

## DEATH OF A CHILD CARE WORKER (A Short Story)

Fred Schreier  
*San Diego, California*

Tex, a child care worker at Saint Victor's School for Wayward Boys, rolled off the couch and managed to get through to the staff room without letting the grimy hands of two small boys impede him. He opened the medicine cabinet, took out the meds, in this case a tranquilizer, and noticed that several of the little yellow submarines were missing. He decided not to mention this fact now to Holly, his co-counselor, but would wait until the kids were in rest period, the time after dinner when the boys were required to go to their rooms and allow their dinners to digest, leaving the staff to recover from another unpleasant meal.

Meal times at Saint Victor's were invariably unpleasant, much to the consternation of the staff who had some expectations of what eating was all about. What eating did entail: please pass this, do not grab that, generous portions of vegetables, cutting down on sugar and salt, a light dessert usually consisting of a fruit, etc. What eating did not entail: Bobby, keep your hands out of Teejay's food, Bobby, remove your fingers from Myron's hair, Bobby, go stand in the corner, Joey, sit in your chair the correct way, etc. Was it any wonder that Holly felt she was ready for institutional care herself? "F... you, bitch" does not help the digestive tract.

"Tex, you really must help me more when I need backup." Holly knew she was speaking to deaf ears. Tex lounged like the lizard he was when he should have been working. As he lolled about waiting for the call to dinner, Tex let his co-worker Holly do the busy work of preparing the meal, getting the children washed and ready for the table, breaking up the fights and otherwise disciplining what was an unruly mob into a funny little family of unfamilial types. Tex was engrossed in a championship basketball game now down to the wire, and he had quite a bit of his undeserved salary riding on the outcome.

"Tex, can you help me for just a second?" The tone in Holly's voice left no area of compromise. "What is it?" "I need someone to give Teejay his meds." "Can't it wait until halftime?" "No, it can't wait until halftime; he needs it before mealtime, not during or after. We're ready for chow now, dear." The annotation to "dear" was not endearing.

Holly had twisted her hair repeatedly until the once long straight locks looked permanently frizzed. She wasn't fazed but kept right on chattering in front of the five other women who had gathered the next morning at Federico's for brunch.

Holly was going on and on about her disastrous situation in the unit as two of the women listened intently and another feigned interest while she stretched to overhear the conversation of the other two women who were off to the side.

*Hilda:* "I caught them going at it the other night."

*Bessie:* "The little twerps."

*Hilda:* "It was funny; I turned on the lights quickly, and they didn't have time to jump back in their beds."

*Bessie:* "What did you say to them?"

*Hilda:* "I didn't say a word. I just glared at them. There was nothing to say. They were speechless. I'm letting them stew for awhile by not saying or doing anything. I've been trying to get something on those two for so long, and I finally got it. I'll be able to use this to full advantage."

*Bessie:* "You clever duck."

*Hilda:* "After all the shit they've been giving me, they deserve a little of it back. The other day one of them had the audacity to break the watch Jim gave me for our anniversary. It was no accident."

*Bessie:* "The little shit."

Holly's first of four consecutive shifts is a strain on her.

"Tex says it's been better than it has been, but what does he know?" says Holly. "He's a feeb."

*Holly's monologue:*

"I'm on the brink again. I can't do it all. I can't stand back and let the program collapse. I had to let Charlene handle Bobby today. I was afraid I was going to hurt him. I wanted to tear his plastic blond doughboy face off. What's going to happen? This has been going on for so long. They say. They say. They always say that it will be taken care of. When are they going to fire Tex? He's been here so long he's part of the furniture. They can't say when. They just keep repeating that it will be taken care of. Who's going to tell

him? Who's going to say: 'You've been slipping. You don't have the skills necessary for this position.' Now they have someone who can walk into the staff room and lay it on the line. They have created another new position: Director of Treatment!"

*More of Holly's monologue a few weeks later:* "I'm losing it. What am I going to do? Who can I talk to? I talked to the new Director of Treatment. He laid it all out for me. The truth. Ever since Tex left, I've taken the responsibility of the entire unit on myself. It's all on me. I had taken my finals on Wednesday. And then on Thursday, Tex was killed in a car accident. I took the kids to the rosary on Friday. They all freaked out seeing him in a casket. And then the funeral on Saturday. By Sunday I was a basket case. I knew I was on the edge of totally losing it. I could see everything breaking up into little pieces, and I would never be able to put any of it back together again. I'm going to have to put in for a transfer to another unit. Or quit altogether and get a job with less stress. Alan [her boyfriend] can support me for a while. I'll hang around the kitchen making Swedish meatballs. I know I'm right. I've got to make a move soon."

Holly's last shift was a doozy. She felt further off mark than she had in some time. She backed the agency car into a post, dropped the phone repeatedly, broke a nail, slipped on a toy. Four of the kids ran off the unit, jumping through windows while she stood powerless with her mouth open. Holly stumbled through sentences getting her words jumbled. Holly's thoughts drifted off in midsentence waiting for the final word and missing a beat. Holly had become what some of her children were: a space case. Except today she was a total mess.

The children who had not run away were at the moment fighting over a toy, a miniature pool table, and there were small balls and cue sticks scattered all over the unit. The children were not responding to a call to order. After several minutes of bribing, coaxing, screaming, threatening, and handing down ultimatums, Holly had depleted her repertoire of behavior management techniques and reached for the phone. The administrative on-call person for that particular weekend was Butch Rafferty.

*Butch:* "Butch here."

*Holly:* "Butch, we need help."

*Butch:* "Who's 'we'?"

*Holly:* "Charlene and me."

*Butch:* "What's going on?"

*Holly:* "The little munchkins are beyond our control."

*Butch:* "Have you tried breaking them up into small groups?"

*Holly:* "A group just ran away and, besides, Charlene has never done groups. It's really just me here. Charlene is a student intern filling in for Tex."

*Butch:* "Well, I'm only trying to go over your options."

*Holly:* "I've exhausted my options. We need someone – anyone, even you – over here now."

*Butch:* "I'll be over as soon as I can. I have to make a few calls. The other group homes are in crisis, too."

Holly hung up and turned to Charlene.

"Let's try calling a group and going over some simple expectations."

Charlene had that glazed-over look that told Holly she really was alone on this one.

Later, Holly called her union rep and informed her of her desperate situation. The union rep listened dispassionately and said, "Holly, we've had so many complaints about your particular unit and its supervisor. It's a perfect example of the Peter Principle in action: Everyone rises to their own level of incompetence. All I can do is file another grievance, but the prospects of the administration acting on it are slim, as you are probably well aware. Off the record, if you have any other resources or alternatives, I would pursue them if I were you."

"Well frankly, Marcia, I thought you were a resource and an alternative. Peter Principle, huh? This is more like Murphy's Law: Anything that can go wrong, will."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Holly, but the union has already done as much as it can. Naturally, we will continue to pound away at this issue but, as I've told you before, this situation you find yourself in is only a piece to a much bigger puzzle."

That night, still feeling the effects of the day, Holly called in to the radio station talk show. "Hi, I'm Holly and I'm a first time caller. I was listening to your guest, Dr. Josie Pierce, and I want to dispute one small point I heard him make. He said, if I heard him correctly, that children

in the latency age grouping are capable of altruistic meditation. I've been working with ten-year-olds for years – emotionally disturbed ten-year-olds – and I have seen little or no evidence that kids that age can develop the discipline necessary for that kind of concentration.”

“How long have you been working with emotionally disturbed children, Holly?” Dr. Pierce asks.

“I have been working at the same school for six years now.”

“And you think that this group you work with may not be representative of a more normal population?”

“I am saying that my experience with latency age kids, regardless of any label, tells me that children today do not have the inclination. I heard Dr. Pierce say they have the capability but, without intensive training, I don't see how that capability will ever be developed.”

“Well, thank you, Holly, for your call. Let me get a response from Dr. Pierce.”

“Holly, you are most correct. Yes, it takes a great deal of attention and effort from the caregivers in a child's environment to assist the child to develop in this area, if a child is ever to achieve a smithering of his or her potential. It is still true that the average person only uses 10 percent of their potential. Thanks again for your call.”

Holly went to bed with Alan that night and fell into a deep sleep . .

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As Tex rounded the corner near the unit, the three-wheeled vehicle he was commandeering turned over. It, with Tex inside, fell against a large steel pole. Tex felt his ribs break and pierce his innards. His liver was punctured. At first he was able to rise and stumble to the unit. He made it as far as the couch. Holly was on the phone. Tex rolled off the couch onto the hardwood floor. As he looked up at the pinewood ceiling he wondered: was this a crucifixion or was he making himself into a sandwich?. Would the ceiling descend, or the floor rise to crush him into an edible mass?. The pressure in his cranium became too intense. He raised his head slightly to see himself on the couch playfully touching himself. He heard Holly's voice:

“Tex, don't let the boys do that.”

There's a lot of things I don't let the boys do.

"Tex."

Yes, come here.

"Come here."

On the floor? Are you crazy?

"Good bye."

"I love you."

"I'm sorry." . . .

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"Those are three hard things to say." Holly rolled over onto the mattress where Alan was stretched out. She popped one of the little yellow pills into her mouth and handed one to Alan. "Tex's 'wrongful death' did it for me. That was it. A last straw. Someone finally was killed doing this f...ing job. The camel's back was broken. That was it. A watershed. A milestone. A time for everyone to assess what was wrong. What went wrong? The circumstances of Tex's death all said something was desperately wrong. If we ignore it or lapse into pious sentiments, we're not doing Tex justice. He would want us to fight and not let the system off the hook. Tex would say: 'Stop, look, listen.' See what's going on. Tex was misused. I was misused. Tex died and I quit. No one is going to investigate or rock the boat or stir it up. Things will go on as before. Nothing will change. The Peter Principle and Murphy's Law triumph again. Good bye. I love you. I'm sorry."