

TRACEY BINNS IS LOST

by Sherryl Clark

CHAPTER 1 (extract)

Monday morning assembly: the whole school was sitting on the floor in the hall and Mr Poplat was on the stage, gabbing away and waving his arms around.

‘I’m sure you’ve seen it on the news,’ he said. ‘The government is worried about how fat you all are.’ His words caused a commotion.

Little Grade One kids poked each other’s stomachs, and the girls around me sucked theirs in. I refused to look at mine. Poor Elliott Burton, who is a bit overweight and puffs loudly when he walks too fast, was being punched by the boys next to him. Justin Zit-face said in my ear, ‘It’s your head that’s fat, Rubbish Binns.’

I turned around to strangle him, but a teacher glared at us so I had to save it for later.

‘Your teachers and I,’ Mr Poplat went on, ‘have worked out a wonderful plan for our school. One that will help you all to become happier and healthier.’

Isabella nudged me. ‘Here it comes,’ she whispered.

I listened under the staffroom windows sometimes, and I’d persuaded Isabella to join me. That’s how we knew what Mr Poplat was about to reveal.

It would start a riot.

‘First of all,’ Mr Poplat said, beaming, ‘the canteen will no longer sell fattening foods like lollies and pies and chips. You will be able to buy lovely salad sandwiches, fresh fruit and nuts.’

‘*He’s gone nuts,*’ Justin Zit-face said.

‘Secondly, we’re very pleased to welcome back our physical education teacher, Mr Gunning.’

Mr Gunning came onto the stage, towering over Mr Poplat, and his Number One buzzcut bristled at us. Even from where I sat near the back, I could see his muscles rippling. Instantly, the whole school went silent. Shock, I think. I’d been at this school since the beginning of Grade Five. I knew what Mr Gunning was like. The two months he’d been away, having a knee reconstruction, had been bliss. Small kids dared to venture onto the footy field for a bit of a kick. Big kids ran around because they were energetic and felt like having fun.

When Mr Gunning was in the playground, everything was boot camp. Having a kick turned into a full-on training session. Running around turned into an endurance cross-country. And that was just at lunch time!

‘Mr Gunning looks like an army sergeant,’ Isabella said.

‘No, an army sergeant would be kinder to us than Mr Gunning,’ I said.

‘I feel faint,’ Elliott said, and keeled over right in front of us.

Two teachers helped Elliott up and half-carried him out of the hall. Mr Gunning glared from the stage, and it was as if I could read his mind. *Wussy fat kid. I’ll soon fix him.*

It was not a good start to the week.

On the way to our classroom, Isabella said, 'How bad can it be? We only have PE twice a week for an hour, and a sports afternoon once a month.'

Isabella hadn't been at our school long. 'How many times could you run around the footy field over there without stopping?' I asked.

Isabella sized up our sports area, which was at least a hundred metres long and nearly as wide. 'Twice ... I think.'

'Mr Gunning will make you run around it five times. That's his idea of a warm-up.'

'Warm-up for what? A marathon?'

'No, his Canadian Air Force exercises.'

'You're kidding. What are they?'

Andrew overheard us and joined in. 'He calls them Five Times Better, but it's really 5BX. I looked it up on the internet once. Some kind of training thing from back in the 60s. The Dark Ages.'

I could tell she thought we were making it up – who really has a PE teacher like that in their school? We do. And it sounded like Mr Poplat was going to be the school cheerleader for fitness all on his own.