

Sting like a Butterfly

Some might call me coward, but I've never felt the need to prove myself by swapping blows with somebody bigger than I am—or someone smaller, for that matter. I was fourteen when I first read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and was captivated by Atticus Finch's definition of courage: 'It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what.' It dawned on me then that to be brave you first have to be afraid.

A year went by before I had the opportunity to test out Atticus's wisdom. The weekend had been spent jamming with my best mates, Billy, aka 'The Kid' and 'Fat' Harry. We'd started a band called 'The Grasshoppers'—Billy belted out a rhythm on the drums, Harry was on bass, and I could strum a few chords on the guitar. We desperately needed the practice, although you wouldn't think so to hear Billy tell it. The boys and I had been pounding out AC/DC in my dad's garage when we should have been doing homework, and when I surfaced from bed that Monday morning I was looking forward to school even less than usual.

Saint Pat's started the day half an hour earlier than the other schools in the district. They told us it was to avoid the morning rush, but we all knew it was really to keep our lot away from the Convent girls. The bus was crammed with hyper-active schoolboys, talking at the top of their voices about their weekend exploits, or playing rock-paper-scissors or noughts and crosses. Billy and Fat Harry squeezed onto the back bench, and I claimed the last empty seat in front of them. I pulled a notebook and biro from my case and struggled to lock out the clamour. I was in trouble. There was a double period of maths in the afternoon, and if I didn't complete my homework by the lunch break I'd have to face up to old 'Marble-head'—the terror of third grade.

I could see him hovering over my shoulder, a chill hiss escaping from clenched teeth as he surveyed my workbook. With his black gown and hunched back he was like a giant bat, his top lip curled in scorn and his beady eyes boring into the back of my head. 'Pathetic effort, Johnson! Out the front!' Reaching for his King James Bible, he would balance it across my wrists before unleashing six whacks from the leather strap he affectionately called 'Big Bertha'. The headmaster had decreed this practice following a confrontation with an angry mother whose son returned home one day with a mass of welts on his wrists caused by the poor aim of one teacher. The good book only seemed to encourage Marble-head to hit harder. Perhaps he was inspired by Solomon's proverb on educating children, 'Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and deliver his soul from hell!'

‘Hey pal, that’s my place you’re sitting in.’ I was jolted back to the present by a not-so-biblical voice. I blinked several times, but the ugly face of Rob Jenkins persisted.