

The Playground Court



Each recess the Playground Lady stood in the exact center of the playground. She was a wide, solidly packed woman with squinty eyes and round red cheeks. Her arms remained clasped behind her, and a silver whistle was always plugged between her thick wet lips.

This whistle was no ordinary whistle. It was the one known throughout W. T. Melon Elementary School as the Bad-News Whistle. Any student who heard it knew bad news soon followed.

Treeeeeeeeeeep! the Bad-News Whistle would blast. “Don’t kick the red balls!” the Playground Lady shouted. “Don’t stand on the swing! Don’t throw sand!”

Treeeeeeeeeeep! “Keep off the fence! Keep out of

the mud! Keep your hands to yourselves!” she bel-
lowed.

Treeeeeeeeeep! “Share the jump ropes. Share the
tetherball! Share the tire swing!”

No one liked to hear the Bad-News Whistle
blow.

The person for whom the Bad-News Whistle blew
the most was a third-grader named Richard. Richard
was the terror of the W. T. Melon playground. Every
recess he would charge out of the school and climb
straight to the top of the jungle gym. Shaking a beefy
arm in the air, he would announce, “I’m the King of
the Playground. And anyone who doesn’t know it,
prepare for punishment.”

Soon the Bad-News Whistle would start to blow.

Treeeeeeeeeep! “Richard! Give Sherwood back his
shirt!”

Treeeeeeeeeep! “Richard, untie Pamela’s pigtails
from the fence.”

Treeeeeeeeeep! Treeeeeeeeeep! Treeeeeeeeeep! The
Playground Lady wore herself out blowing her
whistle at Richard.

But one morning at recess this all changed. The
recess started in the usual joyous, noisy way. The
third-graders charged to the soccer field, the second-
graders raced for the four-square courts, and the
first-graders headed toward the equipment area.

Richard, the lone third-grader not on the grass,
took his position at the top of the jungle gym.

“I am the King of the Playground,” he pro-



claimed. "And anyone who doesn't know it, prepare for punishment."

Then he scanned the playground for his first victim.

Near a tetherball pole a first-grade girl was jumping rope. Rung by rung, Richard climbed down the jungle gym to the rubber mat and approached her. "Who's the King of the Playground?" he asked.

The girl's eyes grew wide with terror. Her chin quivered as she peeped, "The principal? My teacher?"

"Guess again, peewee," said Richard.

The little girl trembled so hard her pigtails wobbled like noodles. "The president?" she squeaked. "God, maybe?"

"Wrong!" said Richard. "*I* am King of the Playground." And he tied the girl to the tetherball pole with her jump rope.

Next he stomped up to a first-grade boy climbing the slide ladder. "Who's the King of the Playground?" Richard growled.

The boy gripped the ladder tightly. "I-I-I don't know," he stuttered. "I-I-I don't know."

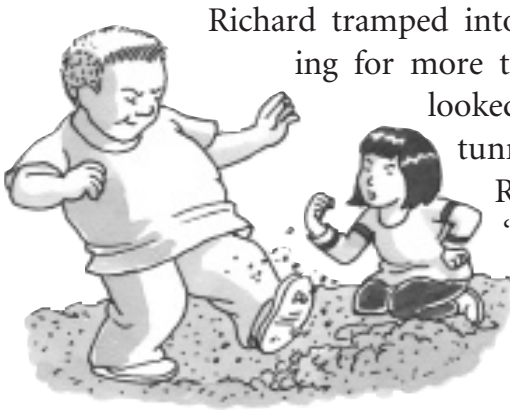
"That's too bad, runt," said Richard. And he pulled the little boy's pants down to his knees. There he stood shivering, his white underpants gleaming in the morning sun.

“Ha, ha, haaaa!” Richard howled. “I am King of the Playground. I am. I am!”

For the next ten minutes Richard prowled the playground proving his might. He tied the swing chains in knots so no one could swing. He snatched a red ball from the four-square court and tossed it on the roof. He stomped to the bicycle stand and knocked over the row of bikes. Then he grabbed the smallest first-grader by the ankles and shook him upside down until his lunch money fell from his pockets.

“Who’s the King of the Playground?” the bully demanded.

“Yoo-o-o ar-r-r,” said the boy. “Yoo-o-o ar-r-r-r.”



Richard tramped into the sandbox looking for more trouble. A brave girl looked up from her sand tunnel. “You’re mean, Richard,” she said. “You should follow the playground rules. That’s what they’re for.”

Richard flattened the girl’s tunnel. “Playground rules aren’t for me, squirt. I rule the playground.”

Treeeeeeeeeeep! When the Bad-News Whistle blew this time, it was for the worst news of all.

“Recess is over!” shouted the Playground Lady. “Let’s get back to work!”

The students charged into the school as they had charged out of it—all but Richard. Never one to hurry back to class, he returned to his perch at the top of the jungle gym. He wished to be the last one off the playground.

But the instant Richard was alone, a tremendous *Bang! Bang! Bang!* shook the playground. One end of the teeter-totter had raised and lowered itself three times, striking the asphalt like a hammer.

What happened next happened so fast that before Richard knew what was happening he found himself lying on the rubber mat, face first. The jungle gym had wobbled and tossed him off.

He rose to his feet, fists raised. “Who did that? I’ll flatten you like a blackboard. I’ll beat you into chalk dust.” But the only thing there to hit was the jungle gym, standing as black and straight as before.

Bump! Something swatted Richard’s bottom. He spun around and saw a swing swaying in the swing set.

“Where are you?” he snarled. “No one touches me and gets away with it.”

Richard took two steps backward and tripped over the slide.

“How’d that get here?” he said, rubbing his bottom. “The slide was over there. Now it’s here.”

This time when Richard rose off the mat, he heard sounds—squeaking, rattling, and scraping like metal against asphalt.

“That’s creepy,” he said under his breath. “The



tetherball is moving closer to the tire swing. The tire swing is moving closer to the monkey bars and slide. And they're all moving closer to me."

Squeak! Rattle! Scrape! Closer and closer the playground equipment came until it surrounded Richard like players in a dodgeball game.

Richard turned in circles. "Hey, what's going on? This must be some sort of special effect, like in the movies. But it all looks so real. Sorry I can't stay to see more. I must get back to class."

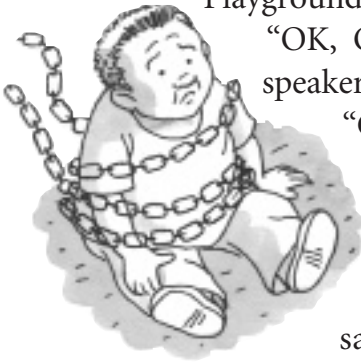
The instant he stepped toward the school—*thunk!*—the slide shot out like a boot and kicked

him toward the swing set. There chains from two swings wrapped around him and held him fast.

Richard knelt on the rubber mat like a prisoner in a dungeon. The chains jangled as he tried to free himself.

“Hey, let me go. Let me go,” he cried. “No fair. You’re bigger than I am.”

At that instant, a high, sharp voice called from inside the tire swing. “Hear ye, hear ye! The Playground Court is now in session.”



“OK, OK, OK,” said an invisible speaker on the four-square court.

“Geez, can’t I get any rest around here?”

Richard shook his chains some more. “Who’s saying those things?” he said. “What Playground Court are you talking about?”

Bang! Bang! Bang! Again the teeter-totter pounded the asphalt.

“The next case is Richard versus The Playground,” the tire-swing voice stated. “Judge Jungle Gym presiding.”

At this point, the tire swing and tetherball pole slid apart. Walking like a giant beetle, the jungle gym waddled into the circle. The tall black structure towered over Richard. It spoke in a deep voice of authority.

“The playground will now come to order. At this

trial I will tolerate no monkeyshines from the monkey bars or back talk from the backstop. Will the prosecution approach the bench?”

“Objection, Your Honor!” cried a wooden bench by the sandbox. “I don’t want anyone approaching me!”

The slide moved into the circle. “Your Honor, Richard has been accused of a terrible playground crime—*bullying!*”

“He throws things at little kids instead of throwing them at me,” declared the basketball hoop.

“He pushes first-graders when he should be pushing my swings,” the swing set sang out.

“He kicks bottoms instead of balls,” called a yellow ball by the kickball wall.

Judge Gym turned. “Do any more witnesses wish to take the stand?”

“I don’t wish to be taken anywhere, but I *am* a witness,” the bicycle stand answered. “I’ve watched Richard knock little kids off bikes dozens of times.”

Loud murmurs and cries of agreement rose from all the playground equipment.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Order in the court!” Judge Gym called out.

“I’m innocent. I wasn’t doing anything,” the four-square court complained. “I was just lying here.”

The jungle gym slid closer to Richard. “Young man, you heard the charges. How do you plead?”

“Let me go, let me go,” the boy begged.

“What does the defense have to say about these

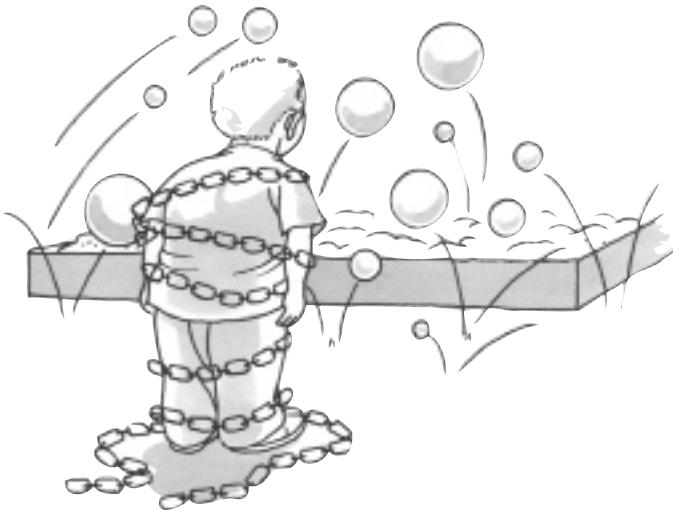
bullying complaints?” asked the judge.

At this point the chain-link fence behind Richard rattled. Out of the bar on the bottom came a high, shaky voice. “Your Honor, de fence says de boy can’t help being a bully. He has a defect called Bullying Addiction Disorder, B.A.D. for short. In all my years on de bar I’ve never defended such a delightful boy. De fence rests its case.”

Richard looked toward the sky. “I’m doomed,” he muttered.

“The Playground Court will now take a short recess,” said Judge Gym. “Will the jury proceed to its box?”

At that moment, twelve balls lying about the asphalt started to bounce. Red rubber balls, yellow balls, tennis balls, basketballs, and white volleyballs bounded toward the sandbox by the swings. The



dozen balls of different colors and sizes lined up on the side of the box facing Richard.

The boy shook his head. “This *must* be some sort of special effect,” he said. “Someone must have a remote control close by, making this all happen.”

“Ball jury, you have heard the testimony,” Judge Gym said. “How do you find Richard?”

Richard stared at the twelve balls. He presented them with his most innocent grin.

The largest red ball rolled forward. “Your Honor,” it said, “we the jury find the defendant, Richard, guilty of playground bullying.”

Shouts and cheers erupted around the playground. The tire swing spun. The slide rolled up and out like a birthday party noisemaker. Every pole swayed and every bar wobbled.

Bang! Bang! Bang! went the teeter-totter.

“Order!” Judge Gym called out. “Order in the court.” The jungle gym turned toward Richard. “Young man, you heard the verdict. Please stand to receive your sentence.”

Richard rose to his feet. “My ... my sentence?” he stuttered. “You mean, you’re going to throw me behind bars or something?”

The jungle gym spoke solemnly. “I, Judge Gym, hereby sentence Richard to say one sentence to the first-graders: I’m sorry.”

Richard’s eyes widened. “What? You mean you want me to apologize? To the little kids? You must be kidding. That sentence would be torture.”

Squeak! Rattle! Scrape! The tetherball, monkey bars, tire swing, and slide moved closer to Richard.

“OK, OK, I’ll say I’m sorry,” he said. “Just let me out of here.”

“And if you ever start bullying again—” Judge Gym continued.

“—we’ll be watching,” the rest of the equipment chorused.

“This court is adjourned!” the four-square court announced. “Finally!”

The instant the swings released their hold, Richard peeled across the asphalt toward the school.

“Hang in there, pal,” shouted the hanging rings.

“Catch ya next recess, Richard,” the basketball hoop called out.

“Monkey see, monkey do,” chattered the monkey bars.

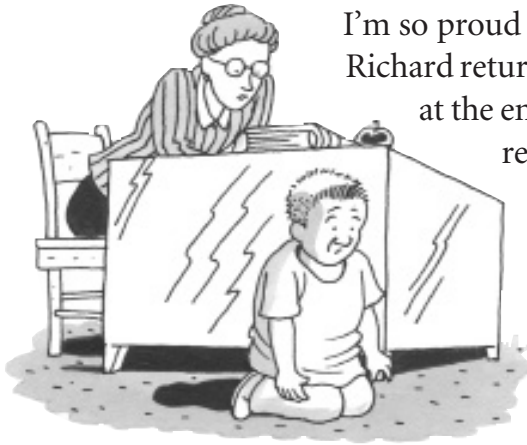
“Keep your chin up, Richard,” chimed the chin-up bar.

Never had Richard been so glad to be back in the school. He barged into the first-grade classroom and dropped to his knees.

“I’m sorry. Please forgive me, little guys,” he begged. “I apologize for everything I’ve ever done to you at any recess. Let’s be pals. My bullying days are over.”

The first-graders looked at each other and giggled. Richard did look silly, kneeling there by the teacher’s desk.

Miss Hap, the first-grade teacher, smiled. “Richie,



I'm so proud of you," she said. Richard returned to the classroom at the end of the hall. During reading he kept peering out the window. If he craned his neck to the left he could see the slide, tire swing, and jungle gym, now standing in their regular spots on the asphalt.

He turned toward Mimi, sitting behind him. "Did you notice anything unusual on the playground after the last recess?" he asked.

"Only you," she replied. "You're sure unusual."

"Just as I thought," Richard said to himself. "There's no such thing as a Playground Court or Judge Jungle Gym. It was all some sort of special effect."

Nevertheless, the following recess and every recess after that, Richard played far away from the equipment area. And not once, for the rest of the school year, did the Bad-News Whistle blow for him.