

# Chapter Eight

## FRUIT AND SALADS

Apple, Banana, Orange, Pear	\$0.70
Special - pair of pears	\$1.00
Fruit Salad - small	\$2.00
Fruit Salad - large	\$3.00
Fruit Salad - ginormous served in swimming pool)	\$100.00
Garden Salad	\$2.20
Garden Salad with Chicken, Ham, Tuna, or Roses	\$3.00
Tossed Salad	\$2.50
Tossed Salad with Duck!	\$2.50
Boiled Egg - Hard	\$0.60
Boiled Egg - Runny	\$0.60
Boiled Egg - Walky	\$0.60
Boiled Egg - Talky	\$0.60
Moderately Warm Egg	\$0.50

*Pat Flynn*

Something else is fallacious, antilogous and subreptitious in my life. Mum's home early every afternoon this week.

'Do you even work anymore?' I ask.

'Yeah,' she says with a smile. 'But I've told Lincoln I want fewer hours.'

'Really? What did he say?'

Lincoln is the only person in the world who works harder than my mum. If there was a workaholic's anonymous meeting, he'd be the first to show up and the last to leave.

'He grumbled and mumbled, but I make him a lot of money so what can he do? There's a new whiz-kid who knows everything about everything. He's taken over half of my accounts, and if it works out I'll be home most afternoons.'

It takes a few seconds for this to sink in. 'Are you going to be all right?'

She looks at me, a hint of worry on her face. 'What do you mean?'

'You know. Are you going to be okay... not working all the time?' Mum without work is like a cheeseburger without cheese.

She runs a hand through my hair. 'I think so. We both know I'm happier when I'm busy, but here I can cook, exercise with you and help with your homework.'

I can't think of anything worse than exercising, doing homework and eating my mum's cooking. Then all of a

***THE TUCKSHOP KID***

sudden I can. 'How about money?' I ask. 'Will you make heaps less?'

What I mean is, will you still make enough to buy me the latest DVDs and computer games?

'I will make less,' she says, 'but I think it'll be worth it, don't you?'

I'm not sure about this so I don't answer.

'Besides,' she adds, 'I don't think we'll starve.'

Talking about starving, I realise I'd love a bit of afternoon tea. I rub my stomach and Mum reads my mind.

She opens the fridge and pulls out an ice-cream container. I get excited until I realise there's no ice-cream in it.

'Apricot slice,' Mum says. 'I found the recipe on the Internet. No butter and hardly any sugar.'

*Oh no!*

She gives me a piece. It's not the best but I have to admit it's a lot tastier than the fruit cake.

'You've got a lot better,' I say, surprised.

'Oh, thanks!

'I mean it, Mum. It's almost edible.'

Suddenly, she turns away, and I bend around so I can see her face. There's a tiny waterfall trickling down her cheek.

'I was only joking,' I say quickly. 'Look.' I take another bite.

'It's not that,' She wipes her eye with the inside of her

*Pat Flynn*

wrist. 'It's just... I wish I could be a better mother, that's all.'

'You're heaps good. You buy me cool stuff and ...'

I hate it when I say 'and' and then can't think of anything to say after it.

'Anyway' I add, 'I bet you didn't think you'd end up with a son like me.'

For some reason, this doesn't make her feel better. The waterfall starts again, more of a stream this time than a trickle.

'Don't you ever think that,' she says, taking me in her arms. 'I'm lucky to have you.'

She looks into my eyes. 'I love you so much. It's just that... I don't always love me.'

All Mum's tears are starting to make me a bit sad. I bury my head in her shoulder. 'Well, I love you,' I say.

But I don't think she hears.



Although I've won my way out of detention, Thursday has something even worse. PE.

'Hurry up, people. The grass won't bite. At least three times around without walking,' says Mr Simpson.

I reckon he shouldn't call it cross-country training. Round-oval training is more accurate.

He claps his hands. 'C'mon, people. Get moving. Except Matthew. You come over here.'

*THE TUCKSHOP KID*

I wonder what's going on. He's probably going to give me one of his boring pep-talks.

'You can sit under a tree and watch,' he says. 'I don't want a repeat of last week.'

Now normally I'm happy as a pig in mud to sit in the shade during PE, but today something inside me snaps. 'I'd rather not, if that's okay.'

'What?'

*What?* I'm not sure why I said it. Perhaps because every Thursday Mr Simpson reads my mum's note and says, 'Matthew, Matthew. When are you going to learn that exercise is good?' Today he hasn't even asked for the note (although it's in my back pocket). It's like he's given up on me.

'I'd rather run,' I say.

'Why?'

'Because, sir, when are you going to learn that exercise is good?'

I run off.

After two laps I wonder how I could've been so stupid. I'd succumbed to a rare moment of weakness - for the first time in my life I cared about being the most unfit person on the face of the planet. That sort of attitude will get me into a lot of trouble if I'm not careful.

Sweat starts to drip into every crack of my body, and it's not good. I think about taking a detour to the shady tree.

*Pat Flynn*

Kayla catches up to me. (Actually, she's lapping me.) She jogs beside me for a bit. 'Wow, Matthew. You're doing great!'

*I am?* I remember that every afternoon this week I've done some form of exercise. Mum and I rescued dusty bikes from the back of the shed and rode to the park. We drove to a dam, hired a canoe and rowed for twenty minutes before capsizing. (Okay, I did it on purpose.) And most tiring of all, we walked around a massive shopping centre for an hour. *Perhaps I can do this?*

Kayla interrupts my train of thought. 'I want to talk to you about something later, okay?'

I try to say 'Yes' but no word comes out. I'm breathing too hard. Instead, I nod.

Withers and the new kid run past. They slow down to deliver an insult. 'Hey, there's Kayla and her new boyfriend,' says Withers. 'The Goodyear blimp.'

If I had any energy I'd tell him to duck next time someone threw a tennis ball at his face. But I don't, so I don't.

Kayla also doesn't spit out a comeback line. Her face is red, but I'm hoping it's just from the running. She speeds up and passes the boys. When she does, I notice how hard Withers is breathing - almost as hard as I am. And I'm breathing heavily enough to blow out the birthday candles of someone turning 100.

When I've done two and a half laps Mr Simpson blows his whistle. Most kids have done four or five laps,

**THE TUCKSHOP KID**

the real good runners more than six. Kids cut across the oval to the finish line, but in another rare moment of weakness, I don't. For some reason I feel like I've got a point to prove, so I keep plodding along, one step at a time.

Something strange starts happening. Instead of talking to Mr Simpson or each other, kids look at me. A group starts to crowd around the finish line.

'Yeah, Matt!' yells Jasmine. 'Keep going!'

*What do you think I'm going to do? Turn around?*

'You the man!' screams Andy.

Now I'd love to sprint home and be a hero. The trouble is that by this stage I'm completely knackered. I'm also starting to feel a bit sick in the gut (though at least there's no chocolate milk swishing around in there) and possibly a touch dizzy, although I'm hoping it's just my imagination.

'Matthew! Matthew! Matthew!' chants the crowd.

I can't believe this. No group has chanted my name since the day I won the school donut-eating competition. I downed eighteen in a minute.

'Matthew! Matthew!'

With about 20 metres to go I get a sudden spurt of energy. I run like I've never run before. It's a bit stupid when you think about it, as I've already come last.

'MATTHEW!'

But the crowd loves it.

'YAAAAAAAAAAAYYYYYYYYYY!'

*THE TUCKSHOP KID*

Marcus Wright shakes my hand when I finish. 'Game, set and match.'

Mr Simpson calls us over. 'Class, I think we all learnt something today, about guts.'

Withers and the new kid snigger.

'I'm not talking about the guts hanging over your pants, Craig.'

The class laughs.

'I'm talking about the guts needed to do something very difficult,' Mr Simpson gestures to me to come out the front, and he shakes my hand. 'Congratulations, Matthew.'

The class clap and cheer and though I feel like spewing, I've never felt better in my life.