



‘Attention!’ Mr Sergeant’s shiny black boots thudded on the lino. He marched in front of us, eyeballing every student.

‘Tuck that shirt in. Pull those socks up!’ His words shook the history projects hanging from the classroom roof.

It was nine o’clock Monday morning. If Mr Brown was teaching, our grade would’ve been playing Continuous Cricket. But Brownie had nicked off last term. So we weren’t playing cricket. Instead, all twenty-one of us were lined up across the back of our classroom at

Outback Creek Primary School being yelled at by a madman. Mr Sergeant was the latest in a long line of Crazy Relief Teachers.

I nudged my best mate, Pete. ‘This bloke’s a few soldiers short of an army.’

We studied Mr Sergeant. His green shirt was so tight his muscles were waging a war for space underneath. Green splodges covered his pants, like someone had spewed broccoli all over them. Mr Sergeant looked more like an action figure than a teacher.

‘He’s not that short,’ noted Pete.

I shook my head. Mr Sergeant. The name was perfect. He was acting like he’d army-rolled straight off a battlefield. For all we knew, he could have. Outback Creek, after all, is in the outback. Spare teachers don’t exist. Any teacher passing through town gets to

teach Grade Six B.

‘Mr Sergeant’s brain has gone AWOL,’ I whispered.

Pete bit his lip. He screwed up his face. Anything to stop the laughter barrelling up from his belly. It didn’t work. A snort shot from his nose.

Mr Sergeant’s head snapped towards him. ‘Inappropriate bodily discharge: level two misconduct,’ he barked with a voice that carried three farms over.

Pete’s body stiffened further with each step Mr Sergeant marched towards him. His eyes glazed over. His hands twitched. Pete was freaking out, which isn’t uncommon. What is uncommon is how Pete freaks out. Some students freeze. Others write an action plan. Pete prefers to rap.

Nervous murmurs filled the air.

‘I’m in trouble, trouble,’ rap-mumbled Pete, his voice trembling. ‘Wanna get out of here on the double, double ...’

Mr Sergeant’s mountain-like pecs shadowed Pete.

‘Get out of here? Planning to desert your official post: level three misconduct. Drop and give me twenty!’

All colour disappeared from Pete’s face.

Mr Sergeant repeated the order. ‘Drop and give me twenty!’

Pete did a stock-take of his upper body:

Biceps: puny.

Pectorals: hibernating.

Triceps: isn’t that a type of dinosaur?

There was no way Pete could lift himself twenty times. I had to help.

I stepped forward. 'It was me laughing.'

'Name?' ordered Mr Sergeant. Spit flew from his lip, splattering on my face like a bug on a windscreen.

'Buckle, Steele Buckle,' I said.

He shoved his face so close to mine I could count his nose hairs. Twenty-four. Twenty-five, if you counted the brave hair rescuing stray boogers from his upper lip.

'What's the joke, Buckle?' he shouted, emptying his lungs of air.

He was the joke. Him and all the other Crazy Relief Teachers, like Mr Farmer who used his sheepdog to herd us in at the end of recess. But saying that would get me frog-marched to the principal's office.

'Nothing, sir!' I stamped my foot and straightened my back.

‘Riddle time, Buckle. What has thirty-six legs and does push-ups ’til I say stop?’

It was the first time at school I was annoyed I knew an answer.

We dropped to our bellies and heaved our bodies off the ground.

Arms wobbled. Legs shook. Faces reddened.

I glanced down the line of students. Nathan, third smartest in school, including the teachers, had never been in trouble and didn’t look keen to start today. He pumped out five quick push-ups.

Holly, the only successful escapee from Mr Warden’s detention group, raised her head and peered towards the ceiling fan, a skipping rope then the open window.

‘Good morning!’ Everyone’s favourite office lady, Ms Forbes, glided in. Talk about

saved by the belle! Her floral dress was as bright as her smile.

It seemed Ms Forbes' popularity didn't stop at the students. Mr Sergeant rolled up his sleeves, dove onto his stomach and began his own series of push-ups. First on his knuckles, then one-handed, before swapping to the other hand and adding a clap in the middle. 'Four hundred and fifty-eight, four hundred and fifty-nine,' he counted, pretending he hadn't noticed our visitor. 'Oh, morning ma'am. Nothing beats exercise to start the day.'

I didn't know what was bigger, his muscles or his ego.

'Umm ... here are today's lessons.' Ms Forbes slid the pink folder under Mr Sergeant's nose as he completed another one-fingered push-up.

‘Why don’t you stick around? I’m just about to attempt the world’s first one-fingered and one-toed push-up,’ he grunted.

Ms Forbes headed for the door. ‘Maybe another time.’

‘Great! Tomorrow I’ll be doing chin-ups using only my mouth.’

*Tap, tap, tap!* Pete tapped the ground as he collapsed onto his belly. ‘You’re not about to use the water cannon are you?’ I asked.

‘Morse code,’ he explained, whispering his message as he tapped. ‘Help ... us ... he ... is ... crazy.’

Nathan shook his sweaty head. ‘Even if Ms Forbes does know Morse code you tapped that your socks taste delicious with strawberry milk.’

The smell of fresh daisies followed Ms

Forbes from the room.

The military madman leapt to his feet. ‘At ease.’

Students collapsed onto their bellies.

Marching to the blackboard, Mr Sergeant read from the folder. ‘O nine hundred hours reading.’

‘We’re reading for nine hundred hours?’ whispered Pete, struggling to lift his head from the floor. I hoped not. Though it would’ve given me time to finish my *Mr Tickle* book report from grade one.

Mr Sergeant continued, ‘Ten hundred hours writing.’

‘Nineteen hundred hours of reading and writing!’ Pete rolled onto his back, placed his left hand over his ear and grasped a fake microphone with his right.

*‘Hard work’s not my game, my hands will go lame. Hard work’s not my thing, I wish the bell would ring.’*

‘Incoming missile!’ Mr Sergeant tossed the pink folder into the bin. ‘You’ll be learning one lesson today: anything achieved without pain is not worth achieving.’