

Chapter Five



SANDWICHES

Vegemite, Promite, Marmite, G'daymate	\$1.00
Banana	\$1.20
Cheese	\$1.50
Tomato	\$1.50
Banana, Cheese and Tomato	\$1.80
Egg	\$1.70
Chicken	\$2.20
Chicken	\$2.20
Egg (which comes first, chicken or egg?)	\$1.70
Curried Egg (looks like spew)	\$1.80
Salad (tastes like spew)	\$2.00
Tuna	\$2.10
Ham	\$2.00
All other available animal except rat	\$1.90
Rat	\$2.00

Extras

Cheese	\$0.50
Sauce	\$0.20
Carrot	\$0.40
Mayonnaise	\$0.20
Cucumber	\$0.40
Tomato	\$0.40
Lettuce	\$0.40
Hair	\$0.20
Insect (alive)	\$0.10
Insect (dead)	\$0.05
Goober	\$0.05
Booger	\$0.05

THE TUCKSHOP KID

On the way home we shop, and for the first time ever Mum heads straight for the fruit section. We pass the junk food aisle without rolling down and grabbing some treats. It's agony. If there weren't security cameras, I reckon I'd stash a family block of rocky road chocolate down my jocks.

At home, Mum actually cooks. It's not pretty. She throws all this yucky stuff starting with V into a pot. I forget what it's called. Oh, that's right, vegetables. She gets out a small bit of fish and forgets to deep-fry it. Even worse, she forgets the chips.

For dessert we have fruit-salad. No ice-cream, no chocolate topping, no good stuff. I don't think my body can handle such a drastic change. It wouldn't surprise me if, in my sleep tonight, I walk to the kitchen and stuff spoonfuls of Milo into my gob. Actually, maybe I can set my alarm and pretend I'm sleepwalking. If I get caught, that is.

Later, Mum comes into my room and sits on my bed. Normally she says goodnight and goes to her laptop with a bottle of wind-down. Tonight she strokes my hair, and stays so long I pretend to be asleep, just so she'll realise it's okay to leave.

She whispers, like she doesn't want me to hear. 'After your dad left, I wanted so much to feel like a success. So I worked and worked, and now I earn lots of money and order twenty people around. And you know what? I feel like more of a failure than ever.'

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She kisses me and I feel warm wetness against my cheek. I realise later it's my mum's tears.

As I drift off to sleep I hear a scary noise. It's the rumbling of my own belly.

'Can I have a ham and salad sandwich with ...' It hurts me to say this next bit, '...no butter, please, Jan. Also, an apple and a chocolate milk, thanks.'

Actually, it hurts me to say all of it, except for the chocolate milk. I fully intended to order a pork riblet roll, a lamington and a packet of chips, but after Mum's performance last night I've got a strange feeling swirling around my insides. I think it's called guilt.

'Eating healthy, are we?' says Jan. 'Well, good for you.' She gives me an even bigger smile than usual.

I go and play handball. Well, line up to play handball. While we wait, Andy Reynolds fills in the gaps of yesterday. 'You went out like a light, dude. We all thought you were dead. Then we thought Mr Simpson was going to do mouth-to-mouth on you.'

'Gross,' I say.

'The funniest thing, though... 'Andy is laughing already.' ...Mr Simpson made Withers and the new kid help him carry you to the office. When they picked up your legs, you ripped one out, right in their faces.'

THE TUCKSHOP KID

'But I was unconscious.'

'That's what's so cool about it!' I laugh as well.

It's nearly my turn to play when Withers, the new kid, and a couple of other blokes who reckon they're more popular than they really are, come over. 'Hey, tubby,' says the new kid. 'Wanna go for a run?'

'Why don't you go back to your old school?' I say. 'Juvenile detention.'

'You were like a beached whale yesterday,' says Withers. 'Except a whale doesn't have so much blubber.'

'Like you're not fat too,' I say. 'At least I'm not in denial.'

'At least I'm not in a fatsuit.'

Kids laugh.

I get in the game and the ball is served to me, but I don't hit it. Instead, I catch it, turn and throw it square at Withers' head. Even though I'm usually as coordinated as a giant baby, somehow it smacks him flush on the left eye (although he's facing me, so it must be his right eye).

He stands there for a second in disbelief, and so do I. When you try something like this, you don't expect it to work. Then Craig falls to his knees, puts two hands over his face and starts howling like a run-over rabbit. He always was a wimp.

I walk off.

Under a tree I wait for trouble to find me, chuck the apple into a bush and enjoy my chocolate milk.

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Before long someone pokes me in the back.

'Whaccha doing?' asks Kayla.

'Nuthin.'

'I heard what you did to Craig. The teachers are looking for you.'

I nod. I'm expecting it.

'I reckon he deserved it,' she says. 'He's so mean to you.'

I shrug.

'What happened yesterday? Are you all right and that?'

'Yeah. Well, sort of. They think I've got diabetes.'

Her eyes go big. 'You're gonna die of... beatties! What's beatties?'

'No. Diabetes. It's this disease that... fat people get.'

'How do you get rid of it?'

'Eat nothing but air and run a marathon every day.'

'Really?'

I give a little smile.

She pokes me in the shoulder.

I suddenly get suspicious. 'Why are you talking to me?'

'What do you mean?'

'Like, do you want something?'

'Do I need a reason to talk to a nice guy like you?'

Striding across the school is a teacher and a posse of kids, and one boy's pointing in my direction. But it's weird, because although I'm about to get busted big-time, I'm not as upset as I should be. Kayla just called me

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a nice guy.

'Have you finished your chocolate milk?' asks Kayla.

'What?'

'Give me your carton. I'll put it in the bin for you.'

My heart sinks. Now I know why she sat next to me, why she was being so nice. I don't know why I let myself believe things that aren't true. Before I hand it to her, I sneak a look at the bottom of the carton, and it's like looking at the bottom of my soul. Except the bottom of the carton calls me a **WINNER!**, and I reckon the bottom of my soul has a giant L tattooed on it.

'There he is!' says a boy. 'The fat kid who went psycho!'

'Matthew, Matthew, Matthew,' says the teacher. 'Mrs O'Neill is waiting to see you.'

'Have a nice drink,' I say to Kayla, before I'm led away.