Seventh Grade Showdown

by Melanie Coffee

The year? I don’t like to talk about the year because it just *sounds* so long ago. Let’s just say that MC Hammer, well, his his music hit you … so hard… made you say … oh my Lord… Thank you for blessing me, with a mind to rhyme and two hyped feet …

At the time, I was growing up in Manhattan….… Kansas. Affectionately called The Little Apple. It was a college town of 58,000 people -- when you counted the 21,000 students. And I grew up in a Norman Rockwellian neighborhood of ranch houses and bike-riding boys with newspaper routes.

I had just started seventh grade and was sooo excited to be going to Manhattan Middle School, or MMS as we called it. No more of this elementary school shit.

I found there was something really foreign yet fascinating at MMS. The fights. We didn’t have many fights at my elementary school. But at MMS, each week there’d be a new match-up. The day would start with a whisper that one boy was going to beat up another boy when school was over. They were to meet where all the fights went down -- behind the church across the street.

By lunch the fight rumors buzzed around the school, with each fighter sending messages of deathly destruction to the other.

Then when the last bell of the day tolled, the school would be in a frenzy over the upcoming fight. We’d all rush across the street to the church, eager to see the bloodshed.

It always started with a lot of trash talking. Sometimes punches would be thrown, sometimes a teacher would come over and break it up, other times it’d just peter out.

But nothing and I mean nothing got the school buzzing like … the word of a girl fight. When a girl said to meet her behind the church, you could bet your MC Hammer pants that a nasty fight was going down. You know the kind, where the earrings came off, the best friend held the purse, sometimes Vaseline was spread on the face and the hair weave, braid, lock, chunk of blonde hair would just be flying.

It was funny in that it always seemed like it’d be the same group of girls who were fighting. One of them was Nichol Waters. She was one of those orange kids, you know she had orange freckles, orange hair and could tear a girl up. The other was Elyse Miller, who was about 75 pounds soaking wet, had a gheri curl and never lost a fight.

Seeing these fights made me scared of these girls because I’d never been in a fight. Ever. I never felt the need to, and didn’t piss anyone off enough to make them want to give me a beat down.

Then one day, a good friend of mine named Kenny, came up to me after Spanish class and told me he heard someone committed one of the greatest crimes possible against a 12-year-old girl.

Someone wrote on the girls bathroom wall about me.

A breathless Kenny told me it said: Melanie Coffee is a bitch!

Now Kenny was always in everyone’s business, but he was also my friend and looking out for me. He said he heard some girls talking about the infamous scrawling and then led me to the bathroom in question. I walked in and sure enough, scratched inside a stall there it was: “Melanie Coffee is a bitch” exclamation point.

My heart sank. Shit. How do I deal with this? First things first, I gotta cover it up. I whipped a marker out of my Trapper Keeper and blotted out the line.

Kenny was still waiting for me in the hallway. “Who do you think did this?” I asked him.

“I don’t know, I just heard some girls talking about it.”

“Who?”

“I don’t want to say, but it was a group of them and one of them said they saw Nichol Waters go in there right before it appeared. They said she did it.”

Great. Nichol? Orange Nichol Waters? This is just not good. Though I wasn’t known for my valor, she had sullied my name and so I’d have to do *something* about this.

“This is wrong, you didn’t do anything to her. You *are* going to talk to her, right?” Kenny asked.

“Um, yeah?” I really just wished he’d shut up about it, but he couldn’t keep a secret which meant soon all the school would know and I didn’t want to look like a simp.

And so I began to talk. And talk. And talk. I told everyone I heard that *bitch* Nichol Waters had written on the bathroom wall about me and I suuuureee as hell didn’t appreciate it.

In fact, I wanted to find out why. We didn’t have to meet behind the church. (Because between you and me, you couldn’t pay me enough to meet her behind the church.) but I told Kenny to tell her to meet me after class on the front steps of the school. (You know, within earshot of teachers in case they needed to save me.)

The last bell of the school day tolled. I raced outside with Kenny by my side. Already, there was a pack of kids waiting for the showdown.

I began talking smack. “She’d better come out here to give me a good explanation for what she did!”

The crowd ooooed and ooooohhhhed, and that only fed my proclamations of grandeur: “I don’t care if we *aaarrreee* on the front steps of the school, that bitch better not piss me off!”

Inside though, I was terrified. I’d seen her slam a girl’s head against the ground before. And here was my stupid ass, picking a fight with her. All that I could hope for is that a teacher would swoop in before my brains leaked out on the sidewalk.

And then there she was. Nichol Waters. Her hair looking oranger and fierier than I remember. Shit, here it goes.

“I heard you were writing on the bathroom wall about me!”

“Melanie I-“

“Why did you do that?” My voice grew louder. “I ain’t done shit to you! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Melanie –“

“Shut the fuck up, I can’t believe you wrote that. You want to know who’s a bitch? You’re a bitch!” By now I was screaming at her, the crowd was a good four people deep, and no damn teacher was in sight.

So I just kept screaming.

And then. Nichol Waters burst into tears.

We all fell quiet as she blubbered that she didn’t write that about me, she promised, she swore, and promised again that she never wrote on the bathroom wall.

I was stunned… and at a loss for words. “Well…. Good!” I spun around, stormed out of the crowd and boarded my bus.

Sitting alone in my seat I could still see Nichol standing on the front steps, shoulders shaking with heavy sobs. Her friends hugging her.

Kenny was giddily bouncing beneath my bus’s window: “You made Nichol Waters cry! You made Nichol Waters cry!”

“I know” I said just before closing the window. (Sigh.)

That was not supposed to happen. I never wanted to make her cry, I just didn’t want her to kill me. I couldn’t even remember all that I’d said, I’d lost control and hurt her, hurt her really bad. I didn’t know I could do that.

That evening, when talking to Kenny on the phone, he finally told me the names of the girls who told him about Nichol and her alleged scrawling.

The next day at school everyone was talking about how Melanie Coffee made Nichol Waters cry. I asked around and no one saw Nichol write anything or even talk about doing so.

Holes were appearing in Kenny’s story. I confronted him and finally he admitted it. He was the one who snuck into the girls bathroom and scrawled it on the wall.

I didn’t understand why, still don’t, and that was the end of our friendship. Nichol and I didn’t grow to be friends, but we also weren’t ever sworn enemies.

To this day, I can hear Nichol Waters’s sobs. Reminding me of the power of my words, and that just because I have still never been in a fight doesn’t mean I can’t bring someone a world of pain.