

# SCHOOLED IN DEATH



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## ONE

Slowly, almost reverently, she shook the lipstick from its silver casing. Taking a deep breath she began, steadying herself as she leaned forward, a frown of concentration on her face. Her hair fell slightly forward, but she brushed it back. She didn't rush. She paid particular attention to the Cupid's bow, and then stood back to examine her handiwork. The flower she had brought didn't quite match the pink of the lipstick, but no matter.



At 7.40 a.m. on Monday, 23rd May, 1975, two girls were seated on the wooden bench on the verandah of Edwards House, regarding with mild curiosity the plump figure of the bursar as she descended the steps of the headmaster's cottage. Why was Miss Hancock clinging to the railing? Why was her bosom quivering like a blancmange? The sun was reflecting off her glasses as she turned this way and that until, with a little shriek, she turned and hauled herself back up the steps into the office, daunted by the indifference of the autumn morning.

It didn't occur to Mary Grimes and Josie St John to ask if she needed help. Miss Hancock must have been at least fifty, and the thought of strong emotion attaching itself to anyone so old was disgusting.

'Do you think Radish tried it on with her?' said Mary, squinting over the border of hydrangeas surrounding the verandah and trying to penetrate the darkness of the doorway across the sunlit yard. Josie giggled at the prospect of Miss Hancock being groped by Mr Radcliffe. 'Maybe she walked in on him while he was . . . you know.'

'And then went back for another look?' asked the incredulous Mary.

The girls dissolved into laughter, and were still laughing when Mildred Obermeyer, better known as Matron, came to remind them that they had very little time to shower and get ready for breakfast.

So it was that they missed the police car that sped up the drive and screeched to a halt in a cloud of gravel and dust at the bottom of the steps that were the scene of Miss Hancock's agitation. They were unable to describe for their friends the relative heights and builds of the young policemen who took the steps two at a time and disappeared into the office. Even worse, they were confined to their bedrooms, and later to the hall when the ambulance arrived to convey their headmaster to the morgue.



Miss Hancock was gabbling almost incoherently into the moist receiver, clutching it like a lifeline. 'Oh, Mrs Graham!' were the only intelligible words Constables Lockyer and Fraser heard as they passed her office and entered the study, the door to which was ajar. There were no signs of a struggle. At his desk, leaning back in his chair (an ornately carved, gothic affair) was Horace Radcliffe. The headmaster's eyes were open, staring with surprise and disbelief at a person or persons unknown. He'd been dead for some time.

It wasn't the ghastly pallor of the headmaster's face that surprised them, for they'd seen death before. It was what had happened to

the headmaster *after* death. His tie was fastened around his head at a rakish angle, and behind his left ear was a wilted hibiscus. As if in protest at this indignity, the headmaster's lips were pulled back from his teeth, giving his mouth the appearance of a snarl. Around his mouth was a lavishly drawn smile in bright-pink lipstick, its exaggerated curves extending onto his cheeks and the points of the Cupid's bow peaking to his nostrils. It looked for all the world, said Constable Fraser, like an end-of-term prank.



## TWO

At his last public appearance, a late-summer day five weeks earlier, death had been the last thing on the headmaster's mind. Open Day at Eldersley was something of a social event for a school that played host to the daughters of the rich and famous. Horace Radcliffe was resplendent in full military regalia, including brown leather gloves, swagger stick and colourful decorations. The officer's cap that concealed his thinning hair was extremely flattering. He surveyed with satisfaction the setting for his speech and nodded and smiled paternalistically, extending his right hand to those fathers whose social pedigree or bank balance warranted such familiarity.

Around him there was much activity, the culmination of weeks of planning. On the verandahs around the quadrangle, chairs were arranged for parents and VIPs (very important parents), who were arriving in larger numbers than expected. Extra chairs were being fetched from the hall. The larger than expected turnout was a satisfying indication for the headmaster of his popularity and influence.

On the dais were chairs for Gilbert Fairweather, executive director of the firm that managed the school, the headmaster, the mayor, the lady mayoress and the archdeacon. A microphone promised speeches, and a bouquet of flowers for the lady mayoress was wilting in a nearby classroom, like the spirits of the nervous child nominated to present it.

Two divisions of the Girls' Service Training Unit (GSTU) were waiting to give a demonstration of precision marching.

As the official party moved to the dais, a hush fell. The headmaster, swagger stick tucked beneath his left armpit, took the microphone. His voice was rich and melodic.

'Ladies and gentlemen, visiting dignitaries, members of staff, girls . . . *the school is the place!*' He paused. 'It is the place where the care previously administered in the home now rests. It is the place where the responsibility for guiding and counselling youth now lies. It is the place where the traditions of loyalty to a group, to a community, to one's country and one's race, are upheld. It is the place, the *only* place, that will shape the future of Australia.'

The tenet of the headmaster's speech was that society was going to the dogs. He cited drugs, free love and reduced standards in schools, including the move away from prescriptive teaching. He cited social service payments to the indolent, attempts at rehabilitation in a justice system that favoured the criminal over the victim, and grants of public money to half-witted attempts at artistic expression. He cited condemnation of military service as ignoble and unnecessary, and a government prepared to scorn those cherished traditions such as the national anthem, the flag and the honours system, that were responsible for Australia's existence.

*Why*, he asked, were traditional social values declining? The question was rhetorical. They were being sacrificed, he said, on the altar of materialism, fanned by the flames of technology. Labour-saving devices had created a dangerous amount of leisure for society's traditional homemakers, women, who were abandoning their kitchens and plunging headlong into the workforce, leaving the guidance and care of their offspring to social welfare agencies. The government, instead of tackling the need to reduce the desire for material goods,

was encouraging this trend by setting up state-controlled kindergartens. Why could not social welfare payments be made to mothers who stayed at home to bring up their children? If it were up to him, it would be *illegal* for mothers of young children to go to work at all! The executive director glanced nervously at the sea of female faces.

The trend was fuelled, the headmaster went on, by cheap birth-control methods that made it possible for women to delay reproduction. What happened when children *did* intrude? Working mums, anxious to earn the extra income needed to maintain their automated homes, turned to welfare agencies and preschools to avoid the inconvenience of rearing them. This, he warned, would have dire effects on a generation growing up starved of a normal family atmosphere and of the maternal influence in early life.

Having despatched the traditional homemakers, the headmaster turned his attention to the church. It was, he said, no longer providing effective pastoral care for individuals in a world that had become cynical of religion. It was little more than a social welfare agency for groups in the community, or for groups in someone *else's* community (here there was a small ripple of laughter). The executive director shifted uncomfortably in his chair, glancing at the archdeacon's face, which had heightened in colour.

The school was the place, the headmaster repeated. The school would pick up where women, the family and the church had left off. The school would arrest social decay by producing great leaders of men. The school would uphold family values, discipline, censorship. The school would not jettison prescriptive teaching. The school would guide children – guard them from those dark, totalitarian ideologies that promised them a society in which the world's wealth was shared on a more equitable basis. The school would thwart totalitarianism's stated aim of overrunning the world by military action and

by stealth through the ranks of the naïve, the less educated and the less intelligent.

At a signal from the headmaster, the GSTU erupted onto the quadrangle to the strains of the Colonel Bogey March, slouch hats tilted at identical angles. They marched proudly, eyes to the front, shoulders back, heads erect. Even those parents whose feathers had been ruffled by the headmaster's anti-feminist views were sufficiently appeased by his talk of old-world values, discipline, capitalism and elitism. The embodiment of these values was their daughters' military display. The key to securing them was money.