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Death of Innocence: When a child kills

JUNE 1996

SCOTT CORDELL WAS ONLY four weeks old when he died in a Sydney suburb just over three years ago. Except for one or two newspaper reports at the time, his death—seemingly at the hands of his three-and-a-half-year-old neighbour—received virtually no publicity. Today, the dead infant's parents want his story told—if for no other reason than to restore some of the dignity they feel they were stripped of when he died. They also want a proper obituary for a son who never had a chance to live.

At the best of times, it is intolerable learning about the suffering of a child, and in the numbing aftershock of Dunblane, Scotland, where 16 innocents were slaughtered, it might be too much for some. Yet unlike Dunblane—or the killing in 1993 of James Bulger in Liverpool, England, by two 10-year-old boys—there is no easy recourse here to words such as 'evil', 'devilish', 'monster'. Although his parents would vehemently disagree, the death of Scott Cordell is full of ambiguity. It requires a balanced telling, particularly as there are essentially two versions to this suburban calamity.

The first one, unthinkable but true, according to Madeleine and Andrew Cordell*, is that their neighbours' child, three-and-a-half-year-old Billy Sharishieh, killed their four-week-old baby, Scott, not through misfortune, but with murderous impulse.

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They believe Billy might not have understood the consequences of what he was doing, but that he could grasp that he was hurting their baby terribly, and failed to stop. They believe Billy Sharishieh either has the demon in him or was emulating behaviour learned at home. They are convinced he and his parents are in urgent need of counselling and that the boy is a serious risk to other children. They want charges laid against the parents—for what, they're not sure—and the recommendations of the Coroner's Court enforced. They also want legislation enacted so that parents are made responsible for the sins of their children.

The second version—the one you pray is the truer account, the one presented by Billy's father, Tony Sharishieh—is that this was a tragic accident, pure and simple. If he could make it up to the Cordells he would. However, his son is no killer. He's a sweet little boy who only tried to comfort the baby when he was crying. He carried him up the stairs and then dropped him accidentally. He's never hurt his sister or the family pets. He wins awards for good behaviour. Why should he wear this stain forever?

MADELEINE CORDELL HAD TRIED for 10 years to become pregnant before having her first child, Evan, in 1988. It took her another five years to have Scott, so she was naturally very protective of her children. This sunny winter's morning, May 24, 1993, was the first time, she says, she'd asked a non-family member to look after her children, and only then because of a plague of ants in her house.

When the fumigator asked her to remove Scott, she asked Tina Sharishieh if she could use her place. The Cordell and Sharishieh families were not exactly friends but there was a level of neighbourliness between them, enough at least for the Sharishiehs to have taken flowers and chocolates to Madeleine in hospital after she'd given birth. Besides, Tina Sharishieh was

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at home that morning, she didn't have any pets that might pose a risk to an infant, and she was always generous about minding other people's children.

The families lived about 150 metres from each other in a town-house complex in Sydney's eastern suburbs. The Cordells had been there for the previous two years, the Sharishiehs for about 14 months. The units were comfortable but not flash. What attracted residents was the village green atmosphere—the playground area, the communal swimming pool and the pathways for children to ride their bikes on. It gave families a deep sense of security.

Madeleine Cordell was to tell police later that night that after putting Scott to sleep on a foam mattress on the floor of the Sharishieh town house, she went home to see how long the fumigators were going to be. She insists that on her way out she signalled to Tina Sharishieh that she was leaving. Sharishieh was in the playground talking to another neighbour, Glenda Robins. Sharishieh vehemently denies receiving any sign from Cordell. She claims she had her back to Cordell. Glenda Robins says she can't recall. Madeleine Cordell says that while at home she heard her baby cry and so was anxious to get back—she says she was away only 10 minutes. The Sharishieh family dispute this. They say 20 minutes to half an hour. Whichever the case, it was too long.

Madeleine Cordell's statement to police that night was delivered in a miasma of shock and exhaustion. Her state of mind can be partially gleaned from the colliding sentences and personal pronouns that have gone missing. What you can't really sense, until you meet her, are the ravages of her grief, the swollen brown eyes and the words that tumble out in a lifeless drone, as though all possibility of pleasure ceased a lifetime ago. She trembles as she recounts what happened next and the cigarette ash falls in little piles on her Laminex kitchen table:

'I walked back into the house and looked to where I'd left Scott but he wasn't there. I didn't sort of worry about that too

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much. I thought, you know, Tina must have heard the cry the same as I did. But as I entered the door there was the sound of something hitting glass and there were two boys standing near the table, one was actually kneeling on a chair. [The boys were Billy Sharishieh and his four-year-old friend, Curtis Browne.]

‘One of the boys said, “The baby’s got a bump on its head.” And I said, “Where is he?” and he looked directly down and then I looked directly down and Scott was on the [dining] table.

‘His head at that stage was facing away from me but you could see the whole of his head was like a football. I went to lift him up by putting my hands underneath his neck and his legs and as I did that his head fell towards me. It looked like he’d just gone 20 rounds with a fighter . . . you could just see the pressure building up on the other side of his head. It just came up on both sides, and I just turned and ran and screamed.

‘[Tina and Glenda] were still in that particular area [outside] and I kept screaming, “What has he done?” I said, “He’s bashed Scott.”’ Glenda Robins ran towards Cordell, grabbed the baby and yelled out to her husband to call the ambulance.

‘Madeleine was transfixed,’ Robins explains. ‘She was sort of breathless, hyperventilating, shocked. I could see she was in no state to handle the baby, so I took the baby from her. He wasn’t breathing. Every 20 seconds he would sigh and then stop. Madeleine was on my left and just babbling and incoherent. I was trying to get her husband’s phone number from her so we could get her husband to meet her at the hospital . . . I wasn’t sure if he was dying in my arms. I suspected he might have been.’

In Tina Sharishieh’s statement to police later that day, she said she immediately went into her house to talk to her son Billy. ‘I screamed at him, “What have you done, we’ve had to call an ambulance.” I repeated this several times. He then burst into tears and ran upstairs to his bedroom. I followed him into

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his room and saw that he had gotten on to his bed and pulled the blankets up over his head.

'I said, "Calm down, Billy, and tell Mummy what happened." I hugged him until he stopped crying and said to him, "What happened?" He said, "Is the ambulance coming to pick me up?" I said, "No, he's picking Scott up." I kept cuddling him, trying to calm him down. I said, "Billy, what happened, sweetheart?" He said, "The baby was crying. I wanted to take the baby home to his mum and I dropped him."'

Scott Cordell arrived at Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital at 11.45 a.m., unconscious with a severely fractured skull, pronounced swelling of the brain and retinal haemorrhages in both eyes. His mother told hospital staff she had no idea how the injuries occurred. Hospital staff, accustomed as they were to seeing child abuse victims, were immediately suspicious. The head of the hospital's Child Protection Team, Dr Kieran Moran, was called in and, according to Cordell, upon introduction virtually accused her of battering her child.

'He said, "What the hell did you do? What happened?" And I said, "I don't know what happened, I wasn't there. Ask the child's [Billy's] mother."'

Kieran Moran strongly denies ever accusing Cordell of hurting her child. He also denies Cordell's claim that he suggested to Tina Sharishieh that she, Madeleine Cordell, might have been suffering from postnatal depression and snapped.

It was hospital protocol to determine whether an explanation given for a child's injuries appeared consistent with the injuries sustained. If not, the hospital had a statutory obligation to call the Department of Community Services (DOCS) and where necessary, the police. Given that the only explanation for the baby's injuries was that it had been dropped on the tiles, and given the nature and extent of the injuries, only one course of action could be followed.

'There was no question of insinuating [that she did it] because I never know who has caused injury,' Moran told me.

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‘But she has got to realise that from our point of view the child is paramount, not the parent.’

Nearly five hours after Scott Cordell was brought to hospital, detectives from the Child Mistreatment Unit arrived. Cordell says she’d been pleading with the ambulance officers and hospital staff to call the police since late morning. No-one did. By the time they arrived, DOCS had already issued a ‘temporary care order’, removing the baby from Madeleine and Andrew Cordell’s custody and placing him in the care of the director-general of the department. Madeleine Cordell was under suspicion for child abuse, which she had already guessed from the looks on the faces of hospital staff. This was confirmed by some of the questions that followed from Detective Constable Robert Waugh: ‘Did you have a difficult birth with Scott? Have you ever suffered from what they term as post-natal depression?’ (Cordell said she had experienced PND for about four days with the birth of Evan and then for about 10 days with Scott.) ‘Dr Moran tells me Scott’s injuries are not consistent with Scott being dropped by Billy, a three-year-old child. Do you wish to say anything about that?’

Cordell: ‘I can’t tell you anything about that. I wasn’t there.’

GLEND A ROBINS, THE NEIGHBOUR who was standing in the park with Tina Sharishieh the morning that Scott Cordell was fatally injured, is a journalist by profession. She was tempted to write this story herself, but she is a major player in the drama and could therefore hardly provide an unbiased account. To this day she cannot look at a sleeping baby without wondering whether it’s dead or alive. She almost wishes for another emergency so that, this time, she might be able to save the child. She gave this story to me in the belief that it would be given the serious treatment it deserved and that it might also serve as a balm for the Cordell family.

On the morning after the incident, Robins was standing

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in her kitchen when she saw her husband talking to Billy Sharishieh's four-year-old friend, Curtis Browne. They were standing by the swings. She joined the conversation and later wrote down what the boy had told her. The following week she made a written statement to police giving her account of this conversation:

The first thing Curtis said to me was, 'Billy took the baby up the stairs and threw it down again.' Curtis said Billy became angry with the baby when it would not stop crying. He started to hit the baby . . . when Curtis told Billy to stop hurting the infant, Billy said: 'Not our baby, it doesn't belong here.' He said to me that after Billy had put the baby on the table, Billy had gone outside and brought in some sand which he sprinkled on the baby's face.

Tony Sharishieh, Billy's father, says it is impossible to believe Glenda Robins. He says she's a liar. I think he's mistaken. So, too, does Detective Robert Waugh, whose subsequent interviews with the two boys tend to confirm the thrust of what Curtis Browne told Robins.

Waugh arrived at the town-house complex about two and a half hours after Robins had spoken to four-year-old Browne—nearly 26 hours after Scott Cordell was taken to hospital. Up until that time, Waugh, too, suspected Madeleine Cordell of having attacked her son. His interviews with the two boys led him to a different conclusion. Although the two boys' versions differed, it seemed clear to Waugh that Billy Sharishieh had either pushed or dropped Scott Cordell down the stairs, twice. This is his sworn account of his interview with Curtis Browne:

I said, 'Hi Curtis, my name is Robert. This is Julianne. I am a policeman and Julianne is a policewoman.' He looked at both of us and grinned. I said, 'I would like to ask you some questions about what happened to the baby at Billy's place yesterday.' He said, 'Okay.' I said, 'Can we go over to Billy's place and have a

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look and see where the baby was sleeping?' In the company with [sic] Curtis and Mrs Browne [his grandmother] and Detective [Julianne] Harcombe, I returned to unit 28.

We stood in the lounge/dining room of the unit and I said, 'Can you show me where the baby was?' Curtis said, 'There' (indicating the red foam fold-down child mattress near the stereo speaker). I said, 'Can you tell what happened to the baby?' Curtis said, 'Baby was crying. Billy put baby here' (indicating corner telephone table). 'Then up here' (walking up internal stairway). Then baby fall down like this' (indicating each step and rolling his arms).

Detective Harcombe said, 'Wait, I'll get something.' Detective Harcombe obtained a doll from Tina Sharishieh. Detective Harcombe said, 'Curtis, show me how baby Scott fell down. This is baby Scott' (indicating and handing doll to Curtis). 'No, it's not baby Scott.' Harcombe said, 'No, it's a doll. Show me how the baby fell down.' Curtis then took the doll to the top of the stairs and rolled the doll down the stairs to cement corner halfway down the stairs. Curtis continued. 'Then Billy take baby up here' (indicating up the stairs). 'Baby fell down' (indicating through the bottom of the railing halfway down the staircase) 'to here' (indicating the bottom of the steps on the lower ground).

I said, 'What happened then?' Curtis said, 'He bled from here and here' (indicating his nose and eyes with both his hands). I said, 'What happened then?' Curtis said, 'Billy take baby to table, put on table.' I said, 'Then what happened?' Curtis said, 'Billy hit baby.' I said, 'How did he hit him?' Curtis said, 'Like this and like this' (indicating two open hands in front of his face). I said, 'Did the baby go outside?' Curtis said, 'No, baby can't walk.' I said, 'Did Billy take the baby outside?' Curtis said, 'No.' Curtis lost concentration and was distracted by some toys . . .

That afternoon, at 3 p.m. on May 25, the life-support system for Scott Cordell was switched off. His body was taken to Glebe Mortuary where a post-mortem was conducted. Madeleine Cordell says she was told by police and

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one of the doctors that she wasn't allowed to accompany her son to the mortuary because they had to perform more tests on him. She says she was left with the impression that it was the last time she would see him. And yet, two days later, she received a call from the mortuary asking why she hadn't been to see her son.

The following Monday, Andrew Cordell carried his son's coffin into the crematorium alone. Nearly 100 people—family, friends and colleagues of Andrew's—were there to pay their respects. A week later a letter arrived from DOCS saying the temporary care order had been lifted. It was made retrospective to the day of Scott's death, but the only thing the Cordells noticed was that DOCS had got their son's date of birth wrong.

The day after Scott's death, Detective Waugh had interviewed Billy Sharishieh in the lounge/dining room of the family town house:

I said to Billy, 'Billy, do you know baby Scott?' Billy said, 'Yeah.' I said, 'I was told by Mummy that the baby was hurt. Do you know how?' Billy said, 'No.' I said, 'Was baby Scott here?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Where was he?' He said, 'Sleeping here' (indicating a small child's red foam mattress). I said, 'Do you know how baby Scott was hurt?' He said, 'Fell down' (pointing to stairs). I said, 'Can you show us how he fell?' Billy walked up stairs to top and indicated baby fell under railing at top. Billy threw the doll over the edge of the stairs and doll dropped to the lower ground. He said, 'Fell here and bang.' I said, 'How did the baby get up the stairs?' Billy said, 'Just did.' I said, 'But how?' Billy said, 'Climb like this' (taking the doll and walking it up the stairs). I said, 'What did baby do after he fell?' Billy said, 'Went to table' (taking the doll and placing it on the table). 'Fell' (dropping the doll off table). I said, 'Billy, did you take baby upstairs?' Billy said, 'No, just walk.' I said, 'Did Curtis take the baby up the stairs?' Billy said, 'No.'

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WHAT ARE WE TALKING about here? A ghastly Elmore Leonard whodunnit? A horrible accident? A cautionary tale for parents? A mother's guilt rearing its tormented head? At least with the James Bulger case in Liverpool in 1993, we had certain uncontested—and diabolical—truths at our disposal. We knew that Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, both 10 years old at the time, lured 'Baby James' away from his mother (who could ever forget that security video?) and later battered him to death on a railway track. We knew, therefore, that there was some kind of plan, some kind of intention.

We also knew—or purported to know—that from psychiatric evidence this intent was firmly based on the two boys' capability of distinguishing right from terrible wrong—that is, that they were mentally responsible for their actions at the time they committed them. (Never mind that the judicial system didn't seek to explore why those children behaved so wickedly; what sort of homes they came from; whether, for example, violence done *to* them had manifested in violence done *by* them. Only that they were fit enough and old enough to stand before a court and be judged by adults.)

But what can we possibly make of the actions of a three-and-a-half-year-old? Double his life and he's just reached the age of reason, according to the Catholic Church. Add six-and-a-half years and only then—in England and Australia—can a child of such an age be found guilty by law of having committed an offence. A three-and-a-half-year-old is still wetting his bed, having teething problems, nightmares. In all but exceptional circumstances he's a long way from reading. He's still learning to speak. He is having temper tantrums, feeling anger, happiness, sadness, guilt, irritation, worry, panic.

A three-and-a-half-year-old is also, on occasions, inflicting pain on another toddler or baby. He's pinching, biting, jabbing, scratching. The question, then, is how premeditated—or meditated—the action is. Is there an intention to hurt and, if

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so, how do we judge that intention, if not in legal terms, then in moral terms?

Put another way: should the child be capable of an empathy that would prevent him causing harm? He couldn't possibly know there are bones at the base of a skull that could shatter. He couldn't know that death was inevitable, irreversible and universal. But could he put himself in another person's situation?

Brent Waters, professor of Psychiatry at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital and the man appointed by the Department of Community Services to assess Billy Sharishieh, says the building blocks of empathy start within the first 12 months of life and that between 12 and 24 months children are beginning to understand that other people have competing needs. By the time they're three, most would know that if they threw the cat off the roof, they'd hurt it.

This intuitive caring for another person or creature is obviously more developed in some children than others. But even with deeply empathetic children this instinct may conflict with another impulse.

'Let me just talk in the general sense,' says Waters. 'Children will do things that have unanticipated results. For instance, a child may want to make another child stop crying and their mind is focused on turning off the volume. So they do everything to turn the volume off, totally losing sight of the fact that they may have to smash the microphone to stop it transmitting.'

And that's why, according to Dr Nick Kowalenko, head of the Arndell Unit for behaviourally and emotionally disturbed children at Sydney's Macquarie Hospital, a three-and-a-half-year-old, unlike a 10-year-old, couldn't possibly be held responsible for his actions. 'Most kids, until the age of seven or eight, don't have a concept of death as final,' he says. 'Look at cartoons—you will often see people who are bashed to a pulp and often come back to life. A lot of issues of moral development don't start until 11 or 12. Parents will tell you endless stories of how one sibling nearly drowned another in the

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bath . . . or the day Johnny chased Patty with a mattock. It is not uncommon to hear tales of potential or actual harm and some kids show the scars of what their brother or sister did to them. Rivalry, envy, a desire to be specially and fully attended to by their parents and an inability to differentiate harm can produce such results.'

In other words, if you had to assess a 'normal' boy of Billy Sharishieh's age in the same way you would a developmentally disabled teenager or intellectually disabled adult—you would probably conclude that he had hugely diminished responsibilities.

I AM NOT A child psychologist so it is hard to say what benefits might have been gained from meeting Billy Sharishieh or seeing him in his family or school environment. Perhaps there would have been none, or perhaps I would have gleaned a nuance here, an idiosyncrasy there. That was not going to happen, however, given the determination of his father to pull a cordon around his family.

By all accounts Tony Sharishieh is a difficult man, although this was not the impression I gained when we met. Scared? Yes. Courteous? Overly. In denial? Almost certainly.

Glenda Robins likened him to a feudal and patriarchal figure. Family was everything, outsiders were not to be trusted; he, the father, was always right and his children were not to cry at home. 'Happy children don't cry,' she reported him as saying.

Sharishieh appeared to confirm this when he and his wife and son saw Professor Waters at the end of 1993. Waters also wrote in his report that Sharishieh had told him they didn't let their children cry and that Billy would have panicked when he saw Scott cry. (He also wrote that Sharishieh told him a game his wife had played with the children involved throwing stuffed toys down the stairs and that this might have had something to do with Billy's behaviour.)

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Sharishieh was to tell me later it was not true he didn't allow crying in his house. 'This is like asking me if you believe in the devil or are you satanic,' he said. He explained that both his children were swaddled at an early age and that if they cried, their needs were immediately attended to. 'I cry,' he said. 'My wife cries. My children cry. What do you mean? How can you not allow crying?'

THE SHARISHIEHS LEFT THEIR town-house complex four months after Scott Cordell died. They left no forwarding address or phone number. Neither the police nor the Department of Community Services knew—or are aware to this day—where they moved.

Relations between themselves and the Cordells had completely broken down in the aftermath of Scott's death. It was obvious that the Sharishiehs had come to believe their son was not at fault and had, in fact, behaved in an exemplary fashion. Scott's father, Andrew Cordell, found this an intolerable re-writing of history and vented his fury on Billy Sharishieh.

'I did get some revenge on the kid,' he told me. 'It's hard to put yourself in my place . . . but what happened was, one day, must have been three or four months later, Evan, my elder son, and I were going past [the Sharishieh house] and Billy was outside playing, wasn't he, and I thought, "Here's a chance."

'Because we'd heard that Billy didn't know exactly what he'd done. This is one of the reasons we wanted counselling [for Billy and his parents]. So I went, "Billy, come here." And he came up and I said, "Do you want to come around and play with baby Scott?" And he said, "Oh yeah," and I said, "Well you can't do that," and he said, "Why?" and I said, "Remember when you hurt him?" and he goes, "Yeah" . . . "Well, you killed him, didn't you, so now he can't play."' Andrew Cordell's mouth curls into a half-smile of . . . is it shame or a chilling

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certitude? Consumed as he is by rage and grief, he cannot possibly see what this has done to him. Or can he?

In September 1993, four months after Scott's death, Billy Sharishieh turned four and his parents threw a birthday party for him. Unfortunately, the party could be seen from the Cordell house. The tension exploded, culminating in Tony Sharishieh taking out a restraining order against Madeleine Cordell. He accused her of threatening his son, an accusation Cordell denies. Within a few days, the Sharishiehs had moved.

I WAS ABLE TO locate Tony Sharishieh through his parents who still lived around the corner from the town-house complex. After introducing myself and explaining my reasons for being there, Tony's mother made it abundantly clear she thought Madeleine Cordell was trying to shift blame. 'How is it that woman is not embarrassed, does not have shame on herself [sic]? She is the one to blame. She is the one who didn't take care of her baby.'

Her grandson is such a 'sweet boy' and this is a ghastly stain on her family's reputation, Tony's mother seemed to be saying. 'People know us. We have relatives working in Canberra for the big people [presumably politicians]. Our background is very good. My mother, she had 130 grandchildren, children and great grandchildren. None of them did a small mistake to anybody. One day I was outside and a bee bit my feet and he died. You know what I did. I was sitting there crying. I said, "It doesn't matter about my foot, a bee has died." We are the best people, but Madeleine . . .'

Before I left, she couldn't show me enough family snapshots, particularly of her beloved grandson, Billy. Yes, she promised, she would call her son, Tony, and ask him to contact me.

An hour later, back in my office, Tony Sharishieh did call. He declined to tell me where he was now living, only that he

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and his wife and two children had left the State. He said their lives had been ruined—that he had been forced to leave his job for a lesser-paid and more menial one and that he had fled not only his neighbourhood of 30 years but, more importantly, his extended family. He implored me ‘not to find anyone guilty’ and said he would fly to the end of the world to put the record straight about his son. He flew to Sydney a few days later to meet me—at his expense.

‘I don’t want to do anything that might upset Madeleine or Andrew,’ he began by saying, ‘or get me into trouble.’ He then went on to say that from their perspective, Madeleine Cordell was not well and that owing to kidney failure, had a short life expectancy. (This was news to Madeleine Cordell.) He said she’d been on medication and found it very hard to have children.

Given that there were no adult witnesses to the incident, Tony Sharishieh continued, one could only make assumptions about what happened after Madeleine Cordell left his house. He assumes Billy tried to take the crying baby upstairs because that was a quiet safe place where his mother breastfed his younger sister. Being too heavy for him, he put the baby down on the stairs and accidentally ‘knocked the baby down’. He then picked the baby up again but Scott was still crying.

‘By this time Billy is fed up,’ his father said. ‘He can’t stop this baby crying. Now because we’re talking about a child, getting upset is 10 times as much. They lose their patience very quickly . . . he probably did hit him once or twice . . . but kids do lose their temper. I am not saying it is the right thing to do but we’re talking about a three-and-half-year-old boy who should not be supervising a one-month-old baby. . .

‘So I blame Madeleine for leaving the baby by himself. I blame Tina for allowing her to come and giving her the whole run of the house. That’s the sort Tina is. She’s a country girl. She’d give you the shirt off her back.’

More importantly, he said, beseechingly, if you read the coroner’s report it says clearly that Scott was dropped and his

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son was present. End of story. Well, not quite. The coroner found that Scott fell 'probably when he was dropped or pushed' by Billy. He also said, however, that it would be wrong for anyone to claim that Billy had formed a 'firm intention' to harm Scott. The boy was simply too young for that.

And yet the question remains: should he have recognised that his actions might cause harm? Probably. And that was the major concern for Professor Waters, upon whose evidence the court placed so much reliance. Although it was extremely unlikely that Billy Sharishieh would ever commit such an act again, it was more possible with him than the average child, Waters said. That's because Billy was more dangerous than the average child.

So even if this was an impulsive act gone horribly wrong, behind it were levels of insecurity in the child that no parent could afford to ignore. Thus the need for counselling.

THE COMMUNITY IN WHICH the Cordell and Sharishieh families lived has never been the same since May 1993. Assumptions that were made about safety and security were horribly dispelled. Neighbour turned against neighbour depending on whose version of events they chose to believe. Social workers, doctors and the coroner himself said that in all their years of witnessing violence against children, they'd never encountered an incident in which the probable culprit was a child so young.

Even Detective Robert Waugh from the Child Mistreatment Unit was more than usually troubled.

'When this case comes to mind it gives me a terrible feeling,' he told me. 'Maybe it was because I was at the hospital when the baby died and I was asked to take it to the morgue . . . But at the time of the coroner's inquest I had a one-month-old child myself and a three-year-old boy. So here I am making analogies, coming to terms with my own family

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life and questioning myself about the way I conduct myself around the home. The people I was working with, the female detectives, they had a lot of difficulties with it, too. They found it terribly upsetting.'

The Cordell family is still filled with heartache and rage. Their youngest child, Jonathon, arrived, unplanned, in September 1994, three days before the inquest began. He is obviously too young to understand the circumstances into which he was born.

Evan Cordell was five years old when his brother died and now sees a counsellor once a week. For about three months every year for the past three years he has withdrawn from the world. He doesn't talk. He barely eats and he cries readily. At these times his mother feels she's lost two sons.

She worries, too, about her husband. It doesn't take much probing beneath the brio to glimpse the powder keg inside Andrew Cordell. 'As the psych [psychologist] said, hey, I might bury it [the anger] deep, and I've still got a lot of it buried, but one day it will snap and come out and in what form nobody will ever know until that time. It may be a case of I might just have a hard day at work and sit down under a bridge and cry or I might stumble across Tony [Sharishieh] in a toy store and just pick up a baseball bat and start beating the shit out of him. Nobody will know until it happens.'

Madeleine Cordell throws up every morning. What sustains her is obviously her family, but also a desire for what she sees as justice. Had their child been savaged by a pit bull terrier, she says, the owner could have been charged with manslaughter and the dog put down. Instead, they got a coronial inquest recommending 18 months' counselling for a family that felt no guilt, nor saw any need for counselling. In the past three years the Sharishiehs have been to exactly two sessions. Tony insists this is because they had to leave the State in a hurry. That is not the view within the Department of Community Services.

Madeleine Cordell believes the recommendations of the

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Coroner's Court are legally binding. They are not. DOCS is only able to work with the Sharishieh family through 'influence and persuasion' and until now have been able to contact them only through Tony Sharishieh's parents. They cannot force the family into counselling, nor does Professor Brent Waters believe it constructive to do so.

'My guess is that to derail family life because of State intervention is probably more likely to be harmful than leaving them alone,' he says.

FROM MADELEINE AND ANDREW Cordell's point of view, it is an obscenity to even compare the Sharishieh family's grief with their own. It is they who lost their child in the most senseless way. It is they who seek justice. It is she who was suspected of killing her son. And yet even though the Sharishiehs may have chosen to put the most innocent spin on the events of May 24, 1993—which parent wouldn't, you might ask—they, too, feel shipwrecked. The day after Scott Cordell died, Glenda Robins saw Tina Sharishieh at her home. Apart from Madeleine Cordell, Robins had never seen another person in so much pain.

Tony Sharishieh tells me he and his wife have cried many times over the loss of Scott. He says now, through fresh tears: 'If I could chop my right arm to bring the baby back, I'd do it. Right and left arm. I would be paralysed for that kid. I have never felt so helpless in my whole life, but there is nothing we can do to bring him back.'

As for his own son, Sharishieh says this article is crucial to how he might view himself years from now. 'I wouldn't like to read something saying that when I was a kid, I killed a baby. I wouldn't feel good. It would destroy me. It might stop me from becoming what I might become.'

So as Tony Sharishieh returns to his exile, the air between us becomes suffused with dread. If he tries to bury this secret in silence or denial, I ask myself, will it stay forever in the pit, or

Somebody Save Me

will there be seepage? If Billy Sharishieh learns in years to come that he might have been responsible for the death of a baby, will he, as his father fears, come to see this as the central reference point in his life? Could it stop him becoming what he might become?

There are other questions, too, like, who is the ultimate victim here? Scott Cordell? His mother? His father? His brother? Or is it Billy Sharishieh, for whom knowledge might become a prison?

Could Billy hurt again? Should his teachers know what happened three years ago? What about the parents of his classmates, or his neighbours? Would this make him a pariah? Could another child have done this in the same circumstances? Could mine?

I hear my children skylarking next door. There are basic assumptions I derive from those sounds. They relate to the community I live in and the neighbours I like to think I know. One question gnaws at me more now than ever: are those assumptions misplaced?

** To protect their identities the names of all family members in this story have been changed.*