

Sunday in the Park --Bel Kaufman

It was still warm in the late-afternoon sun, and the city noises came muffled through the trees in the park. She put her book down on the bench, removed her sunglasses, and sighed contentedly. Morton was reading the Times Magazine section, one arm flung around her shoulder; their three-year-old son, Larry, was playing in the sandbox: a faint breeze fanned her hair softly against her cheek. It was five-thirty of a Sunday afternoon, and the small playground, tucked away in a corner of the park, was all but deserted. The swings and seesaws stood motionless and abandoned, the slides were empty, and only in the sandbox two little boys squatted diligently side by side. How good this is, she thought, and almost smiled at her sense of well-being. They must out in the sun more often; Morton was so city-pale, cooped up all week inside the gray factorylike university. She squeezed his arm affectionately and glanced at Larry, delighting in the pointed little face frowning in concentration over the tunnel he was digging. The other boy suddenly stood up and with a quick, deliberate swing of his chubby arm threw a spadeful of sand at Larry. It just missed his head. Larry continued digging; the boy remained standing, shovel raised, stolid and impassive.

“No, no, little boy.” She shook her finger at him, her eyes searching for the child’s mother or nurse. “We mustn’t throw sand. It may get in someone’s eyes and hurt. We must play nicely in the nice sandbox.” The boy looked at her in unblinking expectancy. He was about Larry’s age but perhaps ten pounds heavier, a husky little boy with none of Larry’s quickness and sensitivity in his face. Where was his mother? The only other people left in the playground were two women and a little girl on roller skates leaving now through the gate, and man on a bench a few feet away. He was a big man, and he seemed to be taking up the whole bench as he held the Sunday comics close to his face. She supposed he was the child’s father. He did not look up from his comics, but spat once deftly out of the corner of his mouth. She turned her eyes away.

At that moment, as swiftly as before, the fat little boy threw another spadeful of sand at Larry. This time some of it landed on his hair and forehead. Larry looked up at his mother, his mouth tentative; her expression would tell him whether to cry or not.

Her first instinct was to rush to her son, brush the sand out of his hair, and punish the other child, but she controlled it. She always said that she wanted Larry to learn to fight his own battles.

“Don’t do that, little boy,” she said sharply, leaning forward on the bench. “You mustn’t throw sand!”

The man on the bench moved his mouth as if to spit again, but instead he spoke. He did not look at her, but at the boy only.

“You go right ahead, Joe,” he said loudly. “Throw all you want. This here is a public sandbox.”

She felt a sudden weakness in her knees as she glanced at Morton. He had become aware of what was happening. He put his Times down carefully on his lap and turned his fine, lean face toward the man, smiling the shy, apologetic smile he might have offered a student in pointing out an error in his thinking. When he spoke to the man, it was with his usual reasonableness.

“You’re quite right,” he said pleasantly, “but just because this is a public place....”

The man lowered his funnies and looked at Morton. He looked at him from head to foot, slowly and deliberately. "Yeah?" His insolent voice was edged with menace. "My kid's got just as good right here as yours, and if he feels like throwing sand, he'll throw it, and if you don't like it, you can take your kid the hell out of here."

The children were listening, their eyes and mouths wide open, their spades forgotten in small fists. She noticed the muscle in Morton's jaw tighten. He was rarely angry; he seldom lost his temper. She was suffused with a tenderness for her husband and an impotent rage against the man for involving him in a situation so alien and so distasteful to him.

"Now, just a minute," Morton said courteously, "you must realize...."

"Aw, shut up," said the man.

Her heart began to pound. Morton half rose; the Times slid to the ground. Slowly the other man stood up. He took a couple of steps toward Morton, then stopped. He flexed his great arms, waiting. She pressed her trembling knees together. Would there be violence, fighting? How dreadful, how incredible.... She must do something, stop them, call for help. She wanted to put her hand on her husband's sleeve, to pull him down, but for some reason she didn't.

Morton adjusted his glasses. He was very pale. "This is ridiculous," he said unevenly. "I must ask you...."

"Oh, yeah?" said the man. He stood with his legs spread apart, rocking a little, looking at Morton with utter scorn. "You and who else?"

For a moment the two men looked at each other nakedly. Then Morton turned his back on the man and said quietly, "Come on, let's get out of here." He walked awkwardly, almost limping with self-consciousness, to the sandbox. He stooped and lifted Larry and his shovel out.

At once Larry came to life; his face lost its rapt expression and he began to kick and cry. "I don't want to go home, I want to play better, I don't want any supper, I don't like supper...." It became a chat as they walked, pulling their child between them, his feet dragging on the ground. In order to get to the exit gate they had to pass the bench where the man sat sprawling again. She was careful not to look at him. With all the dignity she could summon, she pulled Larry's sandy, perspiring little hand, while Morton pulled the other. Slowly and with head high she walked with her husband and child out of the playground.

Her first feelings was one of relief that a fight had been avoided, that no one was hurt. Yet beneath it there was a layer of something else, something heavy and inescapable. She sensed that it was more than just an unpleasant incident, more than defeat of reason by force. She felt dimly it had something to do with her and Morton, something acutely personal, familiar, and important.

Suddenly Morton spoke. "It wouldn't have proved anything."

"What?" she asked.

"A fight. It wouldn't have proved anything beyond the fact that he's bigger than I am."

"Of course," she said.

"The only possible outcome," he continued reasonably, "would have been—what? My glasses broken, perhaps a tooth or two replaced, a couple of days' work missed – and for what? For justice? For truth?"

“Of course,” she repeated. She quickened her step. She wanted only to get home and to busy herself with her familiar tasks; perhaps then the feeling, glued like heavy plaster on her heart, would be gone. Of all the stupid, despicable bullies, she thought, pulling harder on Larry’s hand. The child was still crying. Always before she had felt a tender pity for his defenseless little body, the frail arms, the narrow shoulders with sharp winglike shoulder blades, the thin and unsure legs, but now her mouth tightened in resentment.

“Stop crying,” she said sharply. “I’m ashamed of you!” She felt as if all three of them were tracking mud along the street. The child cried louder.

If there had been an issue involved, she thought, if there had been something to fight for... But what else could her possibly have done? Allow himself to be beaten? Attempt to educate the man? Call a policeman? “Officer, there’s a man in the park who won’t stop his child from throwing sand one mine....” The whole thing was as silly as that, and not worth thinking about.

“Can’t you keep him quiet, for Pete’s sake?” Morton asked irritably.

“What do you suppose I’ve been trying to do?” she said.

Larry pulled back, dragging his feet.

“If you can’t discipline this child, I will,” Morton snapped, making a move toward the boy.

But her voice stopped him. She was shocked to hear it, thin and cold and penetrating with contempt. “Indeed?” she heard herself say. “You and who else?”

“Sunday in the Park” Bel Kaufman (Relating: Connections 2, 19)

1. Where does Morton live and work? Explain how you know.
2. In the second paragraph of the story, Morton’s wife seems to be very happy. Using details from the story, explain why.
3. Look carefully at the information we learn about Morton and the other man in the park. Explain, in your own words, what each of them is like. Pay particular attention to how they are different from one another.
4. Did Morton have any other options in dealing with the situation? Explain your opinion.
5. How can you tell that both Morton and his wife are ashamed that he didn’t fight the man? Provide specific examples for support.