

MICHELLE BAKAR

The Army

We sat together in a line on the hot bricks of Vicki's front fence. She swung her legs and scrutinised the fast pedalling older kids up the street. She sat on the rightmost post. The 'glass,' we called her. For watching. Then came Sid, who was the coolest because he was Irish and had five brothers, no sisters in his family. Then came Steven who smeared mud on his face to be like one of his own older brothers. Steven was the second in charge, and he knew our ranks like he knew the quantity and order of every SAS swap card he owned. Even though he just moved into the Italian house down toward the highway, he was promoted because he had a good memory.

And then there was me, and I was the 'signalman.' The 'mouth' alongside the 'glass.' It went: Vicki, Sid, Steven and me. All bare tummied, hunger rumbling forked animals. Waiting for the tall Greek to walk past and pop us with his scared look so we could laugh and snigger at him. We expected him to run past, as he always did. Vicki, the 'glass,' noticed his arm scratches. She pointed it out for the benefit of all of us and it was a good day when he acted all innocent and walked super fast until he rabbited it up his own driveway. I shouted that he was a druggy, me being the 'mouth.' And continued the joke. That's what we liked to do. Bring it out and turn the joke this way and that in our mouths. In our minds. Draw pictures on the ground. We generally pulled the guts out of things. Dismantled them until there was no more to talk about and all of us would sit quietly and go back to swinging our legs.

"Here he comes," Vicki said and winked at me. I jumped down and placed myself soldierly in front of him.

"Who goes there!" I made everyone laugh.

“Come off it.”

“Show us your arm,” I said, though it was Sid that was supposed to say that.

“Get out of my way.”

“Not until you show us your arm.” Sid spoke.

“We’ve seen you,” Steven joined in. “You hurry to the secret doorway around the trots and the cafe nio. You buy coffee meringues. You wear the same clothes and you’re too skinny.” That’s why Steven made the second in charge. He was almost the coolest. He took out a pair of binocs and peered at the boy through them. Adoration for Steven all around.

The boy did a thing that weirded us all out. He sat down next to me and wedged me in so that if I wanted to jump down, I’d have to jostle Steven holding his binocs. And if I stayed, I’d have him right in my personal space. Leaning over all friendly and wanting to have words. He stank like B.O. The scalpy kind you get when there’s too much hair and sweat all mixed in. The kind that makes you imagine dirty skin that can’t wash out. Fingernails. And your mum getting pissed off at the table. Of course I stayed there. But I stared down the road to the end of the street, concentrating on the island at the junction for something to look at. Steven blinked and brought the binocs to his lap faster than you could swear.

“How do I join your club?” the boy suddenly asked and we looked at Sid. Sid never mentioned what it took to join. We were default members because of where we lived. And rank was determined by opinion. “What is it that makes each one of you different from each other?”

This was a question we’d asked ourselves and one that we hoped people might ask us. Just so we could reply. And we answered it carefully though we knew it would go in one ear and out the other. Steve remembered, which made him second in charge, but this boy would forget for sure. In fact, I reckon that if anyone remembered what we told them, they would be able to join. It was a rule kind of like that.

Sid spoke. “You go ahead Stevo. You tell him who you are.”

And Stevo started. “I’m wearing a large khaki jacket with blackened metal buttons and breeches over a khaki mesh singlet and drawers. The jacket collar buttons down at the points and has four baggy pockets squarely on the front. I have a leather-lined slouch hat, which has a brass badge of the rising sun on it. I got a canvas belt of cloth pockets, holding fags, bullets and coins. I have a knapsack with my name and number stencilled on the side that holds compass, map and anything else. Over my

arm, besides my rifle, is a can strapped in by canvas cloth, and I got a small pair of binocs on the same arm. I got hobnailed brown boots on my feet, lace ups and leather ankle length. I got woollen cloth strapped around my shoes, wound around my legs up to my knees. In my right hand, I hold my rifle strap down to keep it from buggin' me. In my left, I hold ID papers and two identity disks with my name, serial number, battalion number and religion on it. The dead meat tickets will go one to the army, one to Sid if I die."

Much approval. The boy spooked us with how calm he was. People are freaked out normally, when we say stuff like this. He only nodded and gestured to the holes in his arm. "This is my uniform." And he flexed so we could see the pus come out and drip down off the inside of his elbow onto the concrete. Stevo did nothing. Nothing scared him. We did nothing too, though I heard Vicki whistle a bit under her breath.

Then the boy looked at Sid and asked, "What do you wear?" I leaned over to watch and learn because Sid always said things in a cool way.

"I wear a khaki hat and khaki woollen jacket and trousers over white cotton singlet and white long johns. My jacket has four pockets and my trousers are tucked into knee-high leather boots. I wear a white scarf that ties like a cravat around my neck. I have dead meat tags too but they won't go to anyone. I've instructed that they both be buried with me when I die. I have Major General insignia on my collar and special epaulettes. In my pockets is a fob watch, navigation compass and battalion lists. In my right hand I carry a pistol. In my left, I carry a cane."

The boy looked at me but Sid said, "Don't look at him. He's new. He's in a yowie suit. He's got material pieces on mesh and has a gas mask on his face and a night vision long-range shotgun in both hands. He can't be disturbed."

This is when I jumped down off the bricks and went over to where Vicki was sitting. She was okay for a girl. Sid said she could be the only one to have a Black Hawke helicopter. So she was a navigator. And a signaller. This is because one of her uncles went to fight in Somalia and got killed. She said she wanted to be a flag waver. But we said she couldn't, as we had no need for one. We said she could be a Sea King if she wanted. But she didn't want to. She made a face at me as I climbed up next to her and we all waited for the boy to say something else. Nobody wanted to tell him to piss off as his arm was pretty much indication enough that he was crazy. He sort of jiggled up and down nervously when he stood still and the coins in his pockets

clinked together. Vicki hopped down and we checked out the kids riding past on their motor crosses.

Steven asked, “So are you a druggie?” The boy nodded yes and kept staring in our direction, and then at the kids. And then before you knew it, we were all staring at them instead of at him.

There was one kid with atomic bomb looking hair who sat in the back of a wagon with a whole stack of papers and brochures, which was being pulled by another kid. They looked similar and you could tell their mother dressed them. Their flannel shirts were from the same shop. The wagon had rusty wheels and made a scratching noise, especially over the cracks in the road. The kid winced at the bumps. They pained him, you could tell. Every so often they’d stop at someone’s mailbox and put a pamphlet in it, but rolling it up first into neat thirds. The first kid had a whistle, which he started blowing so that people could come out of their houses and buy a paper if they wanted. I don’t know why we didn’t hear that whistle before. It’s like the Gelato Man. Nobody hears the Gelato Man until he’s right on the doorstep playing that funky dull Greensleeves. It’s weird. I reckoned Sid might mention it later. Vicki elbowed me so I could say something.

“Looks like he’s too small to go out without big brother around,” Sid said and we laughed.

“He’s got a bag of money in the back.” I pointed.

They trundled up to us and looked a bit scared which we laughed at. The first kid blew his whistle faintly and Vicki’s mum came out in her terry towel robe and slip-ons.

“Hello boys,” she said as she stopped at the gate. She handed the kid some money. He handed her a paper and she looked at us. “Don’t bother him, okay. And play nicely.” She went back inside.

Vicki came out from her hiding place between the new boy and me and Sid spoke: “What you got in the bag?”

The tall kid dropped the whistle from his mouth and let it hang from a string around his neck. None of us laughed, as we knew pretty much what Sid would do next.

“A severed hand,” the kid said.

“A head,” the other kid said.

Sid smiled. “No. It’s money stupid. Give us the bag.”

They acted like they didn't hear him for a moment.

“Did you hear me? I said give us the bag.”

The tall kid shouted “What!” so loudly that I thought Vicki’s mum might come out. But she didn’t and we were amazed, as Vicki only had to fall over for her to be out on the pavement in a second with band-aids. But she didn’t. And I reckon even the tall kid was surprised.

Sid veered around the druggy and grabbed the bag from where it was next to the small boy. He didn’t time it well, because kids always know violence when they see it and about four kids stopped their bikes from the road and watched. Sid almost fell too, as it was stuck underneath newspapers and the small boy’s runners. And he had to yank it to get it out. The small boy couldn’t figure out what expression to have. He looked from one of us to the other, from me to Vicki, to the druggy to Stevo and then to Sid. So we all kind of looked at this boy squatting in the wagon, with Sid holding the bag like it was a dead rat and nobody saying anything.

The tall boy clutched at his whistle for a moment but decided against it, which I reckoned was good if he wanted to keep his reputation intact with us kids, but bad, later, when his parents might demand where all the takings was.

But what’s the worst that could happen? The tall boy put his hand back down by his side and leaned over to collect the handle of the wagon again. His brother kept quiet and all of us just waited for them to go away so we could get back up on the wall and act like nothing happened. This was looking like it was okay and we all started having the taste of newly bought stuff from the milk bar in our mouths except that Vicki’s mum decided to come back out of the doorway and ask us if everything was okay.

“It’s very quiet out here. Is everything okay?”

“It’s fine, mum.”

Vicki’s mum looked straight at Sid. “Everything alright, Sid?”

“Yes, Mrs Karaminas.” Sid hid the bag behind his back same time as he flashed her a smile that she liked.

In a fast grab, druggy snatched the bag from behind Sid and took off down the street behind the kids. Vicki’s mum stared at him at first, then when she realised that none of us were running after him, she spoke to Sid again.

“Why is that boy running?”

“Sorry, Mrs Karaminas?”

“I said why is that boy running?”

Druggy reached the tall boy and the small one in the wagon. It was like they were waiting for him and I thought they were in cahoots for a second. The taller boy smiled at him, as if druggy was going to give him back his money. His smile disappeared when he saw that druggy wasn't stopping. He was running right past, up the street and up his own driveway, so that the last we heard of him was a door slamming.

“Is that your friend, Sid?” Vicki's mum asked.

“No,” Sid said.

“Did he steal something from you, Sid?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Mrs Karaminas.”

“Completely sure? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, Mrs Karaminas.”

“Okay. But play nicely.”

Vicki's mum turned around, went back inside, and slammed the fly door. And she didn't come out for the rest of the afternoon.

She loved us hanging out there, that was for sure. When Mr Karaminas came home, he'd give us a salute and maybe show us more of his photos from the western front. Or of his father in Europe in world war one. Or if he could really be bothered, the laminated one of an army general who had no name but sat on a chair in a bunker looking important and superior. That one was our favourite. It was the coolest and it was Sid's dad's favourite too as he and Vicki's dad were friends and they hung out like us and showed each other photos all the time.

I elbowed Vicki and we got back up on the wall again and started swinging our feet. The tall boy went on dragging and continued whistling. The small boy hunkered down and made himself comfortable. And nobody ever said anything about it. Not even when we saw druggy walk by the next day holding a bag full of newly bought lollies and wearing a brand new long sleeved shirt.