

## **The Art of Making Friends and Changing Schools**

An unfamiliar girl led him around the building. He felt uncomfortable to be led out of the auditorium and into the darkness by a total stranger. His first experiences at a new high school should not be spent engaging in suspicious pursuits with totally unknown members of the student body. He held her hand and allowed her to guide him through the scattered shadows towards the back of the building. A lock of her hair had escaped her pony tail. He was beguiled by the way it caressed her neck in the patches of light and he became mesmerized in its action to the point where he almost misread her body language as the situation changed. She spun and her face became sinister. Her long nails raked his cheek narrowly missing his eyes. He reacted automatically. In order to create space between them he picked her up by the front of her jacket and lofted her into the gathering crowd. There should not have been a crowd!

Brett had suffered years of abuse at the hands of a headmaster in a nearby high school. Being barely thirteen years of age he eventually rebelled in a way which was foolish. It allowed them to expel him. It had infuriated his enemies among the administration to discover they could not put a student out into the world below a certain age and they had to find a school which would take him until he was of an age.

It was towards the end of the first term of the tenth year of school. (Fourth form.) The fourth year of high school) Since he had been expelled things had been happening quickly. Brett arrived without the uniform of his new school and without text books. They told him not to worry about turning up for the last few days of that term but, strangely, they invited him to the end of term dance.

For him the night of the dance began outside the single-storey assembly hall at the top end of the school. The hall was like a small warehouse. There were kitchens and a cafeteria along the back. Outside in the night behind the kitchens were delivery lanes with basketball courts in deep dugouts on one side and a grassy driveway the other side. Student's toilets were inside and seemed folded away like a beetle's wings while a wide

staircase down to the main quadrangle seemed designed to fling students forth from the front doors.

Inside the uncomfortably close space were strobe lights and a disco ball. A DJ ran a console which belched smoke and distorted bass. Students danced and milled about appearing and disappearing like denizens from some electric wizard's spell.

In the boy's toilets both guys and girls hung out smoking and exhaling through the open windows. In one of the booths a girl seemed to be on her knees. In those days he didn't know what it might mean so he thought she had been sick. She was struggling to roll a cigarette and using the lid of the toilet to steady her tobacco and rolling papers rather than anything else though.

There was an intense argument about a rumor with quite a few students arguing if you added Aspirin to Coca Cola you got a drug. Brett knew if he had the answer to that question his credibility would be established. He felt isolated and hungered to be among friends. The same group milling about and smoking changed their subject so it was about the stringy bits of bananas being dried and smoked like cannabis. You could safely bet nothing like recreational drugs had arrived in this part of the world yet.

Every now and again several students would lift someone out of the window and then later lift them back in. A group of teachers appeared simultaneously inside and outside catching everyone with smoke still pouring out of their cheeks. They herded the transgressors back into the hall and did not seem to see the girl on her knees despite the fact her shoes were well beyond the door. A few moments after the teachers had left everybody was back.

Brett was struggling. He felt like a fish out of water. Nobody talked to him and they seemed to resent his attempts to initiate conversation. The people he knew and had expected to be there weren't there and he began to suspect this wasn't the dance night for students from his part of the school. He should have spent more time analyzing it all and had the sense to flee.

The flashing lights and the music stopped. Low light came on around the hall and there did not seem to be very many students or teachers in sight. A girl wandered up and took him by the hand. She asked him if he wanted to come outside with her. She seemed annoyed and surprised when he said no. She explained she wanted a cigarette but was

scared to be outside on her own. He still said no because there had been teachers at all the entrances and he was tired of trouble. He didn't smoke and he had never seen her before.

She pressed him by pointing out all the teachers were gone for their own cigarette breaks. She was right. There were no teachers in sight. He went with her. He should have thought about that. Why would there be no teachers at all? It was a surprise party! People were waiting for him.

The girl had started it. A crowd of students closed in behind him. To his front some large boys drifted through the crowd which parted in front of them like autumn leaves on a lake parting before the wakes of swans. In the dim light they seemed to appear out of the hedge along the cafeteria delivery road. One of them had been drinking hard and was red faced and breathless. He was almost wetting his pants with excitement as he made his challenge.

“One at a time or three at once!” he bellowed. He was quite worked up! Was that a line from the Three Musketeers or Debbie does Dallas?

There had been no warning and the challenge was a surprise. These students seem to have heard some myth about Brett's desire to be in street fights. When he tried to clear himself some thinking space he discovered the ring of students had closed and was forcing him into a space no larger than the reach of a short man's arm. When he pushed back against them he was punched and kicked in the head and kidneys several times. One of the sneak attackers was wearing a big ring or knuckle dusters and Brett's brow started to bleed into his eye. There was no time to negotiate. His intention, such as it was, would have been to escape. First the ring of students had to be driven back. He swung left and one of the students harrying him from the back screamed and fell to an elbow strike. Then he attacked again catching a second one of the students attacking from the other side. The student's nose blossomed like a slimy rose and he fell away. The crowd drew back a few meters. Each time he was forced back after that they kept far enough away to avoid those elbows. He had 'funny-boned' himself and every mote of his body was pressed into hiding how badly it hurt. One hand buzzed like it was wired to a battery. Not everybody's fury was focused on Brett. There were a couple of fights between students from competing gangs who stood too close in the crowded space.

The fighters in front awaited an answer to the challenge expecting to be asked to fight one at a time or for their victim to beg for mercy. The crowd had already assured him how it was with them. The shorter one was stocky and seemed to stagger and have trouble retaining his balance. He moved into a flat-footed, bow-legged, wrestler's stance. With his arms spread and his head thrown back he hooted at the sky. Brett put his foot on the guy's chest and drove him backwards into a stack of metal rubbish bins where he scattered cans and fell on his backside with a satisfying crash. The tallest fighter was in the middle of the little group. He politely put his hand out to stop Brett's forward-falling motion. Brett thanked him by cuffing the side of his head. Hard! It was too dark to see for sure but the tall guy's eyes might have rotated in their sockets. The other standing fighter and the tall one charged and swung big "haymaker" punches. Brett dropped into the space the crowd had left and the fighters tangled themselves trying to hit his retreating form.

He chose to deal with all three at once. There was nothing brave about it. They were three undisciplined brawlers. Perhaps they had all been drinking. They were acting on adrenalin. If he had fought one at a time they would not have been fair about it. Even if they were fair the first guy to fight would have used up all Brett's strength. He wasn't going to win. He wasn't going to worry about winning. Brett needed them to push him backwards a few meters to where an alleyway went off this driveway at ninety degrees into a dark cul-de-sac. He could outrun them if he made it before his body had taken too much damage.

For fighters in this kind of street situation there was always the matter of energy reserves. To be effective aggressive striking and grappling use massive amounts of energy. You can punch some guys all day and in the end you will be standing there unable to lift a fist with a half dead idiot clamped to your back and two still to fight. The motion of defending yourself by jamming and redirecting uses much less energy.

He dodged and wove and took shot after shot despite redirecting as many as he could. A few times he tied them up like twists of wool but they hit him and they hit him hard. He knew he could not be seen to be working his way backwards to the alleyway or the crowd would block him. He pushed forward and took more damage so they could physically force him back and each time his forward motion was checked the surrounding

students growled with approval. Finally they were there. They were beside the alleyway and there was a break in the crowd.

Brett was hurt. His left eye was swollen shut and bleeding copiously. A tooth had gone through his lip and it was also swollen and bleeding. Either a ring or those knuckle dusters had put another cut in his lips. He had expected to have teeth knocked out. His nose was busted badly enough to limit how much he could breath through it and how badly he would snore for the rest of his life. Blood had clogged it and was running down the back of his throat in copious amounts. He would cough and spray blood every few breaths.

The other team was fine. The two who had been elbowed weren't seen again and they could not have been fine. Brett was mostly ducking and blocking and jamming so the main fighters were exhausted while their limbs were bruised. He would later cop a lot of disdain about this. People thought he was trying to hurt his opponents and was unable. Defending was a good plan, considering what there was to work with, but there was no good way out and it didn't look good

He spun and crouched ready to start sprinting but the short guy had filled the gap. It was just bad luck. The darkness of safety was at the end of a path through that guy's chubby body. He made like the Energizer Bunny and took exactly the same stance he had taken before he was tipped into the rubbish bins. He wanted to wrestle. He demanded it. He knew once he had clamped onto Brett the others could safely attack. He stood with his legs spread wide and his belly low. His arms were spread and he even threw his head back and howled. In his dreams the short guy had imagined a moment where he was in an actual fight and in his imagination he saw himself looking splendid doing this little ritual. He had yet to understand he was dreaming and about to get hurt. This wasn't a sports club wrestling bout! Brett dropped to one knee and punched him twice in the groin. Brett had become angry and punched hard and low. For that he paid. The gods do not forgive meanness. The wrestler bent over and fought to breathe. Drool and vomit ran from his nose and mouth. Brett had managed to act with discipline until then despite all the venom and hurt aimed at him. He grabbed the guy's belt at the back of his pants as he toppled forward. His other hand grabbed the neck of his shirt. Brett tossed him like a sack face-first into a brick pillar. It felt so wrong his mind began to consider it and he slowed down.

It gave the crowd time to notice where he was pointing and cut they him off. Maybe he had been slowing down anyway.

There seemed to be one last chance forming. Beside him to the left was empty of students and he could sense silence behind me. Maybe he could bust out through the ring of students. Thinking of finding some fighting space and pulling them away from the entrance to the alley he hurled himself back. There was nothing there. His foot caught on something, maybe the bricks along the edge of the basketball court retaining wall. Suddenly he was horizontal. It wasn't even long enough to blink. There was nothing. It was a long way to fall. He didn't know what happened then but years later he suffered the annoying thought that if he hadn't fallen so badly he might have died fighting there.

### ***In the Darkness; Afterwards.***

The night seemed to groan and he floated through thick oceans of pain. He willed himself into the pain and towards the shifting shadows. The world seemed to be made of dark, hot, lava and he struggled to be free of it. He threshed and yelled as though he was fighting some foe. Deep in his chest some part of him was grievously injured. The sudden move tore at it so he opened his mouth to moan but the attempt to draw air into his lungs hurt even more and he gasped and had to be content with twitching.

Something caressed his face. He struggled to comprehend the shadow play in front of his face. The night drew itself into fractured panes and then into a scene. He came to realize he was sprawled across the lap of a young woman. One of his eyes didn't work. Trying to talk only produced an unintelligible grunt and a splatter of bloody saliva from his swollen lips. Trying to tell her he worried about his sight he spluttered something unintelligible. She laid him on the ground and told him she would get water and wash the blood from his eye so she could see how badly it was hurt. Don't ask how she deciphered that request. Maybe she was telepathic. He was certainly thinking hard enough. His mind ran rampant. He wondered if his face had been ground to hamburger meat and his body murdered. The spine tingling possibility of being dead and her being some form of angel come to bring him peace loomed like a probability. It hurt too much to be that!

Under the light of a full moon the girl walked back across the ovals to the school. There she found a waxed cardboard milk carton, filled it with water, and walked back to the broken boy she had discovered. She drew him to her despite the blood flecking onto her white jumper. She used her previously spotless white kerchief to sponge the blood from his eyes. They were swollen almost shut but once the blood was washed out the light broke through and the cold water caused some of the swelling to go down.

They rested in the chilly grass for more than an hour and she went back several times for more water. He was soaked in blood and when she asked if it was his he didn't know what to say. Maybe? Probably? Some of it. Maybe all of it? There seemed to be too much just to have come from him. He jerked away every time she tried to rinse a tender spot but eventually he was recognizable as a blood soaked boy rather than a bag of bloody meat and his lips had shrunk enough to talk if he was careful.

He couldn't tell her how he had gotten across the sporting ovals. The basketball court was lit up in the distance and he guessed the students and teachers cleared out without checking. It was a long way to fall onto concrete. He didn't think it likely he had crawled across the oval on his own though. He was in too much pain.

The question straining his thoughts was about what a girl was doing on the sports grounds of an empty school. She was his age and would later be in his classes but now she was new to him. She wore a soft cashmere sweater, skin-tight white jeans and white, ankle length, pixie boots. She carried a tiny white shoulder bag. The aromas of soap and cigarettes conflicted in the air about her.

She had told her mother she was going to the dance. It was something she would never actually do she admitted. It wasn't her scene at all. Her little group of girl friends had a secret place in an old farm house nearby where they were out of the weather and could show a light. They could lock the world out. They would sit for hours and share cigarettes and talk. Mostly talk. This night they had lost track of time and she had been hurrying home but despite that she stopped several hours to nurse the head of a boy she thought was dying.

She took off her soft sweater and used it to pillow his head which, mortifyingly, still dripped blood. She sat in the chill in a bra and jeans using him slumped across her to find some protection from the breeze. He couldn't risk her being here when the sun came

up. It hurt, but less than it should have, when she helped him to his feet. Every breath wrenched at his chest and he hobbled across the oval breathing in small gasps. His jacket had been left undamaged in the garbage around the basketball court and he wrapped it around her. She could keep it for a while so she didn't have to wear her blood soaked sweater.

It took several hours for the broken boy to navigate the distance to his home. It was normally a twenty minute walk. He stayed out of sight as much as he could by traveling up the dark suburban streets away from the arterial roads. He would move into the shadows if he saw a vehicle's lights. It took so long because every breath was hard and he still only had limited sight through his swollen eyes.

He went past his parent's house. His mother had been deeply disturbed by the forced move to a new school and his father had been reacting with anger and suggesting the teenager was at fault. He was at fault. Mia Culpa. He had been a thirteen year old boy under constant abuse from the headmaster of his school. He had been goaded to fight back and was paying the cost.

Down the road, around a corner, then up a short steep road was his "girl next door." If you stood on the front porch of his parent's house you could look across a mosaic of about twenty roofs in the valley and see her front porch rising above them on the other side. She was a beloved and trusted friend. He called her family his "second family" to their faces and was welcome in their home even when he had initiated some hair brained scheme and was trying to escape his fate.

He tapped on her window until she woke and looked out. It was almost dawn and he didn't think her parents would welcome his presence before they went to work. He was wrong. She looked out at him. Her eyes opened wide and she squealed and disappeared into her parent's room, waking them. In a few moments they had wrapped him in blankets and were drawing him up the steep stairs to their front porch. He couldn't imagine what he must have looked like in the changing shadows of night. It was a result of their long association she had recognized him at all.

They stood around him as he sat on a stool in the spotless kitchen. Every light in the house was on as though to frighten off any demons he had inadvertently carried in with him. Her mother was a short but determined and energetic woman who took control



of the situation. From the light in her eyes this was the first time she would get to try covering a beaten and bruised face with a chunk of sirloin. It was a landmark and she relished the idea. It was an amazing bit of sirloin she discovered thawing in the fridge.

The father was a tall slender engineer from Santa Monica in California. From the desolate look in his eyes he wanted his steak dinner before it was draped over a boy's battered profile. He would do his fatherly duty if he must but he was already mourning that bit of meat. Brett put his hand out to stop the arc of the steak heading for his face and the whole family gasped at the blood and cuts on his hands and sleeves.

“Use frozen peas.” He tried to say.

With all the authority of a child who had suffered blackened eyes more than anyone should he said. “It is a waste of good steak if you have a packet of frozen peas instead.”

The engineer leaned over so their heads almost touched.

“God bless you boy, I have my mouth ready for that bit of meat”

It was a sign of how flustered the mother was when she commented she only had frozen beans. She looked annoyed at herself. She went to get a tea-towel from the linen closet in the bathroom so there wouldn't be too much cold directly on his skin. When she came back she decided the use of a packet of frozen beans on someone's face was untidy and crushed some ice cubes instead. The younger brother hovered about with his eyes wide and a look of curiosity. He was a good little guy but Brett had often sensed some strange emotional turmoil and from his own experiences Brett knew he was finding the transfer from his American culture to this place was not going down well.

A few weeks later the newly polished and almost healed student turned up to the beginning of the second term of year 10. He was in a new uniform. The pants and shoes and shirt were the same but the jumper and tie were blue instead of olive green.. Anyone who knew him would know he was walking gingerly and trying to avoid doing anything sudden. There were few who knew him here though.

## **Getting on with it**

He had no blazer. His father had balked at the price of the blazer on top of the new books and clothes. They had also been unable to find one in his size in the middle of the year. Brett had been placed among the lowest classes in the year. He had previously been in all top classes and was a top student so the change to the company of unmotivated students and teachers was difficult. The students in lower classes often could not spell or do simple arithmetic. They played games and got into trouble. A few of the boys had a challenge to see which of them would get the most lashes with the cane. They made a joke out of the school's attempt to literally whip sensibility into troubled lives.

None of them was allowed to play sport. Brett tried to get into a sporting team but he was an athlete and swimmer rather than a team player and didn't have the knowledge of rules he needed. The school specialized in cricket and football. It also sabotaged his attempts by doing things like putting two regional "bodyline" bowlers up against him when he tried out for the house cricket team

The weather quickly became cold, far too cold for the wool jumper had he a blazer to go over it. He wore a big green military trench coat to school that day.

"Hey. Hey!" He looked up to see a man yelling and gesticulating furiously.

"You are a little barbarian! How dare you dress like that on my sports oval?"

The man, later to identify himself as the "Boy's Master" grabbed Brett by the shoulder and dragged him across the asphalt quadrangle and down a long hall to offices that looked out the front doors of the administration block. He admonished the boy bitterly all the time with phrases like.

"Who the hell do you think you are coming to this school out of uniform." and, "I don't know what you did in your last place but we care about our school here."

Brett tried to explain his parents hadn't been able to get the proper blazer on such short notice but stopped when a student in a red ski jacket went past without comment from the master. Nobody else was wearing the uniform blazer as outer clothing in those frigid temperatures. It wasn't about the jacket.

The offices in the administration block were warm and well lit. The master took him into the right hand middle office and gestured to a shallow cupboard. He opened the door of the cupboard and waved his hand indicating a range of slender canes standing in a slotted frame. There were thin bamboo stems, gnarled sticks wide as a broom handle and

half a meter long. There was one long fiberglass whip with a metal core. He chose that one from the rack with great ceremony before gesturing for Brett to stand on a mark side-on to him. Later most of his male class mates would comment they thought the instrument was illegal to use on students.

The man was strong and tall. He was wearing a bulky hand knitted sweater, tan corduroy pants and brown suede shoes. Brett stared at his clothing resisting the urge to beg for mercy. The man swung the cane up preparing to strike and Brett's hands retracted to his waist. He couldn't stop himself. The master let the big cane fall and as the boy put his hands back out he lifted it hard and hit him on the knuckles as hard as he might have hit the fingertips. Brett's arms folded back defensively and the big man whipped his hands several times.

“Get them back out!”

He put his hands out and the master swung viciously while rising onto his toes to get the greatest velocity from his weapon. It flexed down sharply as it struck and was lifted hard before the victim could flinch so it caught the knuckles in another painful back-strike. The child made a noise between a groan and a whimper and saw savage joy in his tormenter's eye. Every strike was backed with an upwards counter strike and Brett thought the six lashes of his caning might have blown out to fourteen or fifteen. One had caught him across the fingernails and there was blood showing beneath two of them. One would later go black and fall off. There were blood blisters on the palm of his hand and an open cut on his knuckles. His wrist had a long purple and yellow bruise spreading across it

His classmates were waiting when he got out. Nobody commented on it but they drew around him and chattered warmly. A few days later he was again walking across the oval. He had stopped wearing the offending coat and was desperately cold in the uniform blue jumper with just a shirt and singlet under it. He shoved his hands in his pockets to try and keep a little warmer.

“Hey! Hey you!” What am I going to have to do to get you to respect your uniform? How dare you walk across my quadrangle with your hands in your pockets?”

This time Brett received the full set of vicious lashes plus all the back-strikes across his fingers with that cruel whip. The blood blisters hadn't healed. They spilled open and now his hands were bloody.

The class again gathered around him at lunch and included him in their conversations. The classmates who had been comparing numbers of beatings they had earned joked that he would beat them all if he kept this up. If the beatings kept on at the pace they had so far he might win notoriety right across the school region as well. They told him of the small fixes they used to try and cut down the pain in their hands although the number of lashes and the style of them made the group doubt anything would help. One of them used pine sap to make a sticky mess he was sure padded the fingers. One showed him how to bend his hand just enough to prevent a solid hit. They warned him not to lower his hands and were outraged when he told them he was getting knuckle-whipped even when he held his hands steady.

Then it was the next day. They had been gathered in the canteen when the order came to sit outside. Everybody looked at him. There was a freezing wind between the buildings and no reason to send them out into it. His classmates went out and formed a circle of seats. They leant together to keep warm, the girls and the boys. The girl on either side of him opened her coat and as much as they could they tried to protect him from the wind. It was working and they were all chattering happily when the call came. It was a different voice this time. It was a woman.

"How dare you interfere with my girls? Who said an animal like you could canoodle with these girls?"

The students hadn't said anything before but now several demanded she leave him alone. This new person was the "Girl's Mistress". She was a small, half starved, gray thing wearing a thick jumper over a gray flannel blouse and a pleated grey wool skirt which fell to her knees. She had heavy gray stockings and flat, laced, black leather, shoes. Her silvery hair was an untidy pile on her head. Her glasses were big with thick frames and the eyes staring through them were clouded and bloodshot. Her bulbous nose had the visible veins of a persistent alcoholic. Her aged face was purple with rage. She waved her clip board around as though it was a weapon but each time she did she had to fight to stay on her feet. A small shy-looking girl stood nearby staring at the ground and holding a tea

cup. Later they would tell him she always had a first year girl make her cups of tea and hide her gin bottle in the staff kitchen. You weren't supposed to notice but she had a snoot full this day.

She shoved her way between the girls and tried to drag him over the seats by his hair. Failing to drag him off his feet she further scattered the students and grabbed his arm trying to shake him and finding him too big. She sated her ire by grabbing his necktie and dragging him all the way to the boy's master on the other side of the school. She looked like a small angry dog being walked by a disheveled ox.

"This animal was touching my girls." She howled to the sympathetic master of boys before staggering back out the door and retiring into the next office out of sight. In the corner of his eye he saw the small girl appear from there and head off to do her duty with the gin.

The master indicated Brett should stand on the mark he used to get the range for his cane. Brett opened his hands which were still covered in ruined blood blisters from the day before and hoped the man would see them and have some mercy. He didn't. By the time Brett walked out of that office the cane was bloody and his hands were swollen open. Several of his knuckles were purple and swollen. He wondered if any of his fingers were broken. He went into the first empty classroom and stood shuddering and crying until he could control himself.

It was still lunch break. With him gone the rest of the students had been allowed out of the wind so he joined them. One girl he didn't know clung to his arm and rested her head on his chest for a moment before sitting down with the others. The "baddest boy in the school" came up with his gang and sat opposite staring at the carnage on Brett's hands. He was a giant with a shock of curly black hair over thick rimmed glasses. His shoes might never have been polished and proudly wore a hole in the toe. His tie had unraveled almost a third of the way back up its length and the zipper on his jacket had been torn and was held with safety pins. Brett knew he had a heart of gold. And years later Brett would help him fill out his identity forms and teach him to read Basic English.

"You are going to beat my number of lashes. It took me all year to get them and you are heading to pass me already."

His little group all nodded wisely and sat staring at the carnage. Every last one of them had experienced the painful lashes but they got two or four for most things and never back to back.

“He must really hate you.” said one boy Brett had never heard speak before.

Some of the girls loved lost causes and rescuing injured animals. One of them unwrapped his lunch and he tried to hold a sandwich between his thumb and forefinger but the hand was too badly damaged. She would have fed him but the look in the eyes of the other female students made him decide to miss lunch.

The students carried their books in “ports” which in this case were massive brown plastic suitcases. They were eventually banned because they ruined so many children’s backs. They were still in use here though. Brett tried to get his hand through the handle so he could go to class but it was too swollen. One of the boys carried it for him. The teacher in the class didn’t say anything to him or look at him. Later as everyone left to go home the physical education teacher came and offered to lock it up in the teacher’s lounge until he came back. That was “if” he came back.

Next week there was a class outing to Warragamba Dam. It was a desirable day out. It wouldn’t be as good as the day they had at the Wollongong steel works in first form (year 7) with his previous school. The workers had emptied great vats of molten metal and exploded sparks all over the workshop floor to entertain the students. The girl’s mistress had sidled up to him as he left to go home.

”Have you paid your fees?”

He nodded thinking he had done everything right and she would go away.

”Have you handed in your signed permission note?”

He was amazed to hear her cackle like a drama-group pantomime witch. She reached up and steadied herself with his collar using it to pull him down to her level.

“Forget it boyo. I will not have animals like you causing trouble with my students. No amount of permission slips or money will get some devil half-breed a berth among these lovely kids. You can spend the day in the detention room and cleaning the school grounds. I will be watching to make sure you stay all day!”

Next morning he took his bag and disconsolately made his way to a classroom he thought might be the one she meant. Several students piled into the room behind him and

gathered around looking triumphant. He thought they were going to make a stand and join him in his detention. One girl made him put down his bag and the whole group towed him back across the quadrangle to the disappearing line of students getting aboard the bus. They stood him at the door and smiled about as hard as someone can. The girl's mistress roughly shoved him out of her way as she got on board and wouldn't look at him again.

"Most of us have been very upset with what has been happening," one boy explained.

Last few days our parents have been calling the school and telling them they want to move us to other schools. We don't really know what final decisions were made but you are allowed to come with us today!"

They dragged him down the back of the bus as a group so he was as far from the girl's mistress as possible. Seated students touched his arm or nodded in support as he lurched down the aisle. The bus took off before they got there. The driver must have heard something of what was happening because he made thumbs up when Brett caught his eye from the back seat. He may have been a parent.

There must have been a passage of time. Nobody spoke. The girl's mistress kept adding fluid from a bottle in a crocheted knitting bag to a cup of tea on an actual matching saucer until she had to be full of pure gin. The bus stopped and the students were given pamphlets with the history and features of the great dam. There was a talk in front of a white board. They were instructed on what they could and could not do while on the tour. The great dam supplied most of the water to the distant city and the suburbs on its outskirts. The students walked in single file through the workings, marveled at the sluices and got vertigo looking down the hundred meters of the spillway. The girl's mistress floated past him gathering students if they wandered and leading them like sheep between each item of interest.

It was the final treat for the day before heading back to school. The suspension bridge! It stood almost a hundred meters above the valley in front of the dam. It was originally built to get workers to the other side of the gully during the building of the great structure before its opening in 1960. It hung loosely during the period our little band experienced it. It was not meant for public consumption although everyone who could get

on it and ride the ripples did. It was damaged beyond repair in a bushfire in 2001 but that was science fiction rather than history to these students.

Two girls walked onto the narrow structure and it swung in the wind. They were followed by the girl's mistress who was still holding a tea cup and saucer in one hand and her clip board in the other. The small first year girl who had been her companion, now carried the crocheted bag in which we guessed resided the gin, tried to accompany her mistress. She moved to follow her onto the bridge but one of the girls put out a hand and she was herded to a group who milled nervously nearby obviously having no intention of going across.

Several students ran on behind the mistress. In this time there were few safety measures. It was a suspension bridge and it was suspended which was believed to be enough. The bridge began to ripple and rise and fall. Every body laughed and yelled like they were at a rodeo. Girl's mistress did a kind of rubber leg thing where she bent as the bridge rose and straightened as it dropped. It worked while the ripples only measured a meter but suddenly the bridge answered the cadence created by the parade of girls and the ripple went three meters in the air lifting the teacher before leaving her hovering in space with her legs wind-milling. She seemed to have decided for the sake of dignity she would simply walk until it was over or she died. She dropped, catching the bridge on its rise with a loud slap. She still held the tea cup, the saucer and the clip board. The possibility of her death seems to have suddenly entered the student's minds also. Their eyes opened wide and they looked at where they were. Their poor teacher floated on a narrow plank walkway almost a hundred meters above the rocks. They would survive. They were young. Their poor girl's mistress had no resources except her alcoholic blood and her refusal to allow them to strip her of her dignity.

They acted as human shock absorbers and stopped the ripples. As the almost living bridge shivered in the rising wind the girl's mistress marched off and straight into the bus. The bus blew its horn and everyone leapt aboard. She wouldn't allow the driver to wait. Nobody said a word. She hit her crocheted bag hard during the trip emptying several cups of the gin. Her small companion clasped her hands in her lap and tried to become even smaller.



The bus drove into the cul-de-sac to that spot on the pavement where buses unloaded in front of the school. The girl's mistress left before it had properly stopped. She didn't say a word or look up. The students didn't speak. They looked into each other's eyes and wondered how bad it was about to get. Nobody dared say it. The mistress went into her office in the admin building. They heard later she was seen leaving in her car and had found her way to a drug rehab. She was gone and not returning.

The next day many students in year ten didn't come to school. Everyone looked grim. The students who had been responsible for the bridge whipping up and down expected the full force of dire punishments to fall on their lives. They didn't even say it was unfair because the bridge ought not to whip so much when they just wanted it to roll a little. They didn't say it. Nobody spoke of it.

One group thought the school would blame Brett. It might have been designed to give the authorities a cause to expel him again. At least it was a chance to give him another whipping. Nobody suggested it much mattered he hadn't been involved

. The hallways were free of the usual chatter. The history of cruel treatment of one student now hovered at the back of every student's mind as something which might be extended to them. The morale of that entire year had been damaged. Their trust in the school to treat them fairly was weakened and the idea the school would protect them was lost. It had been replaced by a sense of pending punishments and harm. They were scared. What they saw in each other's eyes was raw despair and a sense of what they had lost. For a little while life became real and the school grounds were no longer a refuge.

The call came during lunch. A mature woman in a green tartan dress and a tweed jacket walked up to their group and asked which one was him. Nobody would look at him. He knew they were ashamed for being relieved it wasn't them. He didn't care. From the moment he heard his name the pain was all his. Nobody else would share it. He wanted it to be someone else as well. The woman walked in front of him looking busy and efficient. She motioned him into the master of boy's office and then accelerated smoothly out of the moment. His tormenter stood in bewildering stillness before motioning him into the room. The windows looked out to the school and a garden. The world ended at that glass today. All life he was concerned with was contained in a few feet of carpeted hell. He stood on the spot and his stomach writhed.

The hands of the master were empty. He suddenly threw open his arms and embraced the boy. Brett exploded. He punched and kicked and bit and clawed like an animal. The effort threw him backwards over the coffee table and chairs in the room.

“No, no! You don’t understand! They told me you were a devil who would destroy everything you touched. You are just a boy. You are a normal fourteen year old boy!”

Brett knew students had been removed from classes and were asking to be allowed to join different schools because of what was being done to him. He deduced many of those schools would be demanding explanations. He got back to his feet and stood glaring and shivering.

“The parents came to us and told us they were upset by your treatment. I have only been here as long as you have so I am changing the way I treat you. You still face some of the old teachers who were with him for years and years. They were his students. They won’t stop.”

He waved his arm over a lounge chair and a coffee table nestled out of sight behind the door.

“Come here. Let this be your refuge. No one can see you here and you can catch up on work. I even have a private kettle and coffee mugs in here”

Brett thought of the classes he was in now. There was no work. There was certainly no homework or class work to be getting on with. They were just social clubs He didn’t say anything. He left the boy’s master and went out to the students in the lunch hall. They asked him what it had been about and how bad was it. He told them it was nothing. He told them he didn’t think the school even knew about the problems at Warragamba Dam.