

1. *SILO*

...where I get up to something

My feet followed my shadow in the red Mallee dust as I headed down towards the rail yards, and my footprints followed me. I like it that way because I know that if my footprints are behind me then I must be in front, and old Graveyhead says we should all try to be in front.

Graveyhead was the coach of the town football team, or at least he had been before the Second World War, which ended just before I was born, and before everyone got sick of forty-seven defeats and one draw in a row, and the mine closed down and the ruckman, rover, fullback, both wingers, centre half-forward, back pocket, and full forward left for Ballargo. Dad was going to tell me how Graveyhead came to be called Graveyhead but Mum caught us at it and gave me a bath instead, because it was Saturday.

I passed the hotel (Graveyhead wasn't there yet) and turned down the lane that led past the rail yards and the station. On the right was a line of gangers' houses, all chocolate brown and dirty cream, and all of them square, iron-roofed, and hot. Jingo lived in one of those and I might go and see him tomorrow or the next day.

On my left was the railway: two sets of shiny lines. One way was the main line from Melbourne and the other went away to somewhere a long way off.

I jumped down into the gully, between the lane and the railway, one of my favourite places, where nobody could see me and I could only see the sky and the way forward, except when I was looking backwards.

I heard a faint cry of 'Hey!'. I didn't stop at first because I thought it was probably only one of the farmers getting feed for his horses. Then I looked up towards the wheat silo where the noise seemed to have come from and crawled up out of the gully and walked towards it.

'Hey, Scratcher, come 'ere.'

My name isn't really Scratcher, it's Macneill, but it was probably no use saying that to someone at the top of a silo.

'Hurry up you stupid kid!'

I turned away. Scratcher was bad enough, but *kid!*

'Oy! I didn't mean that. Come here will you.'

As he seemed to be sorry I moved closer. The silo towered over me, hiding the sun. The grey concrete had a few cracks in it and grass was growing around its foot, though why it was called a foot was beyond me, unless you meant like a football. I could see where some swallows had a nest, and on the iron roof of the high shed that came off the silo I could hear pinkering and rurberling, which I guessed to be pigeons or sparrows carrying on their affairs without keeping their feet too long on the hot metal.

'What're you doing up there?' I couldn't make out who it was, although he looked pretty old as he took up about ten rungs of the ladder that went up the side of the silo, from feet to outstretched fingers.

'Pigeons.'

'The same to you,' I said.

'I'm after pigeons, and if you don't help me I'll soon be after you.'

I was about to take off at this threat when I realised that if he wanted help he wouldn't be able to go after me.

'Oh, yeah,' I said, and stuck out my tongue. From that height he couldn't've seen this, but I felt better, anyway. Dr Pendle always told me to stick out my tongue and I always felt better then, too. I mean, it's not every day you get to poke your tongue out at a doctor, especially when your mother is there and she can't belt you for doing it. I once stuck it out at the dentist

but he grabbed my jaws and stuffed four great pads of cotton wool inside and then spent five minutes looking at himself in the mirror with my tongue keeping the glass from steaming up. I yelled as loudly as I could, just in case it started to hurt later, but he shouted that I'd better shut up or he'd call a couple of policemen in to handcuff me to the chair for the rest of my life. I didn't want to bother the police again at that stage so I went into a deep trance as the enemy secret agents interrogated me about the sunken treasure.

'Scratcher, if you don't come up here and give us a hand I'll really let you have it later!'

'What?'

'What d'ya mean: "What?"' he bellowed.

He was becoming a little cross, so I decided to co-operate, as they do down at the Base Hospital.

'What do you want?'

'Help.'

'Help?'

'I need a bit of help.'

'Why do you want help? Why don't you just come down?'

If you're up and you don't want to be up it's always best to come down, just the same as it's always best to go up if you're down and you don't want to be down.

'I can't, you idiot!'

Idiot! I might be a fool sometimes, but I'm certainly not an idiot. That's a five-letter word, and that's one worse than a four-letter one and everyone knows that they're naughty. Besides, *he* was up there, not me.

'Why can't you?'

'Because me trousers are falling down!'

'Well...pull them up!'

'I can't!'

'Why can't you?'

‘I’ve got to hang on, you nut!’

Nut! Occasionally I feel like a melon, but *nut!* Never!

‘Hang on with one hand and pull up your trousers with the other.’

Solutions are easy to think of when you’re on the ground and the problem you’re solving is a hundred and twenty feet above you.

I’m quite good at solving problems. Last year we had a lot of trouble with a fox that crawled into our fowl house four nights in a row and carried off four of our best layers and gave our rooster a terrible fright till he became used to the noise. On the fifth night I let all the chooks out to make sure the fox didn’t catch them in the fowl house, and he didn’t. Mind you, I got it next morning when Dad couldn’t find any of them, only feathers between our house and the creek beyond Rawlinnsons’ farm.

‘Listen, squareface, I’ve already thought of that, but I have an egg in one hand and two pigeons up my jumper!’

I was nearly going to tell him to throw the egg down to me, but I thought that he probably couldn’t throw that far, so I tried to think of something else.

‘You come up here and *you* can pull my trousers up for me.’

A hundred and twenty feet?! His pants would just have to fall down. Much better for him to be exposed in the air than me being reposed under the ground. I don’t like worms *that* much!

‘Throw the egg down.’

‘No, you’d never catch it!’

‘Well, I’m not coming up. Why don’t you kick your pants off?’

‘There might be girls around. You come up.’

I thought this conversation was becoming rather boring, so I turned to go.

‘You can have one of the pigeons.’

I could have one of the pigeons! I already had a tame galah, but he couldn’t fly. If I had a pigeon I could train him to race and come home and win races from Sydney or London and call him “Boomerang” and...

‘Did you say I could have a pigeon?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh.’

‘Oh?’

‘Oh.’

‘Oh! . . . You can have the egg, too!’

‘Is it a pigeon’s egg?’

‘Yes!!!’

A pigeon *and* a pigeon’s egg. With a bit of luck I would soon have *two* pigeons. Then I’d be able to have tandem races, or send messages by carrier pigeon to Jemmy at Quimbilong.

‘Are you coming up or aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

‘I’m coming up. Don’t let go of my pigeon. Or the egg.’

I reached up and grasped the fifth rung of the ladder and swung off the ground. A small patch of dust tried to come with me but was whiffed away by the wind. A big red bullant that I must’ve trodden on was surrounded by a million little black ones, while behind me a swallow nipped a fly out of the air and thrust it shrieking down its throat.

It was cooler up here, off the ground and in the shade of the enormous silo. The ladder was fastened to the concrete wall every few feet, and seemed to stretch away above me into the sky. Suddenly the silo started to spin and race past the clouds; a horn tooting over in the main street sounded as if it was coming from the moon. My foot slipped and the red dust squizzed all over me as I thudded down onto the ground and set off for home.

‘Hey!’

I didn’t stop.

‘Hey!!’

I didn’t stop.

‘Both pigeons!’

I stopped.

‘*Both pigeons?*’

‘Both pigeons.’

‘*Both pigeons?*’

‘*Both pigeons.*’

‘*Both pigeons!*’

‘...and the egg.’

‘*Both pigeons and the egg?!*’

‘Both pigeons and the egg.’

For three pigeons (with a bit of luck) a hundred and twenty feet was really only, ah, three lots of forty feet. Forty feet. That wasn’t even the length of our cricket pitch at school.

‘Both pigeons *and* the egg?’

‘You’re catching on.’

‘You sure it’s a *pigeon*’s egg?’

‘Well, a pigeon bit me when I grabbed it.’

‘What are the pigeons like?’

‘One’s black and white, and the other’s black with a bit of red.’

‘Black and red?’

‘**Yes!** Look, are you coming up or will I let the birds go!?’

Black and red. I didn’t go much for black and white, but black and red were my favourite colours.

‘I’m coming.’

And that was how I met Ray.



2. *AFTERWARDS*

...where I have some explaining to do, but I don't tell you about it

It wasn't really the first time that I'd met Ray, but it *was* the first time that we'd talked to each other. You haven't really met a person until you've talked to them. Some people say they've met the Prime Minister or Don Bradman, but really they'd only said "G'day" or "Owyagoin" or "You beauty!". I knew that you have to shake a person by the hand and then talk about something important, like the wheat harvest or the weather or the cringing politicians in Melbourne or Canberra. Then you might mention Graveyhead and the great draw before the war. Of course, I was too young to talk about these things, and I thought Ray might be as well, and I'd rather talk about something important, like ferrets or marbles, or buried treasure hidden in old wells or gullies, but pigeons and eggs is the same as politicians and wheat, so that was how I met Ray.

What happened after I started up the ladder again I don't remember, and the stories that are told around the town don't help much, either. Ray said that after I'd climbed to within thirty feet of him I froze and started hiccuping and he said that I was dead scared and only a stupid little kid, and maybe I was. But he never told anybody that at that moment his trousers slipped right down over his ankles and he squashed the egg in his embarrassment and most of it trickled into my hair and eyes thirty feet below. The firemen who rescued us half an hour later told everybody how difficult it was to rescue two crazy children from the top of a wheat silo, one with something oozing out of

his hair and the other with a pullover that wouldn't stay still and kept making noises like a pigeon.

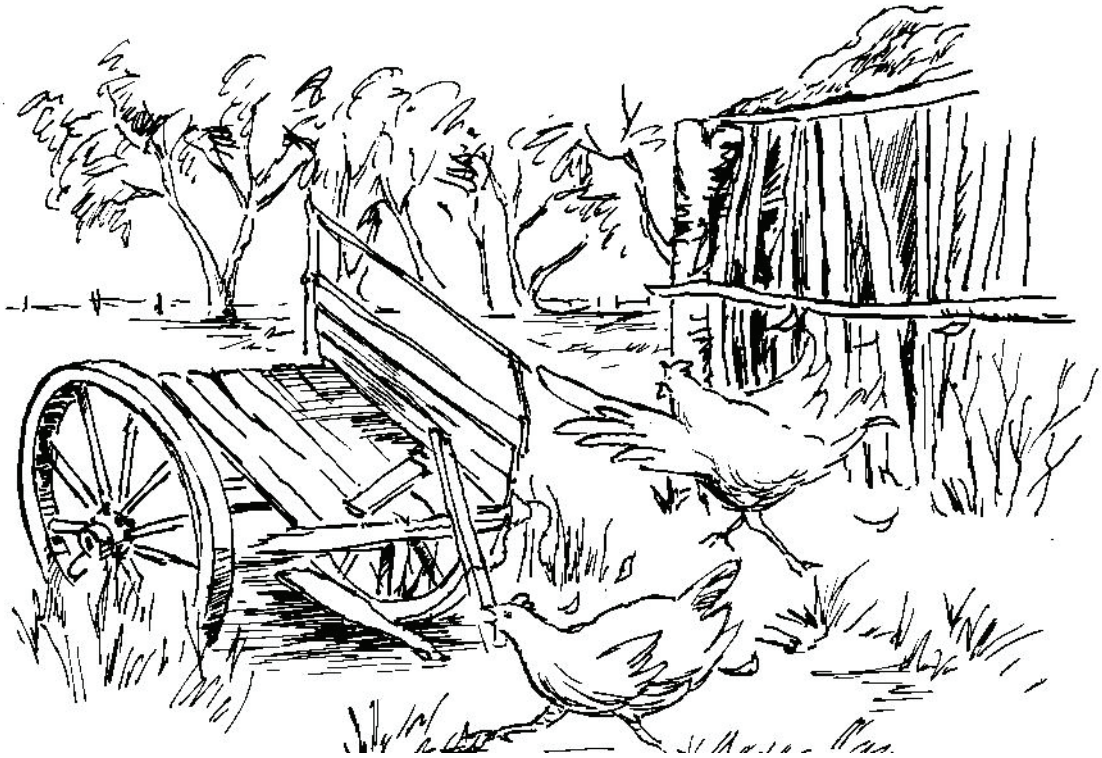
The Chief Fire Officer came up from Melbourne a week later and presented the two firemen with a tin award for bravery (he said it was silver but you can't fool me), and tousled my hair with his hand after making sure that whatever had been oozing out of it up the silo wasn't there any more. He also had a look at Ray's pullover and remarked on a small black and red feather he saw sticking to it.

The first week back at school Mr Braden gave a stern lecture about stealing pigeons and looked at me, but *I* hadn't stolen any pigeons, I'd just tried to rescue Ray. If Ray wanted to give me two pigeons (three with a bit of luck) that was very nice of him, but I couldn't be accused of stealing them. In any case, who owned them to steal them from?!

Every time Mum thought about the silo or birds or even wheat she would burst into tears and pull out one of Dad's old handkerchiefs. Dad just walloped me. I'm not sure how Ray got on at home but I did notice at school that he didn't sit down while he ate his lunch out under the peppercorn tree, nor did he talk to me. This was a bit of a waste, considering all the trouble we'd gone to to meet each other, but some people are just difficult to understand.

School was a pretty good place, if you didn't count being inside it. It wasn't very big – three classrooms, a hall, and a shelter shed, and the Head Teacher's office. It stood on a side street leading off from the highway, a street that was lined with peppercorns and flowering gums. Several old houses with narrow verandahs and scrawny rose bushes fronted on to the street, and every house on my way to school had a dog that hated kids. They barked and slobbered at me going and coming, and I used to help them along with a stone or two. Not that I ever tried to hurt them. I just liked to get them going, kicking up such a fuss that their owners would rush out to see what was happening and maybe trip over a cat on the way.

I remember once when I was out on Rawlinnsons' farm, playing in the chook yard, I discovered that if I started to move quickly the chooks would become excited and flack around, squawking and chipping. The faster I went the faster they went. The Rawlinnsons weren't home so I had a great time.



Soon feathers were spearing the air, nearly making the chooks go bald, and then I got the idea of throwing a stone at them. I knew that I'd never hit one as they were moving too fast, so I picked up a stone and threw it at the silliest chook about twenty yards away. It was running everywhere at the same time and I didn't have a clue where it was going next. The stone flew through the air and the chook flew into the stone and suddenly it was lying still on the ground. I skidded to a halt and stared at it, waiting for it to get up and flap off to lay more eggs, but it didn't. My mouth went dry and my hair went wet and my stomach took off for home with me following it as though all the bulls in the Mallee, and maybe the Wimmera, too, were after me. I haven't been back to the Rawlinnsons' farm since then, especially as I

overheard one of the big Rawlinnson boys talking in a puzzled voice about how one of their chooks had died of sunstroke or something when the family was out visiting their grandmother.

The classrooms were big and high. Along the front of each one was a big blackboard, with a ledge littered with broken sticks of chalk (mostly white). The teacher sat at a large desk on one side, near the wood heater and away from the door, and we sat in desks with lift-up lids.

When I was in Prep I cut a long piece of wood off the underside of my desk with one of Dad's old razor blades. Unfortunately Mrs Phelpps caught me. She hauled me out, lifted me onto the lid, and belted me so hard that I slipped off and crashed heel-first onto her toes. That was the only time I've ever seen a teacher cry and yell and thump at the same time, and I don't mind if I never see it again (unless it's some other kid getting the thumping).

There were nearly fifty kids in my grade, and more girls than boys, which meant that we had to watch out what we did or we'd be told on.

The shelter shed out the back wasn't very big, either, but if we scared all the girls out we had enough room to play knuckles or alleys. The trouble was that the girls always ran and told Mr Braden and he would come stalking over like an old man emu that hadn't had a meal in a month, muttering about taking his Old Friend out of the drawer and introducing him to those pestilential creatures called boys. As we never wanted to meet his "friend", having had that pleasure often enough before, by the time Mr Braden had turned the corner of the main building the shelter shed would be empty and we'd be kicking a footy around in the paddock. It never pays to be caught by the Head, or anywhere else for that matter.

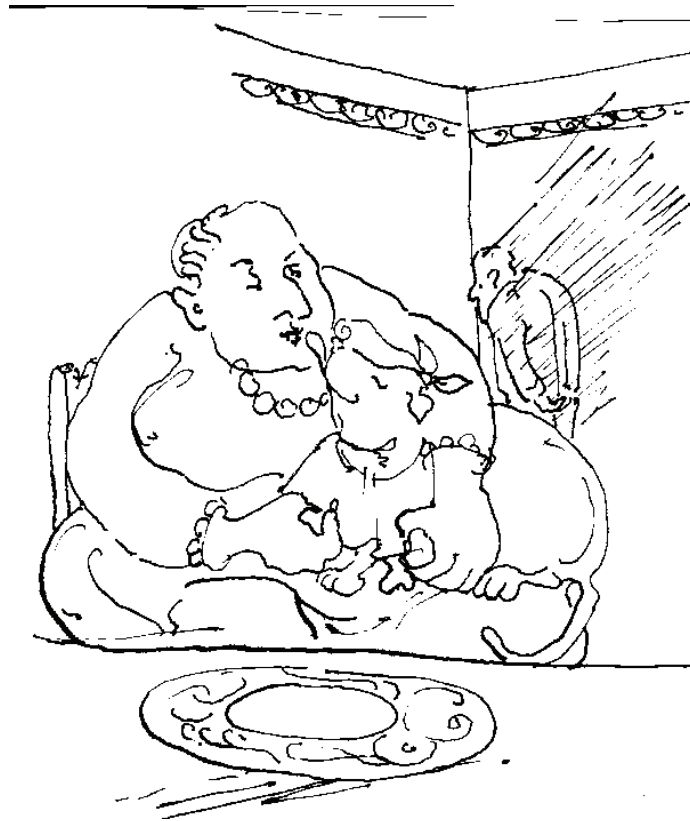
I suppose he wasn't a bad bloke really, but I could never take him seriously. I mean, a man of his age saying to honour your parents! If *he* had any parents they must be as old as Moses, so you can imagine how old he was.

Old Braden took the fifth and sixth grades and I wasn't looking forward to going up there. The older boys used to tell us what a nasty man he was and how he belted them over the . . . well, it hurt where he belted them and I know that's true because Dad has some ideas that are very like Mr Braden's.

Miss Hendley was my teacher, and she was a beauty. She had long blonde hair (usually, although once I saw her and I think she must've dropped some red ink on it), a little nose just like Mum's only better, and she walked like a queen, or a princess, anyway. I liked her. Everybody else liked her, too, and Ray was always sneaking out of Mr Braden's room and asking if he could clean her dusters. I think he's in love with her but I'd better not tell her that or she might forget about me, and Ray's not talking to me, anyway.

Miss Hendley came from the city and boarded with old Mrs Parker around the corner from our place. Sometimes she let me help her carry her bag and books home, and once she asked me in for a glass of lemonade. I think it was lemonade but I'm not too sure as my heart was bumping so much I couldn't concentrate on the flavour of the fizzing bubbles as they crashed around the little hairs in my nose. I do remember sneezing a couple of times, so maybe it was dry ginger ale. When Mum and Dad and I were coming home late one night from the pictures I saw her sitting in the back of a car with someone, her head on his shoulder. When I asked her next day if she hadn't been feeling well she went a funny colour, dropped a bottle of milk on the heater, and said I could go home early as I'd been such a good boy that day.

The other teacher at the school was Mrs Phelpps. Her husband was Mr Phelpps and, boy, was *he* scared of her! If he didn't do anything she told him to she made him stand in the corner and gave his tea to the dog.



I don't know how I lived through the two years I was in her grade. I don't know how Mr Phelps lived, either, but their dog was the fattest little beast in Niamong.

The year after I left Mrs Phelps's grade there was a heck of a to-do down at the saleyards. Her fat butter of a dog (his name was Frederick the Great) had got away from home – which was a serious mistake – and was rolling about amongst the stock when he was whisked up by the butcher who thought Fred was a porky pig ready for the table and thrown into the back of his ute. But he soon changed his mind when a screaming whirlwind of an infant teacher flattened him like one of his miserable hamburgers and carried the heavyweight mutt back to the luxury life from which he was so nearly permanently snatched. He's even fatter now because of the extra sausages Mr Grainger slips into Mrs Phelps's meat order every week. Mr Phelps was almost sacked from work because Mrs Phelps stood him in the corner for leaving the back door open and she forgot to let him go when she went off to

school. He was still there at lunchtime when his boss rang Mrs Phelps at school to ask if he was ill. Boy, he was certainly ill after that!

It seems funny that a person as brave as I am should be scared of two teachers, but I do wish that I could stay in Miss Hendley's grade for the rest of my life and marry her one day. We'd go and live in Melbourne and she could read me stories every night before tucking me into bed and kissing me goodnight, and Ray would be as jealous as anything.

Actually the school was a bit bigger than I said – we had two toilets right down the back, the other side of the oval. I'm not sure why it was called an oval: I mean an O is an O, you know – round. Well, this one was bent. It started behind the shelter shed and ran beside the gully for about twenty yards or so (that's the length of a cricket pitch if you cheat a bit when the umpire's not looking) and then snaked back towards the school to skirt around a peppercorn and three old posts. Then it shot away like Mrs Phelps's cat the day Jingo lit a candle under its tail, jumped over the drain and swooped around a couple of stumps back to the shelter shed. We used to do PE on the oval, running round and round it until we were so giddy that even the flies didn't know where to land, and I'm quite sure it wasn't O-shaped.

Sometimes, when the teacher wasn't looking, Jingo and I would slope quietly off from running round and around and duck behind the toilets for a breather. It was good down there beside the creek. A couple of willows drooped over the waterhole, their gnarled trunks and branches begging us to climb them. It's very rude not to do something when you're begged to do it, so we always climbed the trees. In summer we swung on the thinnest branches way out over the water, parachuting into the deep waterhole from a great height and splashing as many girls as we could. Or at least that was what we did when the drought wasn't too bad and there was actually still water in the waterhole.

The last time Jingo and I went down behind the toilets we saw smoke coming from the boys' roof.

Fire!

Here was our chance to get into Mr Braden's good books, and maybe get one of those fireman's medals!

We raced up to the school and burst into Mr Braden's class yelling 'Fire! Fire!!'

'Why aren't you doing PE, you horrible little urchins? Oh, it's you, Macneill, and you, too, Percival. I might have known that you'd be malingering.'

I looked round. Who was this Percival bloke? I was with Jingo, not Percival. Then I saw Jingo's red face and heard the girls tittering and the fifth-grade boys sniggering and the sixth-grade boys saying things like "Percy worsey" and "Has Percy been a bad boy?" and "Pick a peck of purple Percies" and I realised that they were talking about Jingo. Percival! I stepped away from him a little; after all, you can't be too careful and they might start picking on me and call me "Silo pants" or something. Then I thought, no, he's my mate Jingo, and I stood beside him again.

'Mr Braden, the toilets are on fire!' I yelled. 'They're burning down!' I added hopefully.

'By now they'll just be all ashes, smouldering,' chipped in Jingo, forgetting that he was Percival. 'Smouldering to smithereens!'

He knows lots of big words like those. He says he picks them up from the railways, but I've never seen anything like that lying around down there. All I've ever picked up was a couple of rusty iron spikes and a ham sandwich like a floor board.

'Fire? Ashes?? Smouldering?!?' said Mr Braden. He was starting to get interested. 'If this is a trick to get out of PE I'll have to introduce you to my little "friend" in the drawer. Come on!'

Out the door we went, Jingo trying to trip Mr Braden for calling him Percival, and the rest of the kids crushing each other in the rush to see the toilets burning, and the oval, with a bit of luck.

As we streamed past Mrs Phelpps's room Mr Braden yelled to her that there was a fire and to get the fire brigade, the police, and the President of the School Council, and then we all stumbled into the yard and made off for the conflagration (that was another Jingo-word).

Along the gully we galloped, past the peppercorn and the three old posts, across the drain (where Mr Braden stepped in a great pile of slimy mud), and down the hill to the toilets.

Mr Braden stopped, his shoes squelching.

I stopped, my heart sinking.

Jingo stopped, probably wishing that he was Percival and a long way from there.

And the rest of the school, including the Preps, crashed into everyone else.

The toilets were still standing: there was no fire, no ashes, not even any smoulders to worry the blowflies.

Mr Braden turned slowly towards us, his right arm twitching and his shoes starting to steam in the sun.

'Macneill. Percival. I think it's time I introduced you to my Old Friend inside. Did you think that you could possibly get away with such a story?! Do you think I'm such an imbecile that I can be hoodwinked by a couple of hyperactive horrible little hooligans like you, that you could make a fool of me with equanimity?!?!'

The sun seemed to go in then, and even Jingo couldn't have thought of longer words. I didn't know what they meant but I had a fair idea that pretty soon I wouldn't be able to sit down again for quite a while.

'Mr Braden, look!' I cried through shaking lips. 'Smoke!'

'Don't you ever give up, Macneill? Enough's enough! Come with me!'

His voice thundered around the yard, making several peppercorns fall off the tree, and he grabbed me by the neck. As he did, he turned – and let go! He stiffened, sniffed, and began to stalk stealthily towards the boys' toilet. I don't know why he put on this silent act because the whole school was

milling around the little building by this stage, having more fun than if it was a half-day holiday. The Preps were playing hide-and-seek, the third- and fourth-grade girls were hop scotching up the hill, and half the older boys were playing chasey. Jingo walked slowly behind Mr Braden, and I followed them, gingerly rubbing my aching neck. We stopped as he crept through the door and then there was an almighty yell of triumph. He re-appeared a second later with Garry McPhee's head under one arm, Terry McPhee's head under the other, and, oh dear me, Ray's left ear firmly between his thumb and fingers. Three packets of cigarettes were crumpled in his free hand and I couldn't work out how to vanish from the earth without Ray seeing me.

Just then the fire brigade came panting up, having crossed the oval and bursting a tyre in the drain, Sergeant Connally arrived, having fallen full length in the drain (the same place where Mr Braden had got his shoes wet and muddy), and the President of the School Council stumbled down, after tripping over the policeman and banging his nose on the back of the fire engine.

The assembled school cheered happily at this unexpected excitement, and Jingo and I joined the three other boys in their little walk to be introduced once again to Mr Braden's Old Friend in his room.

