

The Tuck Shop Kid

By Pat Flynn

PAT FLYNN grew up running around an old dairy farm in Queensland, before moving to the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra on a tennis scholarship. After playing and coaching on the professional circuit he became a teacher, where his observations of young people-their interests and stories-led him to writing a book.

Now he writes books for a living, in a house near the beach on the Sunshine Coast. He likes to start the day off with a surf and end it walking along the beach with his wife and son.

His novel, *To the Light*, was shortlisted for the 2006 CBCA Awards in the Younger Readers category.

Chapter 1



HOT FOOD

Meat Pie	\$2.40
Potato Pie	\$2.40
Mathematical Pie	\$3.16
Hot Dog	\$1.70
Cheese Dog	\$1.90
Homework-Eating Dog	\$2.00
Hamburger with Salad	\$2.80
Hamburger without Salad	\$2.60
Cheeseburger	\$3.00
Cheeseburger without Cheese	\$2.80
Chicken Nuggets	\$0.40
Gold Nuggets (served in pan)	\$40.00
Hot Chips	\$1.50
Warmish Chips	\$1.25
Chip off the Old Block	\$1.00

Some kids star at sport, some are young Einsteins, some are born bullies and a couple make careers as class clowns. Some girls are pretty, some boys are tough, some can do backflips and some make you laugh. Some are poets and they know it. 'Every child has a special talent,' Mrs O'Neill, our school principal, always says, 'even if some of you don't know what it is yet.'

I'm lucky, I reckon, 'cause I know what I'm good at. It mightn't make me prime minister or an Olympic athlete or win me a prize on speech night, but at the beginning of lunch it's me that kids want to talk to. It's me they come to for advice.

Andy Reynolds jogs up as I enter the covered area. Around us kids run and scream, letting off some lunchtime steam.

'One ninety," he says.

'Summin hot?' I say.

'Course.'

'Drink?'

'If possible.'

I don't even have to think, let alone look at a menu. The answer pops from my mouth like bubblegum. 'Two party pies and a plain milk. But if you ask nice you can get two squeezes of chocolate topping for nix. Shake it up and you got your very own milkshake.'

Andy squints, trying to remember what I'm saying.

'And I'd go to Jan 'cause Mrs Dwyer is mad at the world lately,' I add.

'Thanks, Matt. You're a legend!' He runs off.

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'I know.'

Yep, I mightn't be the smartest, fastest or best looking, but I've got a special talent all right. It's called 'tuckshop'.

Trouble with giving other kids advice is that I don't have time to plan my own lunch, which is what I need to do right now. I'm leaning towards a meat pie (with sauce, of course) washed down by a slush puppy followed by a rainbow Billabong for dessert, but I'm not sure. Perhaps a cheeseburger, passiona and jelly cup? It's a tough decision. Tough but good.

There's no rush, because it's a good five minutes of waiting. Some kids, as soon as the teacher lets them out, run like the wind to make it to the front of the tuckshop line. When you've got a gut like mine, however, it's much easier to make wind than run like it. And to tell you the truth, I don't mind the waiting. The sense of anticipation, the smell of fried food, the smell of girls (let's face it, this is as close as I'm likely to get for a while) - it's all part of the tuckshop experience. Besides, what else am I gonna do during lunch break? Play 'chase the fat kid'? Not much fun when I'm the fat kid. After tuckshop I usually play handball, and 'cause I'm hopeless at handball I spend most of the game standing in line. I'd rather be in a line that smells like food than a line that smells like sweat.

Kayla slots in behind me, and butterflies zip around my tummy like pinballs. My tummy can fit a lot of butterflies so I'm full-on packing it. Kayla and I have this

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love/hate relationship. I love her and she hates me. No, that's not true. She's pretty nice to me sometimes. Though normally there's a reason.

She pokes me in the back. If anyone else did it I'd be annoyed, but from Kayla it feels like a massage. I turn around.

'What are you looking at, fatzilla?' says Tasha, the girl behind Kayla.

'Your ugly face,' I say. Tasha and I have a hate/hate relationship.

'You don't need tuckshop. You've got ten rolls under your shirt.' Tasha loves to have the last insult.

But so do I. 'At least I don't scare little kids just by looking at them.'

'Stop it, you two,' says Kayla. She looks at Tasha. 'I want to talk to my friend Matt for a second, okay?'

Tasha pokes her tongue at me.

Kayla puts an arm on my shoulder. I wish she'd take it off because I can't concentrate on what she's saying, and I know the only way to impress her is to give good advice.

'I haven't eaten all day,' she says. 'I'm *starving*'.

I know technically that's not true, but I don't disagree. 'How much you got?'

'See, that's the thing.' She paints on a smile that lights up her face and my insides. 'I really, really, *really* want a hamburger, but I've only got two dollars.'

'You can get a sausage roll and fifty cents worth of

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lollies,' I suggest.

She rolls her eyes.

'Three chicken nuggets and a Sunnyboy?'

She looks at me with puppy-dog eyes and gives my shoulder a squeeze. 'C'mon, Matt. Please? I'll be your best friend. Forever.'

One of the golden rules of the tuckshop line is never give in to scabs. Once you become known as a soft touch they'll come back again and again, like pigeons. I've had boys begging on their hands and knees, girls turning on fake tears like fountains, and not weakened.

Then Kayla came along. There are good scabs, there are pros, and there's Kayla. She uses touch, eye-contact, voice expression, promises - if scabbing was a subject, she'd get an A+ for sure.

As I give her 80 cents, our hands come together, if only for a second.

'I love you!' she says.

Even though I know she doesn't, hearing it makes me feel all warm inside, like hot chips.