

BREAK-UP DAY

by Kyle Mewburn

On my last day of primary school, two unusual things happened. One would prove life changing, in a roundabout kind of way. The other was more of a non-event, really. Yet if you'd asked at the time which was which, I'd almost certainly have gotten it wrong.

Break-up day was a highlight of the year. Everyone in the class would bring a plate of food to share – sandwiches, cakes, biscuits, more cakes – and we'd eat and play games from lunchtime until the final bell. The end of grade 7 (year 8 here in New Zealand) was an even bigger deal – it was also a day of friendship break-ups. The following year, we'd all be heading in different directions to one of the many high schools in the Brisbane suburban sprawl where I grew up. We'd likely never see most of our classmates again.

If the year had unfolded like the previous six, there would have been an extra level of significance to the day. It would have meant saying goodbye to my best friend, Keith. But the year hadn't unfolded as I expected – and Keith was no longer my friend.

There was no big drama or anything. For the last six years, Keith and I had always been in the same class. I'd never questioned how such decisions were made. I assumed whoever was in charge took friendships into account. So when Keith was assigned to 7A on our first day of grade 7, I got ready to follow. But my name wasn't called. When it finally was, I drifted over to 7B in disbelief. I felt bewildered. Abandoned. Alone.

At lunchtime, Keith sat with his new classmates. There was no spot saved for me. That was just the way things were. Classes seldom mixed apart from lunchtime games of red rover (bull rush). As always, I blamed myself. No wonder he didn't want to be my friend. I was a complete fraud – a fake boy.



At some point, I became aware that boys and girls were physically different creatures. So that was the problem. No wonder nobody realised I was a girl – I was in the wrong body. A girl in a boy-shaped box. Somebody had obviously made a terrible mistake. Yet there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

Pretending to be a boy wasn't a big problem until I started school, which was like being tossed into a shark-infested pool. If I didn't want to be eaten, I had to learn to swim – fast. Somehow I latched on to Keith. Unlike me, Keith was confident, outgoing. I can't remember how we became friends, but we were, from the first day, and I was fiercely loyal.

I charged into the task of being just like the other boys. I mirrored and magnified their actions. I learnt to conceal my emotions behind anger, and instead of crying, I fought. There were never any punches thrown. There was no serious intent to injure. They weren't even fights in the true sense, just a lot of sweaty writhing as we grappled for supremacy. Victory was decided by pinning your opponent down.

If a male teacher discovered our angry tangle of limbs, he'd yank us apart and send us to opposite ends of the oval to cool off. If a female teacher intervened, we'd be sent to the deputy principal's office. After a fierce slash of his cane across my fingertips, I'd return to class with a throbbing hand and a face burning with shame.

Although I'd been called a boy since the day I was born, it was a meaningless label until my sister turned up. I was two years old. At first, it wasn't the physical difference that stirred my confusion. I was too busy noticing how she was treated. She was fussed and fawned over, she cried and wasn't told off, and – most bewilderingly – she was allowed to grow her hair. Why was I forced to have a number one special when I desperately, passionately wanted long hair? I wanted long hair so much that I would bawl my eyes out each time my father's clippers appeared. It was so unfair.

I quickly learnt boys and girls lived under different regimes. There were iron rules that governed every action, every emotion – it didn't matter whether I was truly a boy or not. I'd been put in the boys' team and was expected to play my part. I was a quick learner. Adapting my behaviour and, more importantly, my emotional responses was essential if I wished to avoid punishment, ridicule, or worse.



Shame was my constant companion at school. It was always there, lurking. It took half my life to realise I had nothing to be ashamed of. But I grew up in an era when being gay was illegal and showing signs of non-binary behaviour was likely to end in a beating. So I blamed myself for being different, for feeling different. I was defective. A freak.

In my mind, the only way shame could be avoided was by flying under the radar. So I did everything I could to not stand out. I was a voracious secret reader with a rapidly expanding vocabulary. Yet I was careful not to say anything that might make me sound like a brainiac. All my best words were kept bottled up like a genie.

Fighting was another way of fitting in. I definitely didn't want to fight, let alone hurt anyone. I didn't even want to be there, hanging out with the boys. I yearned to sit in the shade of the old pine trees at the bottom of the playground with all the other girls. Looking back, I suspect it was these regular fights, more than anything else, that were ultimately responsible for landing me in a different class from Keith. Plus his mother likely considered me a bad influence. Keith was such a relaxed, easygoing, obedient boy. I can't recall him ever getting into trouble.

By the time break-up day came along, I wasn't feeling nostalgic about school. If anything, I was keen to move on. High school might at least offer a clean slate. A new start.

My mother wasn't a great cook or baker. But each year for break-up day, she'd bake her chocolate rough cake – more a slice than an actual cake – and it was always a hit with the other kids. I'd proudly return home with an empty Tupperware container. That year, for some reason, she decided to make an experimental sponge cake. After a 5-kilometre walk, banging around in my school bag on another hot summer's day, it arrived at school looking worse for wear. By lunchtime, it was a soggy mess. Understandably, nobody touched it. As I closed the container and put it back in my bag, I felt a wave of embarrassment.

At the time, it seemed like a huge deal. One more thing to feel ashamed of. Forty-five years later, of course, it's just a funny story. A non-event that had no impact on my life at all. Finishing primary school with a Tupperware container of soggy, untouched sponge now seems entirely appropriate. The perfect metaphor for my year.

So what about that other, life-changing event I mentioned? Well, as I went to leave my classroom for the last time, my teacher, Mr Staib, quietly pressed a book into my hands. "This is for you," he said, then promptly turned away. I was still distracted by my soggy sponge. I hardly gave the book a second glance. It was weeks before I remembered it.



The book was called *The Phantom Tollbooth*. When I saw "B. Staib" inscribed inside the front cover in red biro, I was both touched and a little bewildered. It was his personal copy.

I read the book in one sitting. Then reread it straightaway. Then again. It was the first book that truly spoke to my heart. The story was about a boy called Milo, who finds himself in a magical realm of numbers and letters and endless puns. The story offered reassurance that I wasn't alone with my love of words. It opened up a world of possibilities, and during my many rereadings, a tiny seed was planted. One day, I promised myself, I would be a writer, too.

I can't be sure why Mr Staib felt compelled to give me, and only me, a book. Or why he chose this book. I like to imagine he recognised the writer inside me and was trying to plant that seed. I also like to think he'd be proud to know his gift meant so much in the end. Although I never had a chance to thank him, I never forgot his kind gesture. When my first book, *The Hoppleplop*, was published, I dedicated it to "Mister Staib and his Phantom Tollbooth".

Ironically, if I'd been in Keith's class like I'd so desperately wanted, I'd have gone home bookless that day, with a Tupperware container of soggy sponge my lasting memory of that final break-up day.

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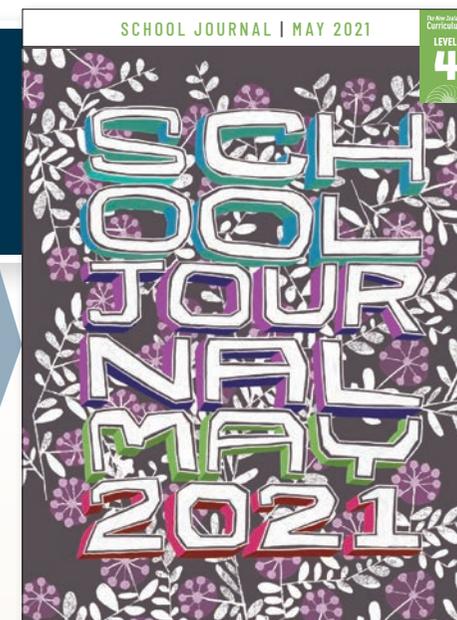
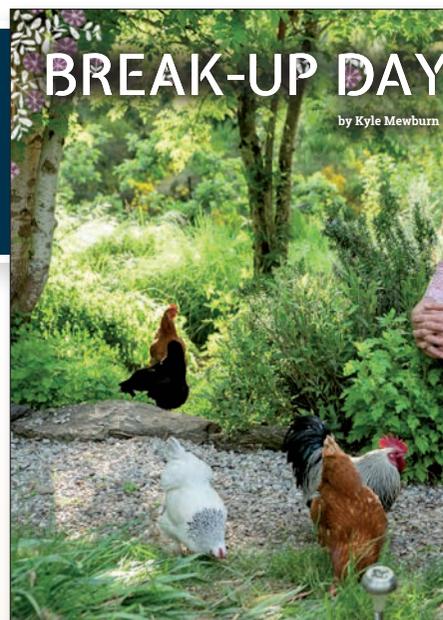
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