

The Pick Up

Paul Samael



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The Pick Up

The bin was really starting to stink. Every time he went into the kitchen to make himself another coffee, it made him feel nauseous. He wondered if he should empty it.

He went upstairs and peered cautiously out of the window of one of the kids' bedrooms. The street was deserted. He scanned the parked cars, searching for bored-looking figures slumped in the front seats, sipping coffee or reading a paper as they waited for him to emerge. But he couldn't see anyone.

Returning to the kitchen, he lifted the black plastic sack out of the bin, taking care not to tear the sides. Released from its stainless steel container, it bulged outwards as he lowered it gently onto the kitchen floor and tied the handles together. When he reached the front door, he noticed that a thick brown liquid was oozing out of the bottom of the sack – although it was sufficiently viscous that it was not in any immediate danger of dripping onto the carpet. He thought about returning to the kitchen to put another bag around it, but decided not to bother. It would be fine, as long as he was quick – which he fully intended to be.

Opening the front door, he darted round the side of the house, lifted the lid of the wheelie bin and with one beautifully fluid movement swung the bag up and over, flipping the lid back down again with his free hand. Or at least, this was what

he had intended to do. But mid-swing, a shout of “Mr Challoner!” from the direction of the front gate made him turn suddenly. The bag hit the top of the wheelie bin and burst, depositing the slimy remains of four days’ food waste all over his jeans.

“Mr Challoner!” said the man at the gate again. “Are you going to apologise to Tracy Harrison?”

Shit, he thought. The newspaper was going to be furious with him. “Just stay out of sight until it all blows over,” the editor had told him, glowering at him through his trade-mark angular glasses. “Don’t speak to them. Don’t even go near them. Got that? You’ve done enough damage as it is. So just shut the fuck up and keep your head down. Better still, take a vow of silence and become a fucking trappist monk. That way, I’ll never have set eyes on you again. Now fuck off out my office and don’t come back until I tell you to.”

Still, he thought, at least there wasn’t a photographer.

Only there was. The man at the gate had been joined by another wielding a camera with a giant telephoto lens (not that it would be necessary from this distance). Tim Challoner looked down at the mess on his trousers. He could hear the shutter whirring. Already he could imagine the pictures in tomorrow’s papers (all the ones except his own, of course). Just when they should have been losing interest, he had managed to breathe new life into the story.

“Bad luck mate,” said the first man, as if he had read Tim’s thoughts. “I’m afraid my editor’s really got it in for you. He’s been paying me extra to stick around, even though all the

others have gone home. I don't s'pose there's any chance of a comment to go with the picture, is there?"

Tim hesitated, wondering if there was anything to gain from expanding on the carefully worded statement which he had put out almost a week ago, in the forlorn hope of drawing a line under the whole affair. But he could guess which paper the man worked for and how they would run the story. So he shook his head and started walking briskly back towards the front door.

"I always reckon two bags are better than one," added the photographer, unnecessarily.

Tim grimaced and shut the door.

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Once inside, he went back to the kitchen, took off his jeans and stuffed them into the washing machine. He considered whether to call the paper to warn them. But what was the point? He'd only have to endure another expletive-laden tirade from the editor or one of his equally foul-mouthed minions.

He sat down at the kitchen table in his underpants. The house felt depressingly quiet, as it had done ever since Vicky had left with the kids to stay at her Mum's. "It's not fair on the children, keeping them here under bloody house arrest," she'd said, by way of explanation. But they both knew there was

more to it than that. Bringing the children into it was just a way of avoiding the issue.

Did Tracy Harrison realise what she'd done, the fat, greasy-haired bitch? He wondered if she had planned it all, but immediately dismissed the thought as absurd. She wasn't clever enough, for a start. And besides, she couldn't possibly have known who he was. She probably never read the paper he wrote for. It just felt like it had all been planned because she had somehow managed to irradiate almost every aspect of his life.

He was pretty sure that the paper wouldn't keep him on. They'd only held off sacking him because they didn't want to be seen to be failing to stand by one of their own columnists. And four days on, he still hadn't heard from Vicky.

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On the morning of the incident, they'd had a row. Sean and Isabel had started squabbling at the kitchen table over breakfast. Sean had managed to spill Coco-Pops all over his school uniform. Vicky told him to change, but there were no clean shirts. She looked accusingly at Tim.

"You were supposed to put them on yesterday. I told you they needed doing. Would it kill you to check the laundry basket once in a while? I'm at work five days a week. You're here the whole time. And don't start telling me how busy you are doing some publicity for your book or writing your bloody

newspaper column. It takes two minutes to put the machine on. But you can't even manage that, can you?"

He should've known better than to argue. It quickly escalated into a full-scale shouting match which was only curtailed when Isabel started crying. Following an uneasy truce, Vicky extracted a solemn and binding undertaking from him not to forget to pick up her dry cleaning at some point during the day. Then she left for work.

But they'd been arguing more and more over things like this – and it was always his work that seemed to be the problem, as far as Vicky was concerned.

After Sean was born, Vicky had never really wanted to go back to work. But when he'd lost his job about six months' later, they'd agreed that she would go back full time and he would do the childcare. At first it was fine; Sean had been quite an easy baby and he was surprised at how much he enjoyed looking after him. He told himself that once Sean was a bit older, more options would open up on the childcare front and he'd be able to start looking for work again. But Isabel's arrival soon put paid to that.

He knew that Vicky would have much preferred to spend more time at home with the kids – but he'd ended up in that role instead. And he felt guilty about not always enjoying it – after all, what could be more fulfilling than looking after your own children, watching them grow up? Vicky couldn't understand why he seemed so grumpy at weekends, when she was clearly delighted to be able to spend time with the kids. It wasn't that he didn't love them. But he was with them seven days a week – and the unrelenting nature of the task made it

difficult to really enjoy their company all the time. He longed to be able to switch off from it in the way that he'd been able to switch off from work when he left the office at the end of the day.

And no matter how much he told himself that he was doing a great thing by bringing up his own children, it just didn't make him feel good about himself. He'd never really thought about it at the time, but what he really missed about having a job was the knowledge that a salary would be going into his bank account at the end of the month. It wasn't so much the money; Vicky's job was well paid and they led a reasonably comfortable existence. It was more the symbolism of it – the fact that someone was paying you purely and simply because they put a certain monetary value on what you did for them. He'd tried to deal with it by pretending that looking after Sean and Isabel was a job that he had been specially commissioned to do (by Vicky who was, effectively, paying him). The trouble was, he knew that she would have been better at this particular job than he was – and that, in an ideal world, she would have given the job to herself.

Unable to talk to Vicky about it, he had started a fairly light-hearted blog about the trials and tribulations of being a house-husband, entitled "I don't know what he does all day." He had expected it to appeal to other men in a similar position but to his surprise, the majority of comments came from stay-at-home Mums. They seemed to enjoy reading about his latest childcare disasters or his ability to turn the simplest of domestic tasks into a challenge on a par with single-handedly

circumnavigating the globe in a coracle or walking to the south pole in a T-shirt, Bermuda shorts and flip-flops.

And with the success of the blog came other opportunities. Eventually the blog turned into a moderately successful book and, somehow or other, he had managed to acquire a regular newspaper column as well. It was, as one of his friends had rather cynically described it, essentially a “fill-space” item in one of the fluffier sections of the weekend edition. But he didn’t care – it generated that all-important regular payment into his bank account and had made him feel good about himself for the first time in ages.

Vicky’s reaction had been mixed. She seemed pleased that he was generally more cheerful and had managed to recover some of his self-esteem. But she was less delighted by her portrayal in some of his blog entries and by the amount of time he was devoting to it all. So yes, there were tensions – but what married couple didn’t have those?

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That morning, after dropping Sean at school, he had gone to pick up Karen, a friend of Isabel’s, for a play-date. While they were in the car, Isabel had asked:

“Daddy, are you cross with Mummy?”

“Not really,” he said, not entirely truthfully. “We were just, um, having a debate.”

“What’s a debate?”

“It’s where two people are trying to work out what they think about something. So, um, I might say to Mummy ‘I think we should go to the park today.’ And then Mummy might say ‘I think we should go swimming.’ Then we talk about which is the best thing to do and we come to an agreement.”

“Do people always shout when they have debates?”

“No, not always. But sometimes when people feel strongly about something, they raise their voices. It depends what you’re having a debate about.”

“Which park are we going to with Karen?”

He felt relieved that his answer had proved insufficiently interesting to prompt any further queries on the same topic. Having stopped to pick up Karen, he drove to a park they’d visited only once or twice before. The playground had recently been fitted out with new equipment, the centre-piece being a large sandpit. He had remembered to bring plastic spades and buckets for the girls to play with and helped them to build a couple of sand castles (they filled the buckets and he did the turning over bit). He was about to leave them to it when he noticed that a small curly-haired boy – who couldn’t have been more than about two – had kicked one of them down.

“Daddy, stop him!” said Isabel as the boy headed, slightly unsteadily, towards the other castles, obviously intent on flattening them as well.

Tim positioned himself between the boy and his objective. The boy hesitated and watched as Tim made a new sand castle to replace the one that had been destroyed. Then he began to edge sideways, which would give him a free run at the remaining sand castles.

“Daddy!” hissed Isabel, “He’s going to kick the others down!”

Tim looked around. He couldn’t see an adult who seemed to be supervising the little boy. So he picked him up gently and deposited him about half a metre to the right, taking care to turn him away from the where from the girls were playing. His attention suitably deflected, the little boy toddled off to pick up someone else’s plastic spade.

Tim went to sit down on a bench where he could keep watch on the kids, in between reading the paper. He had to intervene once when he realised that Isabel was shouting at Karen, who had started to cry. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “Why’s Karen crying?”

“I wanted to decorate this castle with lolly sticks, but she won’t let me. She says it’s hers.”

“Well, why can’t you both decorate it together? Or why don’t I make you another castle and you can decorate that one. There’s no need to have a big fight about it, is there?”

“We’re not having a fight, Daddy. We’re having a debate.”

He decided to ignore this and instead built Isabel another sand castle, making her promise to let Karen have the other one to herself. After that, he carried on reading the paper until he noticed that Isabel had started climbing up a piece of apparatus which struck him as somewhat ambitious for a girl of her age. He went over to make sure that if she fell, he was in a position to catch her. Karen was still decorating her sand castle. As he stood underneath the climbing frame, watching Isabel inch her way slowly along the top, a woman with a thin face and

shoulder-length dark hair approached him, stabbing a finger angrily in his direction:

“Hey! I’ve got a bone to pick with you!”

“I’m sorry?” he replied. He looked around to see if she really was talking to him or to some recalcitrant child standing behind him.

“I saw you pick up my sister’s child. You picked him up. I saw you.” She continued to stab her finger accusingly towards him.

It dawned on him what she was talking about.

“Well, he was kicking my daughter’s sandcastle down. So I just moved him to one side.”

“I don’t care. You *never* touch another person’s child without their permission. *You just don’t do it.*”

For a moment, he wondered if he should back down, apologise and have done with it. But then he thought, no, this is ridiculous. All he’d done was move the kid half a metre to the right. Yet here was this bolshie woman, practically insinuating that he was a paedophile.

“Look, I couldn’t see anyone who was looking after him. He was kicking my daughter’s sandcastle down. So I moved him.”

“Yeah – but you just don’t do that. You just don’t.”

Tim sighed. “Look, was he upset by what I did? Because he seemed perfectly happy to me. And if someone had been supervising him properly, I wouldn’t have had to do anything, would I? I mean, where were you while all this was going on? And where’s his mother?”

She pointed to a corner of the playground where a large woman, with long greasy hair was sitting on a bench next to a pushchair. Oddly, she wasn't looking in their direction – she was just staring off into space.

“Do you want me to accuse you of being a paedo?” said the sister, menacingly. “’Cos I will, you know. I’ll shout the whole place down.”

“This is ridiculous,” he said. “I just told you - all I did was move him a short distance, to stop him kicking my daughter’s sand castle down. That’s all.”

“And I just told you – *you never touch someone else’s child without their permission.* It’s out of order. *Way out of order.*”

There was a silence. Tim assumed that she was expecting an apology. But why should he apologise? There was nothing to apologise for.

“Fine,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “If you feel so strongly about it, why don’t you go ahead and call the police? I’ve got nothing to hide. You’re the one that’ll get done for wasting police time, not me.”

The woman glared at him, then shouted at the top of her voice: “*This bloke touched my sister’s child! I saw him do it! He’s a paedo!*” Then she stood there pointing at him and looking around, as if daring anyone to come to Tim’s defence.

No one did. The playground had gone very quiet. He had the feeling that everyone must be staring at him. But oddly, most of the adults within his line of sight didn’t seem to have their attention fixed on him – they seemed to be looking around, almost as if they had lost something, whilst periodically stealing glances in his direction. Thinking back on it later, he

couldn't decide whether they were just embarrassed by the scene unfolding in front of them or were busy checking that their own children were well way from the strange man and his supposedly wandering hands.

All he could think about at the time was how he wanted to get away from the playground as quickly as possible. But he felt that he couldn't leave without answering his accuser. Raising his voice so that everyone could hear, he said:

"I'm here with my daughter and her friend. All I did was stop your sister's kid from kicking down my daughter's sand castle." His heart was pounding in his chest and he was aware that his voice was quavering slightly. He took a deep breath before continuing: "If you reckon that makes me a paedophile, you go ahead and call the police. I hope you get done for wasting police time. But I think most people here can make up their own minds what sort of person I am."

He began to walk away, motioning to Isabel and Karen to follow him. Then he turned back to the woman and added: "And I'm a better parent than you or your sister ever will be."

On the way to the car, he realised that he was shaking.

"Daddy, are you alright?" asked Isabel.

"Yes, I'm fine," he lied.

She was quiet for a minute and then said: "What's a peedoh? Is it to do with wee-ing?"

But he pretended he hadn't heard and they walked in silence to the car.

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They dropped Karen back at her house. He didn't know her mum, Frances, particularly well, although they had occasionally exchanged small talk at school pick-up time. He hoped that she wouldn't invite him in for coffee, but she did – and then Isabel piped up, pleading with him to accept so that she could go in and see Honey, Karen's new hamster.

As they all headed towards the kitchen, Isabel announced:

“Daddy had a debate with a woman in the park.”

“Well, I wouldn't really call it a debate,” he explained, trying to sound as off-hand as possible. “It was just a silly argument about her kid knocking over the girls' sand castles.”

He wondered whether he should tell Frances what had actually happened. After all, Karen might talk to her about it. But how to explain it? ‘Oh, by the way, there was an incident in the playground where I was accused of being a paedophile – but don't worry, your daughter's perfectly safe with me.’ He decided that he'd be on safer ground steering the conversation onto other topics and hoping that the incident would be swiftly forgotten by both girls.

“Why don't you go and play with Karen while I talk to her Mum?” he said to Isabel.

“Come on,” said Karen. “Let's go and play with Honey!” Both girls ran out of the kitchen, laughing excitedly.

“It's great that they seem to be getting on so well,” said Frances, smiling at him as she busied herself making the coffee. “We really must have Isabel round for a playdate sometime

soon. I know what you mean about other parents though. Some of them can be a nightmare.” And she launched into a long anecdote about how she’d nearly come to blows recently with a mother who had refused to tell her child to get off the swings, so that other children in the increasingly long queue could have a turn.

“It’s these weekend parents,” she said. “They’ve just outsourced all the childcare during the week to nannies and au pairs. So when the weekend comes around, they seem to think it’s their God-given right to spoil their children rotten. If you ask me, it’s all one big guilt trip because they hardly see their kids from Monday to Friday.”

Relieved that he hadn’t been obliged to talk in more detail about the incident in the park, he he started to regale her with an anecdote of his own about over-indulgent parenting. But before he could finish, the children came running back into the kitchen shrieking that the hamster had escaped.

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Predictably, Isabel came away from Karen’s utterly fixated with the idea of getting a hamster as a pet. So for the rest of the day, he was forced to think of excuse after excuse as to why they couldn’t have one. Top of his list was the fact that they had just spent nearly an hour searching for Karen’s hamster; she had eventually turned up under Karen’s bed, having started to build herself a new nest there. But it was

better than being asked questions about the meaning of “paedo.”

He had meant to tell Vicky about the incident in the park when she came home, but they ended up having another minor row because - despite his promise that morning - he’d forgotten to pick up her dry cleaning. He wondered whether to tell her it was because of what had happened in the playground. But she clearly wasn’t in any mood to give him a sympathetic hearing – and he told himself that he didn’t need her sympathy anyway.

He went into the kitchen to start preparing dinner, while Vicky supervised the kids’ bedtime. He could hear Isabel telling her how hamsters made excellent pets and how mean Daddy was not even to entertain the possibility of getting one.

He was in the middle of stir-frying some chicken when the doorbell rang, so he shouted upstairs to ask Vicky if she could answer it. She came into the kitchen a minute or two later, looking anxious.

“Tim, it’s the police. They want to speak to you. They won’t say what it’s about.”

He went to the door. There were two officers, a man in plain clothes and a woman in uniform. The man spoke first.

“Mr Challoner?”

He nodded.

“I’m DS Higgs and this is PC McGarry.” He held up his ID card. “We’d like to talk to you about an incident earlier today in Roystead Park. Would you mind accompanying us down to the station?”

“Am I under arrest?” he asked.

“No Sir, not at this stage. We’re just trying to find out what happened.”

“What’s this about, Tim?” asked Vicky. “What ‘incident’?”

He wished that he had told her about it earlier. But it would take too long now. So he sighed and said:

“It was just a silly misunderstanding. I had a row with another parent and they threatened to report me to the police. I thought it was all just bluff and they wouldn’t actually do it. It’s a complete waste of police time. Look, I think it’s best if I just do as they ask, so I can get this cleared up as soon as possible. Can you manage with the kids until I get back?”

She nodded, but didn’t look particularly reassured. She looked even less reassured when Sean appeared at the top of the stairs asking if it was true that some crazy woman in the park had called Dad a pee-doh. But by that time, it was too late. The police car was already pulling away.

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“How long’s this going to take?” he asked.

“Hard to say, Sir,” replied PC McGarry, who was driving. “Depends on you really.”

Tim wasn’t sure what to make of this. But he felt better when DS Higgs turned to him and said:

“Look, thanks for agreeing to come in at such short notice. It makes our job much easier if people cooperate with

us. Anyway, as you've probably gathered, we've had a complaint about an incident in the park this morning. But obviously we can't just go on what the complainant says. So we need to hear your side of the story." Tim thought this sounded promisingly sceptical.

DS Higgs paused, then added:

"As I'm sure you know, you're entitled to have a solicitor present during the interview. There's a duty solicitor at the station – although I reckon it'll be at least an hour or so before he's free, so you might have a bit of a wait. Or you can call someone yourself if you prefer. It's entirely up to you."

Tim hesitated. The reference to a solicitor made it sound rather less like an informal chat intended to get his side of the story. But if he insisted on a lawyer being present, didn't that make it look as if he had something to hide? Whereas in fact, he'd done nothing wrong. And he was sure that once he'd explained what happened, the police wouldn't take the complaint any further.

"No, it's alright. I just want to get on with it – I mean, I'm sure you've got better things to do than waste your time on this sort of thing."

"Right-o," said DS Higgs, cheerily, as they pulled into the station car park "PC McGarry, could you go through the formalities and show Mr Challoner to the interview room? Let's get this over and done with, then we can all go home."

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In fact there proved to be rather more waiting around than he'd been led to expect. By the time the interview got underway, it was after nine o'clock.

PC McGarry took the lead. After announcing the time, date and the names of those present, she looked directly at Tim and recited, in a bored-sounding voice:

"You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?"

Tim nodded.

"For the benefit of the tape, Mr Challoner is nodding. Can you also confirm that you have been informed of your right to have a lawyer at this interview, but you have chosen not to have one present?"

Tim hesitated. All the references to harming your defence and reliance on evidence in court were making him feel slightly queasy about the whole thing. But having got this far, he'd appear weak and foolish if he suddenly backtracked on his earlier decision. And what could they prosecute him for anyway? Those legal warnings were really aimed at people who had something to hide, not people like him. PC McGarry looked at him expectantly.

"Yes," he replied, rather more firmly than was strictly necessary.

"Right then," said DS Higgs. "As you know, a complaint has been made to us about an incident in Roystead Park this morning. The allegation is that you had inappropriate physical

contact with a child in the playground. Could you tell us in your own words what happened?”

“Well, I was in the park with my daughter and her friend, Karen....”

PC McGarry cut in: “Is this Karen someone you look after regularly?”

“No, actually it’s the first time she’s had a playdate with Isabel.”

“OK. We may need you to give us the details of Karen’s parents at the end of the interview, in case we need to follow up on that,” she explained, scribbling something down on her notepad.

He wished that he had told Frances what had happened in the playground. He would just have to hope that Karen hadn’t said anything that was liable to be misinterpreted. But the interruption had thrown him slightly off balance. Attempting to hide his discomfiture, he continued:

“Right, well, um, we’d gone to the park with Karen and we were building sandcastles. Then this little boy came over – he was only a toddler really - and started kicking them down. So I moved in front of them to block his path.”

“Can I just stop you there?” said DS Higgs. “Just to be clear, was there any physical contact between you at this point?”

“No, none at all. Like I said, I just moved round so that he didn’t have a clear run.”

DS Higgs scribbled something on his pad. “So the little boy didn’t bump into you or run into your leg?”

“No.”

“OK, then what happened?”

“Well, I rebuilt the castles he’d knocked down. But he was still hovering nearby. He kept shifting sideways, like he was trying to find a way around me in order to get at the sandcastles. I started to move away, but he stepped towards them again. And my daughter said something like ‘Daddy, he’s going to kick them down again.’ So then I moved him.”

“You moved him?”

“Yes. I, er, picked him up and put him down about half a metre to the right. I was very gentle. I didn’t hurt him or anything. I was just trying to deflect his attention from the sandcastles. There were some plastic spades and other toys lying around nearby. He picked up one of them and started playing with that. So it worked – I mean, as a way of deflecting his attention.”

“Can you describe exactly how you picked him up?” asked PC McGarry.

“Well, I put my hands around his sides like this.” He held his hands out in front of him, thumbs pointing upwards, palms facing each other. “So if he’d started to slip, my hands would’ve hooked under his armpits and he’d have been perfectly safe. But I hardly lifted him off the ground at all really.”

“So which parts of his body did you actually touch?”

“Just his sides.”

“When you say ‘his sides’, how low or high was that?”

“Well, I think somewhere between his waist and his chest.”

“Can you be any more precise?”

“Um, no not really. Probably around the level of his stomach.”

“Was there any other physical contact?”

“No.”

“But in the process of moving him, you lifted him right off the ground and put him down further away from where you and your daughter were playing?”

“Yes. Although as I said, he can’t have been more than about twenty centimetres off the ground at any point – and after I’d put him down, I didn’t go near him again.”

“How long did the contact last?”

“I don’t know. Can’t have been more than a second or two. As long as it takes to move something from here to here,” he said, miming a picking-up gesture for them.

“And how did he seem after you put him down?”

“Fine. Like I said, he just started playing with one of the plastic spades. He didn’t seem bothered by it at all.”

“Before you picked him up,” said DS Higgs, “did you consider any other course of action?”

“Um, well, it all happened quite quickly really. I did look around briefly to see if there were any adults supervising him but I couldn’t see anyone.”

“Would you say that you had a good look around?”

“Um, well, quite a good look, I suppose. But there were a lot of people in the playground and I was concerned that if I didn’t do something fairly quickly, he was going to kick the rest of the sandcastles down.”

“Why didn’t you just tell him to stop?”

“Er, I may have done that. I can’t really remember if I did or not. But he was just a toddler. I mean, I’d already blocked his path and he wasn’t showing any signs of going away. So I don’t think telling him to stop would’ve made much difference.”

“Some people might say that you crossed a line when you picked him up though,” observed PC McGarry. “Do you really think it was appropriate to do that?”

“Look,” said Tim, indignantly, “are you saying I’ve committed a crime here? All I did was pick the kid up very gently and put him down again – he wasn’t harmed and he just toddled off happily to play with a plastic spade. The only reason we’re here is because some crazy woman accused me of being a paedophile in front of the whole playground – and because she and her sister are incapable of supervising their kid properly. If anyone should be making a complaint, it should be me.”

“Calm down, Mr Challoner,” said DS Higgs. “A serious complaint has been made to us, which we are obliged to investigate. My colleague here is just doing her job. You may not like some of our questions, but all we’re trying to do is to find out what happened. Now, you asked about possible criminal offences. Obviously, there are various sexual offences which could have been committed...”

“Oh come off it. Please tell me you didn’t actually believe that stupid cow when she said I was a paedo.”

DS Higgs held up his hands, motioning Tim to calm down. “I can’t comment on that, Mr Challoner. But I note that, according to your account, nothing of that kind took place.

So if what you've just told us is the truth, then you shouldn't have anything to worry about on that score. But it's still possible that your actions – as you've just described them to us – could amount to assault."

"*Assault?* You've got to be kidding. I never used any violence. This is absolutely ridiculous."

"Mr Challoner, common assault doesn't have to involve violence. It could be any form of unlawful physical contact. Strictly speaking, it doesn't even require actual contact – all we need to show is that the victim was in fear of unlawful force being applied to them."

Tim shook his head angrily.

"Is anyone claiming that the kid was upset by what I did? Because he didn't look upset to me. He was fine. He just started playing with a plastic spade and wandered off in the other direction. I mean, have you interviewed other people who were at the playground to find out what they saw?" Neither DS Higgs nor PC McGarry said anything in response.

"I suppose you think I'm abusing my daughter and her friend as well," Tim continued, hotly. "But if you'd bothered to ask anyone who was actually at the playground, you'd have discovered that I spent about half an hour helping them build sandcastles, supervising them and generally being a *bloody good parent*. But none of that seems to count in my favour. I mean, come on, do I really fit the profile of your typical paedophile? This is such a waste of time."

DS Higgs seemed to bristle at these last remarks. He sat back in his chair and when he spoke, his tone was noticeably sharper than before:

“Mr Challoner, I’ve sat in rooms like this many times and interviewed men like you – men who appeared to be happily married and had kids of their own. On the face of it, they did not seem like the sort of people who would abuse children. And if I were the sort of man who judged purely by appearances, I would probably have let them go. But several of those men have ended up behind bars. Now, I’m not saying that just because those men were convicted, you must be a paedophile too. All I’m saying is that it’s not always easy for us to tell. And when a complaint of this nature is made to us, we have to investigate it properly. We can’t just say ‘Oh, he seems like a respectable chap, so we’ll ignore it.’”

He paused, then added, gently: “All we’re trying to do is get to the truth about what happened today. That’s why we need to hear your side of the story. Now, why don’t you tell us what happened after the incident with the child.”

Tim felt both chastened and unnerved by DS Higgs’ rebuke. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been quite so aggressive towards them. But they were accusing him of being a paedophile – and they seemed far more interested in anything that might support that allegation than any evidence to the contrary.

Slightly hesitantly, he described how he had been accused by the woman in the playground. He fretted that his uncertain tone would make them all the more suspicious of him. But to his relief, they accepted most of what he said without much in the way of interruption. They seemed far less interested in his angry exchange with the woman than they had been in the minutiae of how he had picked up her nephew.

“What I don’t understand,” he added, when he had reached the end of his account, “is why she waited so long. It must have been at least fifteen or twenty minutes before she approached me. I’d sat down and read the paper for a bit and then I went to watch my daughter on the climbing frame. If she and her sister were so worked up about it, why didn’t one of them say something before? And the kid’s mother didn’t seem interested at all. She wasn’t even looking at us. She just seemed to be gazing into the middle distance. It’s all a bit weird, if you ask me.”

DS Higgs and PC McGarry glanced at each other after he said this and for a moment, he thought that he must have said something significant. But they had no more questions for him. Finally, DS Higgs said: “Well, thank you for coming in, Mr Challoner.” He checked his watch. “Interview terminated at 10.02 pm.”

“What happens now?” asked Tim.

“We’ll be in touch if we intend to take matters any further. But for now, you’re free to go. PC McGarry will see you out.”

* * * * *

By the time he finally got back home, it was well after eleven o’clock. On the way home he had been getting more and more worked up about the injustice of the whole situation and he was confident that Vicky would share his sense of

outrage. So he bounded up the stairs to their bedroom, intending to tell her the whole story - only to find her fast asleep. He hovered in the doorway, debating whether to wake her.

Deprived of the opportunity to recount what had happened, he felt slightly cheated. But she had obviously tried to wait up for him – the bedside light was still on and a book was lying open by her side. And she looked so peaceful lying there, with her long brown hair falling across her face, that he couldn't be angry with her.

Besides, there were other ways to unburden himself. He padded quietly back downstairs, started up his laptop and began typing:

“Why is it fine for a woman to touch someone else's child – but if a man does it, he's in danger of being labelled a paedophile? This morning, I took my daughter and her friend to the park. The playground had a sandpit and we spent some time building sandcastles. A toddler came over and started kicking them down. I asked him to stop but he just carried on. I couldn't see anyone supervising him. And I didn't want to shout at him or do anything which would upset him. In an attempt to deflect his attention onto something else, I picked him up very gently and moved him to one side. It's the sort of thing I've done with my own kids when they were that age and I could see that they were upsetting another child. In my experience, it usually gets better results than trying to use reason or getting angry. And it worked – the toddler picked up a plastic spade that was lying around and went off in the opposite direction. He didn't seem remotely bothered by what had just happened to him.

About twenty minutes later, I was accused – very loudly and publicly - of being a paedophile by a woman who said she was the sister of the child's mother. I don't know why the mother herself couldn't bring herself to speak to me – in fact, she seemed totally uninterested in what was going on. Nor do I know why her sister waited twenty minutes before accusing me. I had been nowhere near her nephew during that time. I explained that all I had done was to move him very gently to one side and I couldn't see how that made me a paedophile. Then we left the playground. It was a pretty unpleasant incident – but I thought that would be the end of the matter. After all, the woman had just called me a paedophile in front of a playground full of people. What more in the way of humiliation could she possibly want?

Later that evening I received a visit from the police. They had received a complaint that I'd engaged in 'inappropriate physical contact with a child.' Not wanting to appear uncooperative, I agreed to accompany them to the police station – in the hope that it was just a misunderstanding and would soon be sorted out. Initially, they gave the impression that we were just going to have a cosy, informal chat to find out what happened. I was discouraged from consulting a solicitor – it would just take more time, I was told, and if I wanted to get this cleared up quickly, it was better not to involve lawyers. But the 'cosy chat' turned out to be a full criminal-style interview conducted under caution. I was required to explain in minute detail what had happened in the park that morning and to defend myself against allegations of being a paedophile – when all I had done was to move a small child about half a metre to the right. The physical contact must have lasted no more than a couple of seconds. Yet they told me that I could have committed a range of crimes ranging from assault to various sexual offences.

As I write this, I have no idea if I am going to face criminal charges. I am fortunate in having access to a public forum – this column - in which to defend myself. But I do wonder what this episode says about us as a society. Have we become so fixated with media hysteria about paedophiles that we see almost any physical contact between a man and someone else's child as a potential crime? And surely the police have got better things to do than investigate playground disputes about sandcastles? Maybe they should start by catching some real paedophiles."

Now all he needed was a headline. He always found this the most difficult bit. How about: "Paedophile hysteria: the new McCarthyism." Or: "Paedophile witch-hunt – coming soon to a playground near you." That last one was a bit long, but he liked the idea of a kind of Salem witch trials in reverse, with men rather than women in the dock.

Then he heard footsteps on the stairs. Vicky came in, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

"I'm sorry, Tim," she said. "I tried to stay awake, but I dozed off. Are you OK?"

He pushed the laptop to one side and told her what had happened. She had managed to extract a slightly garbled account of the incident in the playground from Isabel, so she already had some idea of the morning's events.

"Why didn't you tell me about it when I got home?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I didn't think it was a big deal."

She didn't look convinced. "It's because we had that row about the dry cleaning, isn't it? Look, I'm sorry about that, I'd

had a bad day at work. I shouldn't have had a go at you like that."

"You weren't to know," he said. But he felt relieved that she seemed to be taking his side.

"So d'you think the police will pursue the complaint?" she asked.

He shrugged and explained how the interview hadn't exactly been a reassuring experience. Vicky seemed to share his view that the whole thing was an outrageous overreaction, but she was annoyed with him for refusing a solicitor. "You've got two kids, for goodness' sake. What would we have done if they hadn't released you?"

He explained that he hadn't wanted to look as if he'd got anything to hide. Vicky thought he should still talk to a lawyer, but he couldn't see the point. Having put it down in writing, he felt increasingly confident in the overall justice of his position.

"Stop worrying. It'll be fine," he said. "It's not like I'm entirely defenceless. I'm doing a piece on it for my column." He gestured at his laptop, where his unfinished article was still on the screen.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? Wouldn't it be better to let it all blow over first?"

"No way," he said firmly. "I feel really strongly about this. It just isn't right that people can go around accusing others of being paedophiles with no evidence to back it up. And anyway, I don't see what the risk is – there's nothing in the article that I haven't told the police already. Like I said, I've got nothing to hide."

“Well, alright. I still think you’d be better off waiting a few days, that’s all. And what harm would it do to talk to a lawyer? At least that way you’d know where you stood, legally.”

“I just don’t see how talking to a lawyer will help. I need to get my side of the story out there. Once I’ve done that, the police are going to look pretty unreasonable if they pursue this complaint. But it’s not just about me. Any father taking his kids to any playground is at risk from this kind of overreaction. Someone needs to take a stand and start saying that this whole paedophile thing has got out of hand.”

He felt irritated that she was no longer taking his side. It was typical, he thought. She had never really supported his writing – and here she was again, coming up with spurious reasons not to publish. Couldn’t she see that this article was important?

Besides which, he was pretty confident that the features editor at the paper would be pleased with the article. He was going to ask her to pull the column he’d written for this week and replace it with this piece. It might turn out to be just the thing he needed to boost his profile. No doubt Vicky would prefer that not to happen – because she would really rather that he focussed all his attention and energy on looking after the kids. But if he did that and nothing else, he would go mad. So he was not going to back down.

“Do you know why I think that woman accused me?” he continued. “I reckon it’s because she could see how I was playing with Isabel and Karen – and that I was doing a much better job of it than she or her sister were doing of looking after

their kid. And after twenty minutes or so of watching me, she couldn't stand it any longer. So then she goes and accuses me of being a paedo – just so she can feel better about herself.”

Vicky held up her hands in a gesture of mock surrender. “OK, OK. I don't want to have a big row about it now. And you are a good Dad. The kids are very lucky.” She came over and put her arms around him. “And so am I. Now, why don't you come to bed? You must be exhausted.”

“I'll be up in a minute,” he said, pulling away from her embrace. “I just want to finish this off and email it to the paper.”

* * * * *

As he had hoped, Erica, the features editor, really liked his piece – so much so that instead of using it to replace his usual column, she suggested using it as the lead article in the features section of the paper. She wanted him to expand it a bit and asked for a few additional changes – but he was well used to that by now. He had to wait a few hours while she was in an editorial meeting, arguing for his article to be moved upfront. But an email duly arrived confirming that it would be going into the next day's paper. Earlier in the day, they'd even sent a photographer round to get a picture of him at the playground where the incident took place. To his relief, there had been no sign of his accuser when they went for the photo-shoot.

In the meantime, he'd heard nothing further from the police. He wondered if he should phone them up to find out if they were still investigating the complaint. But that might require him to change what he'd written – and he felt it was more effective if there was no indication of the outcome. It forced the reader to share his own uncertainty as to whether any charges would be brought.

The article appeared the next day. By the time Vicky got home, he'd already had an email from Erica telling him how the website version had generated more comments than any other article in that section of the paper for the last six months. Although there were a few people who felt that he'd been too "hands on" (so to speak), most agreed that he'd done nothing wrong – and that both the complaint and the police investigation were a complete over-reaction. Tim felt thoroughly vindicated. He read out some of the comments to Vicky after she came downstairs, having put the children to bed.

"And it's been great for my column," he added. "They say the website version's getting about ten times as many hits as usual. It might help sales of the book too."

"Good for you," she replied, slightly wearily. He wished that she sounded a bit more pleased for him. But she was probably just tired – which was not surprising given how late they had both been up on the night of the incident.

By the day after that, the story had been picked up by any number of other newspapers and websites. Erica was even more delighted. She seemed to be enjoying making the news for once, as opposed to commissioning worthy, left-leaning features about family breakdown or the difficulty of surviving

on benefits. Quite a few requests for interviews had come in, including an offer to discuss it on a radio phone-in show. He was trying to work out a way to fit them around his schedule of childcare when the phone rang.

“Hi there,” said a voice on the other end which sounded vaguely familiar. “It’s Keith Jameson, I’m a correspondent on the Home Affairs desk. I think we met at the Christmas party last year.”

“Oh yes, I remember,” said Tim, even though he couldn’t quite put a face to the caller.

“Erica asked me to give you a call. We just wanted to give you a heads-up on a story that looks as if it’s about to break in some of the tabloids. I can’t talk for long, but we thought you should know.” Keith seemed to be keeping his voice low, as if he was concerned about being overheard.

“OK. Well, fire away.”

“It looks like someone’s tracked down the woman whose toddler you picked up. Her name’s Tracy Harrison. Ring any bells with you?”

“No,” said Tim, genuinely mystified.

“Ah,” said Keith. “Well, Tracy Harrison’s daughter was abducted and killed four years ago, when she was about one and a half. There was a lot of coverage at the time, especially in the tabloids. Baby Aleesha, she was called. They never found the killer and there was a lot of controversy over whether the police screwed up the initial investigation. The family were pretty unhappy about it. That could be why the police gave you such a hard time – because they didn’t want to be accused of not taking the complaint seriously. Anyway, at least one of the

tabloids is planning to run a front page story saying how upset Tracy Harrison is about your article in yesterday's paper. 'Crass' and 'insensitive' are the kind of words being used to describe it. And she's demanding an apology - from us and from you personally."

Tim felt sick.

"But I had no idea who she was," he said. "Absolutely no idea. And anyway, it doesn't justify what she did. I mean, I'm really sorry about her daughter, what happened to her is awful - but it doesn't give her the right to accuse any man who goes near her son of being a paedophile."

"Yeah," said Keith, sympathetically. "I know, I know. But the trouble is, they can scent blood on this one. They reckon that once everyone knows it was Tracy Harrison, there's going to be a real backlash against you - and against this paper. Which the right-wing tabloids would obviously love to see, 'cos they hate our guts. Management here is really twitchy. They're in a meeting about it now - got the lawyers in and everything. They're giving Erica the third degree, poor girl. So I just wanted to give you a heads-up really. Fore-warned is fore-armed, as they say."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Tim, although he couldn't for the life of him see what sort of evasive action he could usefully take at this point.

"I gather the police weren't too happy with your article either," continued Keith. "It's a fair bet they've tipped off one or two of the tabloid hacks about her identity, otherwise I don't see how they could've tracked her down quite so quickly. It wouldn't be the first time they've done it."

“Oh one last thing - you didn’t hear any of this from me. We’re all under strict orders not to speak to you without management’s approval. But some of us thought it was only fair to warn you that there could be a bit of a shitstorm heading your way. Listen, I’ve got to go now. Best of luck, mate.”

* * * * *

Within a matter of hours, it was all over news. The coverage was all about how he had rushed to judgement – and shown himself to be callous and insensitive to a grieving mother’s terrible loss.

He watched, appalled, as the TV news showed the sister reading out a prepared statement. She explained how Tracy had been devastated by his article and how the whole affair had brought back all the horror of her daughter’s disappearance. Meanwhile, Tracy herself said nothing. She just stared vacantly into the middle distance, apparently oblivious to the mass of photographers and reporters jostling for the best position around her.

In fact, she’d never uttered a word publicly throughout the entire affair. Other people always spoke for her – first her sister and then latterly, a professional publicist, who’d been brought in to handle negotiations over which of the tabloids was going to get the exclusive rights to “Tracy’s story”. When that article eventually appeared, she was quoted as saying that she hoped the publicity would encourage people to come

forward with new evidence about her daughter's murder. But she refused to be interviewed on TV and kept up her silence whenever she appeared in public. She looked so disengaged that he sometimes wondered if she really knew or cared what was happening around here. Yet the image of her blank expression as she stood next to her sister or their publicist had proved far more effective in conveying her sense of loss and vulnerability than anything she could possibly have said.

As Keith had predicted, the right-wing tabloids were playing up the story for all it was worth, relishing the combination of the earlier child abduction, the fresh allegations of paedophilia and the spectacle of his own newspaper's discomfiture. Even in the broadsheet press, there were pages of smug commentary about how Tim had failed to adhere to basic journalistic standards by not investigating Tracy Harrison's past and how his conduct in the playground had been at best presumptuous – and at worst, well, they were too conscious of the libel laws to actually spell out what heinous offences he might have committed. He was also taken to task for not contacting the police before he rushed into print and for failing to appreciate how difficult and delicate a job they had when investigating complaints of this nature.

Worse by far, though, was the reaction from ordinary people. An online petition had been started calling for him to be sacked by the paper – but this was a thoroughly mild form of retribution compared with the blood-curdling comments on social media about what should be done to him.

The day after the story broke, he was called in to the newspaper's offices for an intensive debrief. The management

wanted him to apologise in order to try to close the story down – but he refused, insisting that there was nothing to apologise for and holding to his line that important principles were at stake. Eventually, after hours of debate, they settled on a form of words which did not include the words “sorry” or “apologise” but expressed sorrow at Tracy Harrison’s loss and at any perceived insensitivity on Tim’s part. That evening, he made a brief appearance outside the paper’s office to read out the statement. This was followed by a much more strongly-worded statement from the grim-faced editor. He explained that an investigation was underway and that disciplinary action would be taken against any individuals whose conduct had fallen below the high journalistic standards on which the paper prided itself. They refused to answer any questions from the assembled journalists and then scurried back inside.

Tim slipped out of a back entrance and got a taxi back home. Vicky had already warned him that their house was besieged by reporters, so he asked to be dropped off a few streets away. He went round the back and climbed over the next door neighbour’s fence to get into their garden, before letting himself in via the back door.

It was late and he had expected Vicky to be in bed, but a light was still on in the front room. He went in to find Vicky hunched over his laptop. She looked embarrassed when she saw him and quickly pulled the screen down so that he couldn’t see it.

“How did you manage to get past all those reporters?” she asked.

“Climbed over the back,” he muttered. What had she been looking at on his computer?

“How was it today?” she asked.

“Awful,” he said, gloomily. “I wish I’d never written that bloody article.”

“I saw your statement on the news.”

He shrugged. “They wanted me to make a really grovelling apology. They said it would draw a line under the whole thing. But I couldn’t do it. We argued about it for hours. That’s why it took so long.”

“Don’t you think they might have a point?” she asked.

“Well, thanks for your support.”

“Don’t be like that, Tim. You don’t know what it’s been like here today with all these reporters hanging about outside. I don’t think I can stand it if it goes on for much longer. And it’s not fair on the kids either.”

“What were you doing with my laptop?”

“Oh, um, I just had a problem with mine and needed to look something up on the web.”

Unconvinced, he went over to it and pushed the screen back open. As he’d suspected, it was showing the “History” page on his web browser.

“Well, this is great, isn’t it?” he said. “So now you think I’m a paedophile too.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” she said quickly, looking mortified. “I shouldn’t have done it – it was wrong of me and I’m ashamed of myself for thinking it. It’s just that – well, when you see all this stuff in the news, it’s hard to ignore. And then when I was checking my emails this evening, there was all this hate mail.

One of them had loads of image files attached to it. They were all pictures of children having disgusting things done to them. The email said something like ‘This is what your husband really likes. Why don’t you ask him where he gets it from?’ And I know I shouldn’t have, but I just had to check – I had to know that you weren’t like that.”

“But how could you believe that I might be a paedophile? I mean, how could you?”

“Look, I’ve said I’m sorry. What more d’you want me to say, Tim?”

He shook his head. “This just proves I was right not to apologise. We can’t go on like this, suspecting that paedophiles are lurking around every corner. That you of all people could fall victim to it – well, that shows how important it is to take a stand.”

Vicky didn’t answer.

“I was rather hoping that I had your support,” he added, pointedly.

“Oh Tim, why d’you have to make everything so difficult? No, I don’t believe you’re a paedophile. There - I’ve said it. And I’ve admitted I was wrong to go rummaging around on your laptop. But this isn’t just about you any more. We need to talk about what we’re going to do about all these reporters outside and the effect it’s having on the kids.”

He looked down at the laptop and then back at Vicky.

“You’ve never really supported my writing, have you?” he said.

She sighed. “Oh, is that what this is about? Well, I admit that I was sceptical at first. But I understand why you wanted

to do something with your life besides looking after the kids – really I do. It’s just that – well, look where it’s got us.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“For Christ’s sake, Tim. Do I have to spell it out for you? Pull the curtains and look out of the bloody window.”

“I just want to know that my wife doesn’t think I’m paedophile and supports what I’m doing.”

“How many times do I have to say it, Tim? *I don’t believe you’re a paedophile.* And I’m sorry about what I did. It was wrong. But I told you not to write that article, didn’t I? And now our house is surrounded by reporters. So if you want go off on some bloody crusade against paedophile hysteria, well, be my guest. But I can’t support you. Because my priority right now is getting our family back to some kind of normality. And if you really cared about me and the kids, that’d be your priority too.”

He shrugged, unable to think of anything to say. Vicky glared at him with an expression somewhere between despair and disgust.

* * * * *

The next morning he was woken up by the kids poking him in the face.

“Bye bye, Daddy,” said Isabel.

“What d’you mean, ‘bye bye’?” he said, blearily. “Where are you going? It’s Saturday. It’s not a school day.”

“Mum’s taking us to stay with Granny,” explained Sean.

“Oh. Right. I see.”

“Why are you sleeping on the sofa?” asked Isabel. “You haven’t even changed into your pyjamas.”

Ignoring her question, he threw off the duvet and went to find Vicky. She was waiting in the hallway.

“I would ask you to help me put them in the car,” she said, gesturing at the bags arranged in a neat row by the door. “But I think that might be counter-productive. So you’d better just stay in here out of sight.”

Peering out from behind the curtains of an upstairs window, he watched them struggle through the mass of reporters, climb into the car and drive away.

* * * * *

Now, four days later, he was sitting at the kitchen table in his underpants, wondering whether to call Vicky.

He had already decided against it countless times. Why should he make the first move? Surely it was up to her. After all, he was the victim in all this.

And each time he had put the phone back down.

But the longer he sat there, the more he became aware of the awful stillness in the house. How empty it felt without the children.

And for the first time, he understood why Tracy Harrison looked so completely lost.

He picked up the phone.

About the author

Paul Samael lives in the UK. He is the author of a novel, “In the future this will not be necessary” and several short stories. These are available to download free of charge as ebooks from Smashwords.com and Feedbooks.com and as PDFs from Scribd. For more background to “The Pick Up”, see: <http://www.paulsamael.com/blog/the-pick-up>

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