

## Dilemma

By: Josh Zou

Officer Smith parked his old car by the local public elementary school to pick up his eight-year-old son. He drew out a cigarette from a box hidden under the seat, lit it, and smoked. He inhaled the smoke heavily into his lungs with strength and tension, and exhaled in relief, as if his stress had gone away with the fading smoke.

The officer was a middle-aged divorced man. He rented a small apartment with his low income (it was higher before his current superior came into power), and he lived with his son, Little Willy. Deep wrinkles crawled upon Smith's forehead, and they became deeper as he frowned. Hair departed from his head gradually, possibly because it found mostly stress in his head. His eyes began to lose focus as he appreciated this precious period of solitude.

Smith thought of his dream last night. He'd dreamed of himself: Julian August Smith, the gallant and handsome lad in police academy, who was reading the *Iliad* to his fiancée, craving battles with the nemesis of his lord Justitia, and fancying a heroic death like that of Achilles. He woke up on a wet pillow.

Smith's eyes suddenly focused as he saw his Little Willy walking out of the school, and a light began to flicker in them. His boy was his Polaris in the perpetual and overwhelming night of his life. He told Little Willy about great deeds of heroic figures and the moral lessons behind, and how meaningful they are to him. Smith put out the sparks on his cigarette anxiously and tossed it out of the car, then he chewed some gum to cleanse the disgusting smell in his mouth. He adjusted his smile and got out of the car.

As Little Willy walked closer, Smith found that his son's face was black and blue; a purple

bruise appeared on Little Willy's left eye. Willy sobbed as he walked; he could not stop teardrops from sliding down his eyes.

Smith stood stiffly still, as if being electrocuted. A few shades of black haunted his vision. He squatted when Little Willy came in front of him, put both hands on Willy's shoulders, and stared into his eyes: "Son, who did it?" His voice was plain even though he was outraged, like a sea with a calm surface but fierce undercurrents. Little Willy tried to counterfeit a profound, stern expression and give a contrastingly light-hearted response like his father, but his attempt resulted in an exodus of tears. He sobbed as he finally spoke: "I...I said that po-policemen are good and...and he b-beat me..."

Smith felt an ache in his heart. The words "policemen are good" struck him hard. "How I wish we really are..." he thought. He patted Little Willy's head and said gently: "It's alright pal. I got your back. Men won't cry easily, right?" Willy nodded and tried hard to cease sobbing, and Smith continued, "Let's go for ice cream and you'll tell me his name." Then Smith walked Willy into the car with his warm hand on his son's back.

The next day Smith took half a day off from work at an expense and went to the Willy's elementary school. He found the principal in his office and demanded forcefully to see the brat who beat Willy. Willy's teacher and a few school officials managed to find the child and brought him to Smith, and anxiously stood between the two---they had prepared themselves to deal with an outraged father. The helpless child gazed at Smith with fear.

The moment Smith saw this child he froze. He remembered that face and that look---it is one of the phantoms haunting him in sleep. Smith could not cease his memory from replaying:

Months ago Smith and his colleague set off to an apartment---a child had called the police. They saw the child waiting anxiously outside of the building, and they followed the child into his

tiny apartment. Along the way Smith heard some loud, terrible noises: men and women screaming and begging, glass breaking, and fists pounding on flesh. He and his colleague saw a few men beating a man and a woman, apparently the child's parents, and cursing. Smith stepped forward and shouted, "Hey stop!" instinctively, but he was stopped by his colleague, who whispered, "Don't mess with them---they drunk with our chief---think about Willy!" The formidable men noticed the officers, handed them cigarettes, and went back to their violent business. Smith's colleague held him tightly. Smith saw the terrorized child staring blindly at him and his colleague, very, very baffled.

"Sir?" The headmaster's voice knocked Smith out of his nightmarish flashback of the mission.

"Ahhh! Yes," Smith responded instinctively. He found his legs trembling like freshly made, meek tofu and could barely support his weight. Smith felt his face burning like red coal in shame, and sweat emerged all over his body. The child's gaze, full of dread, torched him. His righteous fury, fueled by the temporary suffering of his son, crumbled before this small, permanently scarred malefactor, like the Tower of Babel collapsing under God's decree. "I...uh...just wanna see this boy...just wanna see'em..." Smith finished his sentence, panicking to remain in the school with the resentful and helpless boy who beat his son. He quickly walked out of the office, and then started trotting, leaving the faculty confused.

Smith ran out of the school and hid in his car. *Think about Willy! Don't mess with them!* He chanted his colleague's words to quell the rumbling guilt in him. He fumbled his hidden pack of cigarettes, lit one, and smoked. Officer Smith inhaled deeply and exhaled in relief.