

Crime and Punishment

... a short story by Bill

"Mr. Willis, why are you crying?"

I wasn't really crying. But I felt like it. How had I gotten myself into this?

I had volunteered to read a story to the grade 1 class. I'm not sure why I said yes. I'm not an elementary teacher. And I'm a lousy story reader. But as Assistant Principal, things like this were expected of me, and in a moment of weakness, I'd said yes.

So now the regular teacher was off somewhere doing heaven knows what, and here I was in front of her class of short little people who expected me to keep them enthralled for the next twenty minutes.

Things had started out just fine. I'd picked a likely-looking book off the shelf at the side of the classroom, and I'd taken a seat in the rocking chair in front of the kids. They were sitting on the floor all around me, eager expressions on their little runny-nosed faces.

How hard could this be? All I had to do was read a story.

So I'd begun. "*George the Giraffe's Vacation*" It sounded harmless enough.

"*George was a very curious giraffe*", I read. Then I showed them the picture. "*George liked to watch the traffic go by.*"

Traffic? What traffic? Was George in a zoo, or what?

"*George lived in a zoo.*"

OK, why didn't they say so in the first place. I was really getting into the story now.

"*George was so tall, he could see ...*"

That's about the point that things started to go wrong.

There was a hand at the back. It was Amanda.

"*Yes Amanda? Did you have a question?*"

"*Mr. Willis, what do giraffes eat?*"

"*Well, Amanda ...*" I had no idea. Tree bark? Twigs? Monkeys? No, it had to be leaves.

"*Leaves, Amanda. Giraffes eat leaves. Now let's go back to the story, OK?*"

I held up the book, preparing to resume where I had left off. But it was not to be.

"*Mr. Willis, how can they swallow all those leaves? Their necks are a mile long! They'd need a bucket full of spit to be able to swallow all those leaves, don't you think?*"

This from Jennifer. Apparently Jennifer was an aspiring biologist. For all I knew, maybe they did need a bucketful of spit. I didn't foresee the story telling us about that.

"Well, Jennifer, it's like this ..."

"Mr. Willis, do you think giraffes are beautiful?" Brickley this time.

"Well, I ..."

"My mommy thinks I'm beautiful! That's why she let me wear this simply beautiful dress today. Don't you think it's beautiful?"

"Well, Brickley ..."

What kind of mother would name a daughter 'Brickley'? I couldn't fathom it.

"Well, Brickley, I think it's ... uh ... really pretty."

Brickley's pink fluffy dress made her look like a big pink cat toy.

"Mr. Willis, can I go to the bathroom?" It was Barney. Barney was the little guy in the front row who usually had a finger up his nose. I was always careful not to get too close to Barney.

"Ah, OK, Barney, sure. You know where it is." Barney scampered out of the room.

"Oh oh, Mr. Willis. I think you just made a mistake." It was Jennifer again.

"And why is that, Jennifer?"

"Because Barney always gets lost. The teacher never lets him go to the bathroom by himself."

"Lost? How can he get lost? The bathroom is just across ..."

"Not lost like that, Mr. Willis. I mean, lost, like ... well, Barney likes to explore. The last time he went to the bathroom by himself, he was gone for half an hour. The teacher found him in the shed out behind ..."

"Well, for heaven's sake, Jennifer. Why didn't you tell me. Go with him, OK?"

"Go with him? I can't do that! He's a boy! He's going to the boy's bathroom!"

"Can't you just wait outside the door? For him to finish?"

"Ewww! I might hear him flush. That would be SO embarrassing!" Jennifer wrinkled her nose at me, in disgust.

George the Giraffe seemed like a distant memory.

"All right ... then ... Kenny. You go wait for Barney outside the bathroom, OK? And then the two of you come right back."

Kenny scampered out of the room.

"Mr. Willis, I don't think ..."

"What is it now, Jennifer?"

"Well, it's just that ... Barney likes to wander. But Barney and Kenny together ..."

"I don't care. Let them wander. We have a story to finish!"

I was getting a little testy. And if Barney and Kenny didn't show up for half an hour? Well, I'd be long gone! Let their regular teacher worry about it.

I was starting to look forward to my afternoon Junior High class with a certain fondness. I was actually starting to miss them. In fact ...
No, I had a story to read.

"George was so tall, he could see right across the town. One day, when he was looking up the street ..."

"Mr. Willis? Is David supposed to be doing that?"

It was Jennifer again. I was starting to dislike Jennifer. And her mother. I'd never liked her mother either.

I looked over at David. He'd brought three glue sticks with him. I guess he was hungry. He was in the process of finishing off the second one.

"David, don't eat glue sticks! You'll die!"

I didn't really think he would die. I used to eat pencil erasers when I was in grade one, and I'd never died. But I had to say something. I was supposed to be the teacher here.

"Mr. Willis ..."

It was Jennifer again. That's when I'd covered my face with my hand. The one not holding the book. I guess they thought I was about to cry. I felt like it.

I ignored her. *"One day, when he was looking up the street, he spotted ... Yes, Jennifer!"* I couldn't ignore her any longer. She was waving her hand around like it was on fire.

"Mr. Willis, you have nice eyes!" Well, what was I supposed to say to that?

"Thank, you, Jennifer. Can we ... uh ... finish the story now?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Willis. It's snack time. We're supposed to get our lunch kits and eat something. Back in our desks. Is that OK?"

"Well, I guess..."

As they were eating, their regular teacher walked back into the room. She smiled at me. I tried to smile back.

"Thanks, Bill. I hope you had fun. They're such an adorable class. I need to go to the Post Office. Would you mind looking after them for another ten minutes or so? Maybe you could read them another story?"

"No, I can't, I'm sorry. I have to ... I have to ..."

"He has to go to the bathroom!" All the class laughed. Thank you, Jennifer.