

Dear Mr Cairney

Tonight I read in the local paper that you have been appointed headmaster of Rimu Park Intermediate School. When I read your name and saw your photograph I was surprised, not at your becoming a headmaster, but at how clearly I still remembered you, even though it's now over twenty-five years since you taught me. Your face hasn't changed much at all, although your hair's receded quite a bit at the temples. I remember that some of the girls in our Form II class thought you were handsome and asked you to sign their autograph books when you left at the end of that term, but I don't suppose you remember that. But that's not surprising because I've been working it out and I realise now that you must have been only about twenty-one when you came to our school in Kaimara to relieve for Mrs Hunter when she had her operation. It was the winter term, I think, and I remember that the class wrote to Mrs Hunter in hospital and told her how much they enjoyed having you for a teacher.

But I never enjoyed having you, Mr Cairney, because I could tell that you didn't like me almost from the first day that you arrived at our school. You weren't like Mrs Hunter, who let us talk and walk around as we worked. I suppose she allowed us to get into these bad habits, but the first morning you came it was me that you told to stand up, even though there were several of us talking. You asked me what my name was and when I told you you called me by my surname and told me to keep on standing up for a quarter of an hour and I went very red and the others in the class laughed and for the first time since I started school I wished I wasn't there. After that you hardly ever asked me to answer a question, so I gave up putting my hand up after a while, even though I would have got the answer right sometimes. And I noticed that you would look at me in a funny way. I suppose that was why I never forgot your face, because quite often I would look up from what I was doing and you would be staring at me. Then one day I knocked a chair over and it made a loud noise and you kept me in after school to write out lines. *I must not act the fool when I am supposed to be working, one*

hundred times. When I finished it was after four o'clock and my wrist was sore and I'd never stayed at school by myself that late before and afterwards my footsteps sounded scary when I walked along the corridor to the vestibule.

It's strange how things like that should come back to me now; until I started writing this letter I had completely forgotten about the lines. But what I never forgot was the wondering about why you were, as we used to put it, picking on me, though I never said anything to anybody else about it. You made me feel sort of ashamed, but I didn't know why.

But what I really wanted to remind you of was the day you set us some sums to do and then went out of the room for a while to see another teacher and came back and found me out of my seat talking to another boy on the other side of the room and shouted, 'What are you doing getting up before you've finished?' and then after I said 'I have finished Mr Cairney,' you stared at me for a minute, then said, 'Stay behind after school today.' During the rest of the day I was worried about getting kept in again to write out more lines and I remember looking at you and wondering again why it was that it was always me that was getting into trouble when with Mrs Hunter I had never been kept in. Then at three o'clock when the bell went and the others put their chairs up and went home I went up to your desk and stood there and the way you looked at me made me feel suddenly frightened. Your mouth was just a thin line, and you didn't blink at all. I stood there in front of your desk and I felt very alone, but it wasn't until you said, 'I'm going to teach you not to fool in my class,' that I started to realise that I was going to get the strap. We were all frightened of the strap, though I had never actually had it before. Only once had I seen it used, when Mr King the headmaster came in and strapped one of the Maori boys because he had yelled 'Good riddance to bad rubbish!' when Mr Rosser the Methodist minister was going out the classroom door one day after giving us Bible study. Mr King's strap had been very black and worn looking, but when you reached into your satchel and pulled yours out I saw that it was light brown, with neat white stitches around the edges. When I saw it and watched you take your dark blue blazer off I felt sick right down in my stomach and I pissed my trousers a bit.

You stood me in the space between the desk and the door and pointed the strap at my right hand. Then you took a deep breath and flicked the strap back over your shoulder. I brought my hand up and held it out but even then I couldn't really believe that you were going to give me the cuts for just being out of my seat and I couldn't take my eyes off your face and when you hit me the first time your head came forward and you made a little gasping noise.

The pain started straight away. It wasn't like falling off my bike or tripping onto concrete: then there was always a little pause between the fall and the pain. But now for one second my hand was a normal, useful part of me, and the next it had disappeared and in its place was just a huge, numbing pain. There was no burning on the skin, as I had always imagined there would be, just the shock of the ache and the thudding numbness as the muscles of my palm were bruised to the bones.

The second cut came so quickly that I hardly had time to straighten out my arm again before a second shock of pain went up my arm. Then you paused before the third and I could see how hard you were working because you were breathing deeply and your tie had slipped sideways. You steadied yourself and nodded again and I brought my hand up and your strap came down again.

Now I was sure that my hand had grown to an enormous size, yet when I glanced down it wasn't any bigger, although the skin was bright pink and my fingers were curled up like the claws of a dead bird. They just went like that, I couldn't stop them. When I looked up at you again you had folded the strap in half and were staring down at me. Your mouth was hanging open a bit and your face had gone shiny and suddenly I knew why you were staring. Because I was so small you thought I ought to be crying. And I was. But only inside. Through the dizziness and the sickness and the pain I knew I must not show that I was. I stood there looking up at you with my huge hand dangling, waiting for you to speak. Now that the thump of the strap had stopped, the room was very still.

But you didn't say anything. Instead you suddenly put the strap on your desk, grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me over to the door, the one that led out into the playground. You

opened the door and pushed me out. By the bottom of the steps there was a downpipe which went from the spouting to a drain. The grate of the drain was blocked by mud and leaves and bits of paper and fruit peel, mixed into a soft wet sludge. You pointed at the drain. 'Clean it out,' you said. 'With your right hand.' And you stood on the top step and watched me do it.

The muck was very cold – that's why I remember that it was the winter term – but when I scooped out a handful it felt as if I was holding a red-hot coal in my palm. I scratched out the muck, carried it from the drain over to a rubbish bin at the corner of the classroom block and stood at the bottom of the steps, looking up at you again. My hand felt as if it had been plunged into a furnace and my arm was throbbing so much that my body felt lopsided and inside I felt sicker and sicker. But I knew that my eyes were still dry and I could see the lines around the corners of your mouth tighten and I knew that in a way I was winning. As you spoke you turned away. 'Right. Inside,' you said.

I followed you back into the room, then I started to walk over to my desk to put my chair up and get my lunchbox. I had to force myself to walk slowly because more than anything else in the world I wanted to run from that place. Then, from behind me, I heard your voice again. 'No you don't, son, I haven't finished with you yet.' And when I turned around you were holding the strap again and making the little pointing movements with it in the direction of my right hand.

Your last three weren't very well directed: only the middle one got me fair and square on the palm. The first cut across the ends of my wet fingers and the third landed high up on my wrist, because later when the bruise came out it reached quite a long way up my arm. But you still didn't see me cry because I didn't start to until after I had wheeled my bike through the school gates and was riding home. One-handed.

Well as I said at the beginning, this happened over twenty-five years ago. Have you changed, Mr Cairney? Somehow I think you probably haven't. Have you been successful? Oh yes, you're a headmaster now, so I suppose you have been. Will you remember me? I don't think so: in over twenty-five years you must have taught a thousand children. But I'd like you to know that after I left school I went to university and studied music,

then I graduated and travelled around Europe a bit and now I'm a musician and a piano teacher. I'm married with two children, a boy and a girl. We live not very far from your new school; that's why I was especially interested when I read of your appointment in the paper. Our boy's a lively little chap, small for his age, like I was, but he's keen to learn and he loves life. He's the reason why I haven't signed this letter. It was hard for me, as a professional person, to use a pen-name, but you see on the one hand I don't want our son to be victimised, and on the other I do want you to know that he'll be one of your pupils. And that if you so much as touch one hair on his head, Mr Cairney, I will come along to your school and smash every bone in your face.

Yours faithfully,

A Past Pupil