

THERE ARE NO BULLIES AT PUNCHBOWL BOYS. The school captain, Jamal, stands up and screams out at assembly like it's thug life. 'Bullying is for faggots and pussies. What kind of a sad fuck is bothered to pick on some other sad fuck?' Specks of tabouli blaze in his eyes. The teachers react by barricading the school, erecting nine-foot fences with barbed wire and cameras, and creating one way in, one way out, through the front office. They lose all their privacy but tell us it's a small price to pay for freedom. Students pour through the front door all morning, and the principal, Mr Whitechurch, who's White, and the deputy, Ms Aboud, who's Libyan, stand at the entry. 'Good morning, Bani,' they say to me at the same time, like two coppers. I step between them, along the blue carpet and past the reception desk, which has a bulletproof glass shield, and then through the door that leads into the school. It opens out from the front office, swings closed and locks.

There used to be seven hundred students at Punchbowl Boys, but when Mr Whitechurch was appointed he expelled three hundred and ninety-nine of them in one go. I was fifteen at the time but it starts over again like I'm staring at the western suburbs through my rear-view. Every day the remaining boys sprint along the corridor that joins to the front office, pretending they are driving a Subaru WRX. Their heads and spines are tipped back as though they are sitting in a bucket seat, their left hand is on their cock as though they're shifting a gearstick, and their right hand is out in front of them as though they're holding onto a steering wheel. While they move through the corridor they make engine and gear shifting sounds, 'Baaaaaa-baaa baaaaaa.' Then before they turn a corner they kick in the sound of the turbo, 'Bre-bre-bre-bre-bre-brew!' Mustafa Fatala moves so fast down the corridor that he crashes through a window. He tears open his hand and damages vital nerves, which means he can't write properly anymore, but that doesn't matter because he never receives a grade higher than thirty per cent anyway. He rambles on about how he's going to sue the school until one day Ms Aboud says to him, 'Yeah, tell the lawyer you were acting like a car.' Every Punchbowl Boy except me pisses himself laughing. I keep my pleasure to myself, grateful to see Fatala in pain because of the time I'd stepped past him in the corridor and he screamed 'Yaaaaaa!' into my ear. I thought someone had put a bullet in my head; then I turned and saw him

standing there staring at me with his jaw clenched and his eyes possessed by the *jinn*, a creature made of smokeless fire. Fatala seethed at me as air pushed in and out through the gaps in his teeth. Why he acts this way is a mystery between him and his maker. It brings me down – knowing that such a being exists and that we are only different to others within the walls of this school. In here Fatala is Black and I am White. I am at the centre of every teacher's affection because I can discuss Faulkner and Joyce and Dostoyevsky and Nabokov. The teachers look to me whenever they need to be reminded that it's the Boys of Punchbowl who are wrong, who are lesser beings. But then, when we're on the outside, Fatala and I are the same – we are sand niggers, rejected and hated and feared. Cops and transit officers target us and chicks and Skips avoid us. There's nothing I can do about it. Fatala and I look like the gang rapist Bilal Skaf, who is on the front page of every newspaper today.

The main corridor leads into the quadrangle at one end and the school hall at the other. All the way down the cracked vinyl tiles are the Maths rooms, six in total. My 2 Unit Maths room is between 3 Unit on the left and Intermediate on the right. I hate Maths like I hate being a Lebo – I am above it. I will be neither Isaac Newton nor Bilal Skaf, I will be a great novelist, like Tolstoy and Chekhov, and I will shape reality through my own words. I'm sitting in Maths writing a short story about a very young boy with enormous wings instead of learning equations when

there is a loud screech outside that goes, 'Fucken black cunt!' All twenty boys in my class shoot up and tumble into the corridor like bodies through a windshield.

A Pacific Islander named Banjo is standing with his arms dangling by his sides, a kitchen knife in his right hand and a serrated pocketknife in his left hand. His jaw hangs open and his eyes are filled with the fizz of Coca-Cola. He looks like an ogre, towering over all the Lebs. His head is small and round and he's hunching, his size-seventeen Converses rake across the vinyl. Rajab stands in front of him; a short-arse Lebo with a wound shaped like the centre of a strawberry across his shaved head. Blood runs down his temple and cheek, dripping from his jaw onto his shoulder, his white school shirt blotching with red like a slashed lamb. Banjo isn't strong enough to penetrate Rajab's skull. That's the thing about Punchbowl Boys: we swing like men but we're still just boys – we're not as strong as the bones that hold us together, so the knives just ricochet against our flesh. Perhaps if we were smart enough to sharpen those knives, and smart enough to learn the most sensitive points in the head to swing those knives at, we'd kill each other. Perhaps stupidity is Allah's way of protecting us from ourselves.