Billison O. Hainsley

Fight on the Playground

CHILDREN'S LAUGHTER DISTRACTED ME FROM DARK THOUGHTS. I COULDN'T quite see them yet — their squeals and shouts were coming from across the street, a few blocks down the road, from an asphalt lot ringed with droopy chain-link fencing. They seemed oblivious to the slow line of cars on the narrow lanes outside the lot, the afternoon traffic I was stuck in. Waiting for the traffic to move, I listened to them, and despite Miss Ricketts' demand that I sell more policies or else, I smiled a little.

I wondered why I hadn't heard them before today, or noticed the lot. Since joining the company, almost a year now, I drove this shortcut several times a day, almost daily. The route shaved twenty minutes or so off the journey from the noisy markets and dingy wholesales downtown to the gleaming towers, chic boutiques, and shopping malls uptown. It passed through the inner city, past derelict buildings, rusty zinc fences and rickety wooden shacks. I realized that like everyone else, I was usually speeding through, eager to make it to my next prospect but also to shorten my stay in this no man's land, my windows up, my radio tuned to the grumpy talk-show host. I'd never encountered traffic along the shortcut before. I couldn't remember when I'd turned off the radio and AC and wound down the windows, or when my thoughts had wandered. I remembered remembering my glare at Miss Ricketts' scrawny back as she walked away from my desk, her high heels clicking, people resuming conversations or looking away. I remembered the words I'd wanted to fling at her like stones.

I could just glimpse the children now. Their clothes looked like hand-me-downs, mismatched but not too worn, clean enough to tell me none of these children begged. They were skipping, singing, running; some throwing around an old tennis ball. I could picture their mothers: neon hairstyles; faces sullen like Nicole's; bodies even fatter than hers and bulging out of snug midriffs and tights without grace or shame. Their laughter would be rare and coarse, their anger swift and brutal. They always quarrelled with their men too, I'd bet.

No men were about. They usually were this time of day, if I remembered correctly. They'd be leaning against the street lamp poles or graffiti'd walls; sitting on grimy concrete fences; or huddled in the mouths of alleys, murmuring to each other and smoking. Some were wiry and surly, with boisterous talk or harsh laughter which made drivers speed up and keep their gazes forward. Some

would be playing dominoes. A few would sit on the curb or on tall wooden stools before dim bars, and seem listless or dazed, waiting for day to end.

I glanced at the dashboard clock. I hadn't gone yet to pay for the cylinder of gas I'd ordered that morning. If I didn't want to quarrel with Nicole, I'd have to hurry with my next prospects and race back to the gas place. Forget lunch. Ahead of my car, horns were blowing. The line was moving too slowly, and it seemed now that the person at the front, up at the intersection with the main road, was afraid to push out of the lane. I'd bet it was a woman.

I was about to join in the chorus, but on the playground a tall brawny boy with ashy black skin, maybe eleven years old, his face in a fierce scowl, stomped over to another boy about the same age. The second boy was short, with a nearly-bald head and a shiny navel protruding like a pout. The first boy shoved him — viciously, as if he wanted to crush the short boy's chest. The short boy tottered. His flailing hand brushed his attacker's neck. The tall boy's scowl turned murderous. He shoved the short boy again. The short boy fell. His attacker fell on him, fists falling and rising like hammers.

"Fight!"

The children ran and circled the boys. Shouts rose, but also — from some who watched, mute — an uneasy silence. The boys were rolling around, tears and mucus streaming down the short boy's face. He waved his hands about wildly. I glimpsed blood.

Horns were blowing. I blew mine too. But I realized they were for the driver up at the intersection, who still hadn't moved her car out onto the main road. The boy screamed. I looked around and up and down the street, hoping to see someone, anyone, tell them run into the lot grab the bully throw him into the fence — but there was nobody, nobody open my door, go out there myself? Nobody at all

A girl ran onto the playground.

She was about the boys' age, nearly as tall as the bully, but skinny. Her face was that shade of black which in all lighting seems to gleam. On either side of her head, a twirled pigtail stuck out behind her like a goat's horn. The children hurried out of her way.

She grabbed the bully's shoulders and hauled him off his victim. His bottom dragged along the ground, his arms windmilling, his furious face turning to look behind him, then with a scramble of heels and knees he clambered to his feet and faced her. Her face seemed fixed in a taut grimness. Her fists were rigid by her side, her legs apart like a gunslinger.

The bully stepped towards her; she towards him. They glared at each other, their faces almost touching, and he was saying something, and she continued to glare at him, and it seemed at any second he would shove her, or she slap him — though neither wanted it to happen, but if the other persisted for just one more second, then God help them, it would.

Horns were blowing. No cars were before me — the woman at the intersection had obviously

found some courage. "Drive up yu bumboclaat car!" someone shouted. I stepped on the gas, glancing in my mirrors. On the playground, the bully and the grim-faced girl — glaring at each other — stood still.

I visited my prospects — a hairdresser in glittery bangles and rings; a fat, giggly bank clerk with a little one on the way; and an attorney with a weakness for garish silk ties. They listened and asked the usual, but I knew our rates weren't the best. I knew our company had the least catchy ads, the least famous CEO, and the least renowned head office. They knew too. But while I spoke and they listened politely, I wondered if the grim-faced girl had punched down the bully. Or if she had turned away from him, went over to the short boy, picked him up, dusted him off, then took him back to his grandmother. (I had a feeling the boy didn't live with his mother — the bully had been too fearless. Maybe she lived overseas.) I imagined his grandmother crying at his swollen face and bloody nose; the girl, grim-faced again, about to stalk back to the playground; the grandmother holding the girl's elbow, pleading for the bully's life.

I raced to the gas place, remembering fights in my school days. Boys — and girls, sometimes — punching, slapping, scratching each other, dust swirling around their feet, faces contorted in outrage or rage, with a circle of children noisy around the tussle, some just staring, before an older student or teacher dragged the opponents apart. I remembered bullies, too. I was fortunate: they only asked me for lunch money. I'd learned to save money just for their requests. Others were teased or slapped, or kicked — and for the few who were different, the very gawky, the very stupid, there was the occasional beating.

One I never forgot: a skinny, big-eared boy with effeminate wrists. They shouted names at him and chased him behind the cafeteria, where he scurried behind rusty garbage pans. They pulled him out, dragging him through the grass, and began kicking him. He rolled himself into a foetal ball and screamed obscene things. The ring of us gapers grew —

"No, sar, it too late," said the girl behind the mesh-grill. Slack-jawed and sleepy-eyed, with stubby plaits, she glared at me resentfully. I blinked at her affronted tone; my face grew warm. I leaned against the chipped bagasse counter and moved closer to the grill, but before I could say anything ("give me a bligh no, nice girl?") the girl shook her head.

"Them can't deliver it today again." Her hand hovered over the cash register's open drawer, clenching the money I'd given her. Underneath my palms the counter felt oily, as if with the sweat of those who begged and failed. Behind me, the people in line shuffled; someone chuupsed.

"Then him never read the sign?" an old woman said.

"You still want the gas?" the girl asked.

I nodded, finally. The girl scowled at the cash register and counted out my change in a blur of dollar bills.

I made it back to my car. I got in and glanced at the dashboard clock. If I went back to the office, by the time I got there everyone would have left. Nicole would be home.

I decided to go back to the office.

Homeward traffic had begun, lines of cars and buses fed by lines of cars and buses, and in the cars and buses or at the bus stops or on the sidewalks filling with people, if people weren't talking then their faces looked spent or grave. The long line of cars heading back to the financial district kept slowing to a stop, making me tired. I was hungry but I didn't feel like eating. Not without Nicole. I tried to let the faces distract me. At the bus stop, that man in the hard hat, merino and scruffy brown jeans: was he worrying about dinner? Standing a little away from him, as if she'd moved upwind, a woman with natural hair and a plain knee-long dress: was she wondering if anyone was hiring? In a gleaming Galant gliding by, windows up, a couple chuckling and chatting: would they still be talking to each other by dinner time?

The car ahead of me moved off and mine crept forward. Suddenly a horn blew — a grey station wagon zipped in front of me I braked I cussed. A route taxi. I blew my horn. Most of the taxi's body stuck out to the oncoming traffic; cars approaching, horns blowing, slowed to go around. At the back window, an old man in a black tam glanced at me. My car almost touched the door he sat at, but his wrinkled face showed no expression. His red-eyed gaze seemed lifeless. The taxi driver thrust his beefy arm out his window and as if flicking flies away waved a filthy chamois at the oncoming cars and horns. I blew my horn. *Why bother?* the old man's eyes seemed to ask. *Why them have to behave like that?* I replied with my glare. The old man looked away.

The car before the taxi edged forward and the taxi pulled into the line. The driver perched his arm at his window, as if showing off his burly triceps. I could believe a machete was underneath his seat — a greyish blade as long as his arm with sinister stains. The line of cars crawled forward; the taxi too, as if it had always been in line. I shook my head.

I slowed down to turn into the parking lot. The taxi drove on. I wondered when my wishes for the driver would be granted.

The office was just a six-storey beige and yellow building with sharp corners, a low-roofed portico and narrow tinted windows, on a crumbly asphalt lot not much longer or wider than the building and enclosed by lolling purple bougainvillea and a taut chain-link fence. But the parking lot entrance so close to the portico, the portico's roof so near to visitors' head-tops, and the side walls so close to the flowers and fence, the building always seemed hemmed in to me, like a tall man forced to crouch and keep his head bowed and his arms pressed tightly against his ribs. A few cars were in the parking lot. At the far end, Merriweather's Pajero glistened as if it'd just been washed and waxed. He'd bought it three months ago, immediately after making MDRT. Glancing at it, I stepped under

the portico, and for a moment — maybe because I was hungry — the tall man seemed about to topple forward head first onto me.

In the lobby, the security guard's desk was empty. I got into the elevator and pushed the third-floor button. Outside the elevator the guard suddenly walked by, buckling her belt. For some reason she wore dark glasses: she forgot them when she came in for her shift, maybe. She looked towards me and I nodded. She turned away, as if I wasn't there.

I sat at my desk, phone at my ear, listening to voice-mail. The Accounts Department had left several messages: some of my clients' policies had lapsed. Around the office, dour cleaning women mopped underneath and around unpeopled desks. Every now and then, their mop sticks knocked against the cabinets and credenzas. Nicole hadn't called.

"I thought you'd gone," said Merriweather's belly-deep voice behind me.

I swivelled my chair towards him. Even at this time of the day he was the model salesman — his fat, smug face like it had never been out in the sun; his silk tie just so down his chest and over his paunch, like an expensive paisley bib; his shirt and trousers somehow still crisp. Dark, curly hairs poked out of his cuff like weeds around his gold watch. Up on the wall behind him was his photograph in a shiny frame, the champion agent again last quarter.

"Miss Ricketts want meet with us tomorrow," he said.

It didn't help that Miss Ricketts had left a note on my desk saying the same thing or that I heard Merriweather's effort to keep his voice from sounding an ominous schoolboy tone that someone was going to get a beating. I kept the phone at my ear and pointed to it. Merriweather nodded, then waved and walked on. In my first months, we'd had a friendly rivalry, the reigning champion and the promising newcomer. We no longer played that game. I hung up the phone.

It'd been the same at the other places — Paper Processors; Stationery and Office Supplies; the Novelties, Oddities and Gimmicks Office; Gimmick Innovations Traders — smirking rivals, bosses telling me sell more sell more be more persuasive be more aggressive. It's your merchandise! I'd wanted to yell at them. I never waited for Personnel to call — once I'd even stayed home a few weeks until something came along. But those were different days. The economy had been strong. Nicole had understood then —

"Yu soon finish, sar?"

Eyes down as if she hadn't just spoken, the cleaning woman mopped the aisle, her gnarled arms not much fatter than her mop stick. She glanced at me askance, almost abashed, as if she'd violated her profession's code of ethics.

"Just one more call," I said, as if I needed her permission. Pushing her mop, she moved away.

I picked up the phone, then dialled our number. On the fifth ring Nicole answered. She sounded

as if she'd been laughing.

"Hi, Nicky." Her interrupted laughter gave me sudden hope: "The gas came?"

Her anger was immediate. "You went and paid for it?"

"They said it was too late, but I was hoping…" My hope died. "You want me bring dinner?"

"I don't want you do anything."

"You want chicken?"

"Don't worry 'bout me. Me alright." She hung up.

The cleaning woman, far on the other side of the office pushing her mop, averted her eyes.

The traffic lights changed, but cars which had sneaked past the amber now blocked the four-way intersection. Their drivers stared straight ahead, as if praying the traffic would creep forward just enough for them to inch out of the way, out of the reach of accusing glances. Or maybe they stared ahead, indifferent to those like me waiting for them to move. Horns blew.

I wondered when it had all begun. The quarrel forever awaiting volleys and ammunition, which when no salvos were fired became a stilted peace. Was it really when our friends started getting promotions? Or when this or that couple said they could afford to have children now or move to a better neighbourhood or buy a new house new furniture a new car things I couldn't do anymore they go out every weekend you going let them fire you again why you not in the mood anymore you think I too fat you like someone else don't leave the job you soon find something better why you don't want go out anymore is because of me you just want watch TV all the time how you forget fi pay the bill again don't let them fire you again my salary can't keep the two of us again you'd rather go out with you man friend them 'stead of me you have woman outside how you forget fi order the gas I can't depend on you don't let them fire you again you know I tired of it —

"Beg yu ten dollars, big man?"

The boy was just tall enough to peer into my car. His dirty striped shirt was torn at the collar, and mud or grime streaked his hair and face. I felt as tired and hungry as he looked. His outstretched palm leaned to one side, almost mirroring the angle of his head, which he'd slanted too as if to intensify his plea. His gaze was aimed at my change tray. But nothing was there. I looked away.

"Please, sar?"

The traffic lights were still red. I kept my gaze forward. Nothing happening again in the economy, Miss Ricketts. Nobody buying policies again, Miss Ricketts. We need new products, Miss Ricketts.

There was movement at my window. The boy was gone. The evening light slunk back into my car, tinged reddish-pink by the approaching sunset. The traffic lights changed. The intersection clear, the traffic lurched forward. I couldn't see the boy in my mirror. Behind me, horns blew.

Nicole's old Corolla was in the garage, and her co-worker Dawn's station wagon tilted on the curb. I put my car in neutral and came out and went to the gate. A previous tenant had backed her car into it accidentally; it bulged out to the street now, as if pregnant, the warped white rails peeling and rusty, the hinges twisted. I winced at its opening whine. I remembered I'd promised Nicole I'd call the landlord again and get him to fix and repaint it. The hibiscus hedge, unkempt behind the dirty concrete fence, rustled in an abrupt breeze. A snatch of voices came from one house; the bassy thump of dancehall music from another; and television evening news further away. I stood for a while and looked up the pothole-pocked street: squat flat-roofed houses close together; cars in narrow driveways shaded by mango or almond trees on tiny front lawns; small grilled verandahs dimmer than the evening and, from grilled louvre windows, wan light which would be little brighter when it got darker. In the distance a few street lamps already cast their murky orange light.

Merriweather would never live here, I knew. Neither would Miss Ricketts. Laughter burst from the house. Nicole and Dawn were still laughing when I opened the door. Dawn was in the sofa, bending over; her linen skirt hiking up her skinny, stockinged legs; her ostrich-like face laugh-contorted, seeming even more ostrich-like with her new crew-cut hairstyle. Dawn and her husband had bought an apartment in the hills, Nicole had told me; a nice place.

Nicole was in the recliner, its foot-rest raised, her plump legs spread like a market woman's, her skirt and inner thighs a tunnel which in our earlier days perhaps in a better mood I would have peeped down like a mischievous school-boy. I'd become accustomed to her scowl — her lips, cheeks and chin appearing tough and unyielding; her brown eyes flickering between disgusted glares and angry glances — but her hazel-dyed hair was bundled now on top of her head in a hasty after-work bun, showing me a face I hadn't seen in a long time — lips, chin and cheeks looking supple and relaxed, softened by a broad smile; her eyes amused by some particularly naughty punch-line. She glanced at me and for a moment the naughtiness slipped. But then it returned; she turned back to Dawn and waved at my "Good evening" as if her bulky breasts restricted the motion of her arm. The flesh-folds at her elbow jiggled like they did when I played with them when we used to cuddle before the television.

Later for me, then. I headed to the bedroom. Her handbag and briefcase stood on her side of the still made bed — leather territory-markers with brass-tipped edges. Her bedside lamp was on; my side of the bed and room dim. I changed my clothes, then lay down and closed my eyes. Outside, they went on talking and laughing.

After a while, Dawn called out goodbye, and Nicole called out to me that Dawn was saying goodbye. "Goodbye, Dawn," I said, eyes still closed. Their giggles moved away, then — from outside — the gate rattling; an engine coughing and sputtering then revving; almost-smooth tyres buffing asphalt; Nicole's *later*, a car horn, then silence.

Then, footfalls, heavy on the terrazzo floor. Nicole was in the bedroom. I realized I'd flinched.

But she didn't even look at me, it seemed. A drawer opened then closed; the closet-hinges squeaked; a zipper; the rustle of garments; hangers clattering. Footfalls out the bedroom. Pans, plates and glasses clanging in the kitchen.

I opened my eyes. I remembered restless sleep, opening my eyes not seeing Nicole's scowling face closing my eyes guilty relief darkness. Nicole's lamp was still on. The earlier dimness had deepened into night. Blue light from the living room TV flickered on the wall, and I could hear the TV's muffled laughter. I was hungry. I didn't hear Nicole. I lifted my head and listened.

Suddenly I wondered —

— but beside me, Nicole's handbag and briefcase shook when I sat up. The briefcase almost fell.

The kitchen doorway spilled fluorescent light into the blue-dark living room, an oblong shaft along the floor and up the wall to near where the wall became the popcorn ceiling. On the television, a housewife in a sunny kitchen held up a yellow bottle of dishwashing liquid and flashed a starchy smile. The volume was low. Nicole was sitting in the sofa, her back straight, not slumped as usual. From behind I couldn't be sure, but her arms appeared to be crossed. Her shoulders were like hills rising from the horizon of the sofa's spine. I didn't know how to begin.

"What you watching, Nicky?" I said finally.

She turned her head, her face in profile. In the blueness I couldn't tell if she was scowling. I remembered nights, so long ago it seemed, before hard times made her so plump and so sullen. Our sweaty, naked bodies cooling in our embrace, I would play with her breasts (they weren't so heavy then) and smile. Nicole would close her eyes and look contented, as if I'd done what I was supposed to do — took out the garbage, locked up the house, made her feel like a woman.

Nicole turned away from me and back to the television. "Some movie soon start."

She'd answered. I crossed my arms and leaned back against the wall.

"Nicky, I'm sorry about the gas. I didn't make it to the place in time…"

"No bother with it."

"I really tried, Nicky…"

"Me say no bother with it."

"Nicky, I'm sorry…"

"You no hear me say no bother with it? I went and I paid for the gas. You hear me? I paid for it."

When I didn't answer, she turned back to me. "What? You wrong me?"

— go get the gas receipt shove it in her fat face —

"You couldn't ask for time?"

— shove it in her mouth down her throat —

"I can't bother. You hear me? I can't bother."

— shut up her mouth stuff it up so she couldn't talk —

"I tired of it."

— but she wouldn't stop would she even if I showed her she wouldn't stop why didn't I go earlier see she had to go herself is she one doing everything she couldn't depend on me she couldn't depend on any man shut up Nicole shut up you chat too much I went to the damned place see see I went

I went into the kitchen. A breeze through the window brushed my warm face and lingered; cool, almost moist on my cheek. On the stove, congealed tomato-red gravy striped the Dutch pot: bully beef. Rice poked out from under the dented lid on the little black pot.

I didn't feel like eating.

Behind me in the living room, music blared and voices argued. Nicole was quiet.

I turned on the burners and took a plate from the dish drainer. A small cockroach scurried underneath the rusty skirting of the fridge; another squeezed itself into a crack on the Formica counter. I washed a glass and poured myself some orange juice. When the bully beef gravy was bubbling and the rice felt warm to my palm, I spooned some from both into the plate and placed it then the glass on a tray.

I sat in the sofa, tray in my lap. Nicole looked over at the tray, then back at the television. She waved the remote before her and the volume rose.

I wasn't really watching. Nicole was quiet. I ate what I could.

I got up and took my tray back to the kitchen. I scraped what I didn't eat into the garbage. I washed the things and put them away, then went back to the living room. I stood beside the sofa, looking at the television. I wasn't really watching. The ring of us gapers grew. No one moved to help. The bullies kicked the effeminate boy. Two girls began crying, one hugging the other, and teachers came, swinging leather straps. The bullies scattered, but were chased and grabbed and beaten. The effeminate boy, helped up by a teacher, watched, crying, and yet not watching, as if like me he wasn't sure what he was feeling anymore.