sitting in the chair offered to him, officer Switt chose to stand, hands clasped behind his back. It was clear that he was scrutinizing the environment, his eyes darting from floor to ceiling to furniture. Pressing his lips together and nodding silently to himself, he placed the zippered binder on a coffee table next to his chair, but continued to stand.

“I’d like to see the offender, if I may,” he half-ordered. “I assume he’s still here.”

“Yes, of course he’s here,” Shannon answered, with a worried glance at Daryl. “I’ll go get him.”

Moments later Shannon returned, her reassuring hand resting on Timmy’s shoulder. At the sight of the officer, the boy did his best to hide behind his mother. He clung to her leg and peeked anxiously at the shiny black holster.

“Timmy, this is officer Switt,” Daryl explained in a gentle voice. “He’s here to help us.”

The B.F.A. agent remained in the same attentive posture, again nodding silently to himself. Then he squatted down and, to Shannon’s surprise, spoke with sincere concern. “Timmy, I understand you spilled your milk today.”

The boy tried to stammer out an answer, but the words wouldn’t come.

The officer continued, “Timmy, it’s okay to feel embarrassed and ashamed; that’s only natural. But I’m here to help you, Timmy. I’ll be your friend. And when I’m through with you, you’ll never spill your milk again. How does that sound?”

The boy looked up at his mother, his eyes nervous and uncertain. He tightened his grip on her leg and continued to remain silent.

“Mrs. Becker, maybe it would be best if you sent Timmy out to play... but if you could come back please.” As Shannon turned to leave the room, officer Switt rose to his feet. He glanced at Daryl and again gave a knowing nod with his head. “Yep,” he sighed, “see it all the time.”

“What’s that?” asked Daryl with concern.

“Ownership, responsibility,” the agent replied in an authoritative tone. “Offenders who can’t admit the guilt of their actions. Serious, very serious. But we’ll get him through it, won’t we? Yes sir, you can count on that!” Then, clapping his hands loudly and rubbing his palms vigorously together, officer Switt finally sat down. He unzipped the binder and drew out a pen and a pale green form. After giving his chin a thoughtful rub, he jotted down a few brief notes.

Soon Shannon returned and took her place next to Daryl on the couch. The trio spent several minutes getting properly introduced. Officer Switt led them through some necessary formalities and was beginning to question them about the events of the day when Shannon interrupted him.

“Oh, excuse me, Ken, but I almost forgot. Timmy wanted me to tell you that it was actually lemonade he spilled, not milk. He was trying to correct you but, you know, he was a little too shy to speak.”

“Lemonade?”

“Lemonade,” Shannon confirmed.

The agent threw a suspicious glance at the couple on the couch as if still not convinced. Picking up the pale green form, he studied it briefly. “The Bureau says it was milk,” he declared.

“Lemonade,” Daryl affirmed.

Ken smirked as he picked up a pen and made the correction. “I don’t know what’s wrong with those people at the office. Happens all the time. Must be some kind of typing fatigue I guess. Now, let’s get down to business.”

Officer Switt, speaking as an experienced professional, was convinced that Timmy had already developed ingrained spill habits in his muscle memory. This could be demonstrated by the undeniable fact that he was a three-time offender. The solution was to enlist him in a strict training regime which would effectively counteract these tendencies.

Shannon felt compelled to speak out. “Isn’t this a bit extreme? I mean, he’s only a five year old boy and accidents are just a part of life. We certainly never reacted like this when I was a child,” she added with irritation.

The Bureau agent responded in a gentle, fatherly tone. “Shannon, I know people used to think that way, but times have changed. There are some current studies which demonstrate that repeated drink-spilling can lead to serious self-worth issues. Also, you need to consider the cost to society when there are spills in public places, such as restaurants, which can require extensive restoration to clothing and carpets. And what about large gatherings for special events like weddings and parties? My goodness... kids at parties!” He rolled his eyes. “You

might as well turn a pack of starving wolves loose in a delicatessen! No, clearly Shannon, enrolling repeat offenders in a rehabilitation program is in the best interests of all."

"But he's only a little boy," Shannon persisted. "It's not like he's trying to make a mess!"

"Yes, but little boys become big boys, and big boys become adults. We can't have adults running around wreaking havoc on society, spilling coffee and beer and who knows what else all over the place. However, with the proper guidance and training we can turn all the 'Timmys' of the world into fully competent members of society. Now the way to begin is to change our thinking by no longer referring to a spill as an accident, but as an incident. The very word 'accident' implies accidental, which means 'not on purpose', which means 'not my fault', which means I don't have to accept ownership for my actions. So you see how even our choice of words can have such a subtle effect on our judgment. But 'incident'," he stressed triumphantly, "avoids all these escape mechanisms!"

Shannon was about to respond again when officer Switt quickly raised his hand.

"Now, now, Shannon," he soothed, "I'm sure this is very confusing and distressing for you, but the process is much simpler than it may seem. In the first place, we need to deal with the individual's self-image. It is quite likely that Timmy is thinking of himself as a klutz, and may be convinced that he'll never learn how to drink properly. Our counsellors will gently probe his fragile psyche in order to uncover the root issues and help restore a positive self-image."

Daryl now appeared quite interested and leaned forward on the couch. "And how would your counsellors do that?"

"Oh, Rorschach inkblots or self-awareness questions. We want the offenders to get more in touch with their inner selves." Ken gave a little chuckle. "One of my favourites is to ask kids to describe themselves as a type of food. Seems to be a lot of macaroni and jello images out there. Anyway, the kids love it and it really opens them up to some deeper issues."

Closing his eyes, Daryl slumped back into the couch.

Officer Switt carried on without noticing. "So first we deal with the mental issues, and then the physical. Now, in this second area of concern, what the Bureau wanted to achieve was a way to develop new muscle-memory habits while avoiding the possibility of a spill. Therefore the B.F.A. has created the consistent-movement retraining cup!"

Shannon responded to this momentous revelation with a blank stare.

"It's really quite a wonderful idea," Ken continued with admiration. "The child is assigned a sturdy, stainless steel cup with a snap lid and a rubber-lined hole for a straw. Then the cup is secured in a track which allows it to slide back and forth..."

"A track?" Shannon interrupted.

"Uh, yes... somewhat like a curtain rod I suppose."

"A curtain rod?"

"Well, not exactly..." The agent's face suddenly brightened. "Look, I have one of these units in my car. Why don't I go get it and then you can see for yourselves how it operates."

Jumping to his feet, Ken almost ran to his vehicle, returning in a moment with a box of clanking metal parts. He popped open the lid and began removing the various pieces. His military manner had apparently been left outside and he was acting more like a child with a new toy.

“Hey, just look at this baby!” he announced with pride, pulling out what appeared to be a section of toy train track. “Now we bolt this to the table...”

“Bolt it?!” Daryl asked in shock.

“Oh, don’t worry, don’t worry,” Ken assured with a wave of his hand. “Piece of cake. Drill a few holes; get a couple of wrenches, no problem! Of course, some people might think the bolts are unseemly, but really they are a touching indication of concern for the welfare of others. I think we’re all willing to be inconvenienced a bit if it will help restore someone to functional wholeness. So anyway, you bolt the track to the table, lock the cup into place, snap on the lid and... voila! Notice how the cup slides effortlessly on these ball bearing rollers. But... oh wait... that one’s a little stiff. Hang on now, no need to get excited,” Ken continued with confidence. “We merely use a little of the silicone spray provided in this convenient aerosol can and... presto!... no more sticking. Now the child simply slides the cup along the track, thereby developing the proper muscle memory, takes a sip through the straw and moves the cup back into its proper place away from the edge of the table.”

Officer Switt was glowing with delight and satisfaction as he looked across the room at Daryl and Shannon. There was a moment of deep silence while the benefits of this marvelous creation sank in on the stupefied audience.

“But why does it have to be bolted to the table?” Shannon asked weakly.

“Oh, that was a step we felt we needed to take after running several trials with our prototype. One of the children was holding on to the cup when he fell off his chair. Not only did he end up spilling his milk, but he hit himself in the head with the track and had to get stitches. However, with this design,” Ken boasted, “not even Mr. Universe could rip that track out of the table. No sir, this baby ain’t goin’ nowhere!”

“Well, I see,” responded Daryl, trying to appear impressed. “That’s really quite an invention you’ve got there. Uh... honey... how about some coffee? I could use a coffee. How about you, Ken?”

“Why sure, I’d love one.”

While Shannon left to put on the coffee, officer Switt repacked the various metal components of his retraining cup into the box. Then, zipping shut his binder, he relaxed back into the arm chair. His childlike enthusiasm had now been replaced by a look of pleased and fatherly benevolence. By this time Daryl had begun to reconsider the wisdom of his decision to contact the B.F.A. He realized that he and Shannon had not yet made any documented commitment to a specific course of action. Maybe it would be possible to find some other solution if he could build rapport with the agent.

“So Ken,” he began with chatty familiarity, “how many children do you have?”

“Actually, I don’t have any, Daryl. I’m not even married. And even if I was I’m not sure I’d want any kids.”

“Really? Why’s that?”

“It’s the job, Daryl. The truth is, if you knew what I know about kids... well, frankly, you’d be afraid to let Timmy get out of bed in the morning.”

Realizing that this approach was unsuccessful, Daryl decided to try another subject.

“Did you see the big game last night?”

The tragic sigh of officer Switt was not the response he had hoped for. Ken answered sadly, “Yes, I watched until half-time, but then I had to turn it off. I was too upset.”

“Your team losing, eh?”

“No, not that.”

Daryl was mystified. “So what was the problem?”

“Maybe you’ll remember, just before half-time, the camera panned across the fans and focused in on that overweight, shirtless gentleman... the one who was painted all green with the yellow face.”

“As a matter of fact I do remember that.”

His voice heavy with pathos, Ken continued, “Well what did he do the second the camera was on him? He jumped up, started waving his arms around like a crazy man, and spilled his beer all over the lady in front of him.”

“So?”

“So?! Daryl, don’t you see? That could be Timmy ten years from now! Well, maybe not ten, but that’s beside the point. Think of the cost to society, the psychological damage! Clearly that was a man who needed certified retraining.”

“What?! All he needed to do was drink less beer.”

“No Daryl, no!” Officer Switt spoke with such earnestness that there were almost tears in his eyes. “Think about it. Spilling beer in a public place, on national television... that’s a cry for help! Obviously there are deeper issues involved.”

“Yes, I’m beginning to think so,” Daryl muttered to himself.

“Eh?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing. Say, where do you people get your training?” Daryl asked cheerily. “I mean... uh... you picked up right away on that fan’s... deep personal problems.”

“Yeah, we get pretty fine-tuned at the Bureau. It’s hard to turn it off sometimes. But I guess that’s the cost of being a highly skilled professional. After all, we go to school for weeks taking all sorts of B.F.A. courses. And we’re in class the whole day too, like nine to five!” Ken snorted. “But then with this type of work we need that heavy-duty training in psychology and counselling.”

Now Daryl was intensely interested. He sat up straight on the couch, rubbing his hands on his knees. "Hmm, I find that very fascinating. You see, I'm a psychology professor at the college in town. I suppose that after your 'weeks' of training you must be well acquainted with all the various schools of thought... you know... structuralism, functionalism, behaviorism. Of course those are only the early 20th century beginnings in psychology, and there's always a new theory on the horizon, isn't there?"

Ken remained silent, but responded with a nervous nod.

"So how do you choose?" Daryl pursued.

"Choose?"

"What I'm wondering is, how does the Bureau decide which theory to use as the basis for its program? I can see that your department must work in the area of developmental psychology, but the connection between overt and covert behavior has never been definitively explained. Then, of course, there is the critical connection with the other behavioral sciences of anthropology and sociology. So, as you must know, it certainly makes for a difficult decision."

Officer Switt was struggling to reply when he was rescued by the arrival of Shannon with the coffee. Though Shannon had missed their conversation, she knew that something had developed by the twinkle in her husband's eye and the perspiration on Ken's forehead. The agent hurried to fix himself a cup of coffee and proceeded to take several large and noisy gulps.

"Honey, I'm glad you're here now," Daryl said pleasantly. "You missed a really intriguing discussion. Fortunately, Ken was just going to tell me how the Bureau has solved a problem that has baffled psychologists for decades."

Realizing that he was in a tight spot, officer Switt decided to go on the offensive. He did his best to resume his authoritative, military manner and launched a counter-attack. "I'm sorry Shannon, but we'll have to postpone this little chitchat about counseling theory for another time. I still have a second appointment today and we have yet to choose which program of rehabilitation to pursue. After all, you did call us voluntarily to ask for help for Timmy."

"Hardly!" Daryl responded with irritation. "Since that waitress reported the spill in the restaurant last week we had only one chance left. As you well know, after a third documented offense, families must register with the B.F.A. or have their benefits reduced to cover social costs. We thought maybe the Bureau could offer some sensible advice."

"Daryl, I can understand that at first glance our program might seem unreasonable, but you need to consider the larger picture. If the government is going to take care of society as a whole, it's unavoidable that individuals will have to surrender their... uh... I mean, some of us may at times have to give up our... uh..."

"Rights," Shannon suggested.

"No, no! I don't mean that!" the agent quickly responded. "But it would seem only reasonable that we may have to lose... certain..."

"Freedoms," Daryl offered.

Officer Switt looked like a man whose canoe had just capsized as he floundered around to find the right answer. Taking another big gulp of coffee, he wiped his perspiring forehead with his hand. Suddenly he snapped upright in his chair. "Privileges!" he almost shouted. "Yes, privileges! You see, as... as loyal citizens of our great democracy it becomes necessary to... uh... that is, it becomes necessary in the best interests of the larger community to relinquish certain personal privileges, so that the government can better care for the needs of the whole!"

Now, feeling relieved and triumphant, Ken resorted to a more fatherly and soothing tone. "Daryl, Shannon, the truth is, sometimes we need to be protected from ourselves. That's why I'm here, and that's why together we are going to help Timmy overcome this ingrained disorder. So please, take a few minutes to examine these forms, and when you're ready you can sign at the bottom."

He handed a copy to each of them and sat back to relax in his chair. While the couple perused the documents, officer Switt sipped his coffee and hummed quietly to himself. He was beginning to refill his cup from the carafe on the table, when he broke into a delighted chuckle. "Hey, would you look at that!"

Daryl and Shannon glanced around the room. "What?"

"This coffee cup! I never noticed till now, but it's a souvenir from Oak Island Fishing Resort. See the little gold print? I went there last summer!"

"Oh, yeah," Daryl nodded with indifference, "I was there a few years ago."

"Boy, that's really too bad!" Ken continued with surprising earnestness.

Daryl was baffled. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Well, it's too bad we can't use these mugs at the office."

"What?" Shannon laughed. "Why not?"

"Too hazardous. You know, if you drop them and they shatter... glass everywhere, people getting cut. At the Bureau we use only pyramidal lead-bottom cups. Can't spill those babies! And even if you did drop them, that titanium alloy is indestructible. They won't melt either if... uh, ahem," officer Switt seemed slightly embarrassed and his voice trailed away, "if somebody happened to leave one on a hot plate or something."

Shannon looked over at Daryl and rolled her eyes. "Those sound like a really great... invention," she offered.

"Well, I don't know about that," Ken responded, "but they sure are better than those magneto-mugs we tried at first." He gave a short burst of laughter. "Now those ones had a battery operated electro-magnet in the bottom with a circuit-interrupter switch on the handle. We installed steel plates on every desk, and I'll tell you those cups stuck to them like glue. The only problem was the mugs had a design flaw and sometimes they wouldn't work. Well you can imagine the aggravation and office tension created by people yanking at their coffee cups and not being able to budge them. Then, of course, the switch would suddenly click in and staff would be throwing coffee all over the place! We had so many lawsuits that we had to replace

the mugs before their design could be perfected. In a way it's too bad," Ken mused, "because they had a small heating coil embedded in the cup to keep the coffee warm... though, then again, that's probably why so many people got scalded!"

Daryl, who had been trying to follow this ramble, still remained puzzled. "So you would rather use an Oak Island mug?"

"Oh, sorry," officer Switt answered, "I got off topic a bit. No, I have no problem with the Bureau's PLB cups. It's just too bad we can't have any designs on them. They only come in solid colours."

Daryl and Shannon, now both hopelessly confused, could only react with a questioning stare.

"Designs are too distracting," Ken explained. "Oh, you've probably seen it yourself at work, Daryl. You know, people walking around the office trying to read each other's coffee cups and bumping into things and tripping." His face beginning to redden at the thought, Ken quickly changed topics. "So what were you fishing for at Oak Island?"

"Actually I was happy to catch anything. I'd never been ocean fishing before, but some of my buddies were after salmon. I guess they have some real trophies up there."

Officer Switt's response was so enthusiastic that it made Daryl and Shannon jump. "Trophies?!" he boomed, leaning forward and slapping his knees. "You'd better believe it! When I was up there last summer we were pulling out some monster salmon! Why some of those beauties must have been THIS big!" As he swept his arms wide for emphasis, Ken's right hand crashed into the freshly-filled cup of coffee. Brown liquid sprayed through the air, showering the wall and carpet.

Arms spread, mouth open, the Bureau agent stared at the mess in stunned silence. He looked helplessly at Daryl and Shannon, only to be met by the same silent disbelief. His voice cracked like an old crow as he offered weakly, "I'll... I'll take care of it... no... problem..." But still everyone was too much in shock to move.

Now officer Switt's hands began quivering like his voice. "You wouldn't report this little accident, would you?" he queried.

"Accident, Ken?" Shannon prodded.

"Incident!" he blurted. "I mean incident!"

Realizing the leverage presented by the situation, Daryl quickly countered, "But you said 'accident' Ken. What would happen if we did report this... accident?"

"No, please!" officer Switt begged. "It's the third time this week. I don't know why. I can't help it."

Shannon appeared to be shocked. "Ken! What about ownership?!... responsibility?!"

"But it's not my fault... really! It's my sister! She used to call me a klutz and..."

Jumping to his feet, Daryl snatched up the portable phone from the table beside him. "Clearly there are some serious issues here! Officer Switt, I'm afraid we have no choice but to call the Bureau!"

"No! No! Wait!" Ken leaped in terror from his chair and began fumbling around trying to gather up the forms. He shoved the binder under his arm, grabbed the box of parts and began backing toward the door. "If you don't report me, I won't report you!" he bargained. "I promise! I was never here! And I'll get treatment! Really! You'll see! I'll be a new man! I'll..."

But by this time he had backed his way to the front door. Clawing at the handle, he threw the door open and ran to his car. Seconds later, motor roaring, tires squealing, officer Switt disappeared down the street. Daryl and Shannon remained standing on the porch until a voice from behind interrupted their laughter.

"I don't like him," Timmy said. "Will he be back?"

"No, honey," Shannon comforted, kneeling down to give her little boy a hug. "I'm sure we'll never see him again."

"That's right, Timmy," Daryl affirmed. "You don't have to worry about officer Switt. We're your mom and dad, and we'll take care of you."