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## Held Fast

*A bully gets his due, maybe.*

When Midge (for Midget) was in grade 4, he was easily the smallest kid in the class. The biggest kid was Bomber, a kid who had been kept back a couple of years, so he should have been in grade 6, and even then he would have been the biggest kid in grade 6, he was so big. They called him Bomber because he farted all the time and he smelled and made lots of weird noises.

Mr. Gowt, the teacher, made Bomber sit in the front seat, on his own. He was always calling out, screaming even, and would spend most of his time crawling around under the desk. He couldn't do his work and could hardly read. His workbook was full of drawings he had made then scribbled in heavy pencil all over them. And there were ink blots all over. Every page was disgusting, Mr. Gowt told him almost every day.

Above the usual chatter, Mr. Gowt said in his high-pitched loud voice, "settle down now, children. Sit quietly and pay attention." All responded and the room became silent, except for Bomber who made his usual noises. "Take out your workbooks. You have twenty minutes to finish the sums on the board. First finished and gets them all right will be milk monitor for today."

Milk monitor was a coveted chore, handing out the free milk to all the kids just before morning recess. A wave of excited chatter rippled across the room, and for a moment even Bomber was excited.

Mr. Gowt took out his watch. "Ready! Go!" he called.

Bomber slid beneath his desk, trying to find his workbook that he had dropped on the floor. Mr. Gpwt, a tall thin man who had a thick English accent (an English immigrant Australia just after the war) wedged himself into the seat beside Bomber. "Now Bomber," he said, "let's see if we can get some of your sums done."

Bomber, greatly surprised, came up from under the desk and

handed Mr. Gowt his workbook.

“We won’t need that,” said Mr. Gowt. He produced a small box of oblong colored blocks of four different lengths and colors. He sat the longest one on the desk then asked Bomber to pick four short ones of equal size that would make the same length. Bomber was thoroughly bamboozled. He dropped his workbook on the floor and grabbed a handful of blocks, then began to sort them. Mr. Gowt slid out of the desk, looking on with great satisfaction. But Bomber continued to handle the blocks, unable to match four blocks with the long one. Instead, in frustration, he simply built towers, just like he did when he was a toddler, then smashed them down and they all fell to the floor.

Mr. Gowt was incensed. “Bomber! How could you do such a thing? All the trouble I have gone to get these special blocks for you. You are a very naughty boy!”

Bomber slid down under his desk and grunted, a bit like a snorting pig. The rest of the class giggled and rustled. Mr. Gowt looked at his watch. “Time’s up!” he announced in his most stern voice, trying to make it as deep as he could. “Pencils down!” He quickly went through each sum and called on different kids for the answers. Midge called out as loudly as he could, and got them all right. “Midge got ten out of ten, anybody else?”

A girl answered in a sweet voice. “I did Mr. Gowt.”

The bell went for morning recess. “Midge and Mary are the milk monitors, the rest of you sit quietly. They came forward and collected the little bottles of milk to pass out to the class. And as Midge passed Bomber’s desk, Bomber put out his hand from below and grabbed his ankle, causing him to fall forward and drop two bottles of milk. One bottle broke and splashed milk everywhere. The children gasped.

Midge, shaking the milk off his hands, trying to get up, snarled, “Dummy! You can’t even count! You’re a baby! You should be in kindergarten. Dummy! Look what you’ve done. Dummy!” and the rest of the class chimed in, “Dumm-ee! Dumm-ee!”

“That’s enough, class!” cried Mr. Gowt. “What Bomber does is none of your business. Now stand quietly and go out for recess. Walk! Don’t run!” He turned to Midge. “I know you are

upset with Bomber, but one should not speak to another like that. It's not his fault he's like that."

Midge was thinking, "Like what?" but held his breath.

"I'll clean up the mess, Mr. Gowt," said Mary.

"Thank you, Mary, that's very kind of you."

Midge looked at Mary with a smirk of disapproval. She was such a goody-goody. "Can I go wash my hands?" he asked.

"Yes, you may. And take Bomber with you." He grabbed Bomber and pulled him up from under the desk. Mr. Gowt was clearly very angry. "Go with Midge and clean yourself up," he ordered.

The thought of Bomber being clean was such a joke, smiled Midge to himself. But Bomber already had a hold of him and was dragging him out of the classroom and to the tap outside the school where they would wash their hands. Or not quite. Bomber had something else in mind, that is, if he had a mind.

Bomber pulled Midge to the tap and turned it on. He pushed Midge under the tap, head first. Midge screamed, "help! Stop it! You're soaking me! Me mum will yell at me!"

"Too bad!" growled Bomber with a big grin. That's what you get for being a shit. That's what you are. I hate you and all the rest of you smarty-pants shits."

"I'm gunna tell on you. You swore!"

"No kidding? And here's more!"

And just as Bomber pushed Midge's head under the tap, a strong hand gripped him by the scruff of the neck and pushed him away. Midge looked up, shaking the water from his hair. The biggest kid in grade six stood there, holding Bomber by his neck, and his other hand clenched into a fist. "You want a punch in the guts?" he asked with a challenging grin.

"Let me go, you're hurting me!" cried Bomber.

By this time, a gang of kids, all boys, had circled around, watching and cheering. "Grab Bomber's arms and hold him out," ordered the grade 6 kid. Two kids grabbed each of Bomber's arms and pulled them so that Bomber was spread out, trying to kick, but unable to reach anyone.

"I'll get you bastards for this!" shouted Bomber.

The grade sixer walked over to Midge and put his hand on

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his shoulder. "OK. Now you can hit him back. Make it a good one to teach him a lesson."

"You bastards!" cried Bomber again. "I'll get you all for this. I'll bash every bloody one of you. You wait! You'll see!"

Midge stepped forward and raised his fist. Would he do it? "Bomber deserved it, didn't he?" He asked himself. And he looked around at the gang of kids, egging him on. He had to do it. But who knows what Bomber would do to him afterwards.

"Go on then," taunted Bomber. "Do it, and see what will happen to you."

The grade sixer nudged Midge forward a little. "Don't be scared," he said, "I won't let him beat you up. Go ahead. It's only right. It's not fair that he keeps picking on you. He doesn't pick on his own size."

All of that was true, thought Midge, almost shivering in fear at the thought of Bomber getting at him later on, when there was no one there to save him. He raised his arm again.

"Hit him in the guts!" cried one of the kids.

"Yair, go on. Get on with it. Give it to him. It's time he learned his lesson!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Midge saw Mr. Gowt step out of the school and come towards them. Perhaps he would be saved.

"I'm warning you!" snarled Bomber.

And Midge knew he had to do something. After all the Sixer had done for him, he had to do what he said. He couldn't just walk away. They would all call him a coward, and the Sixer would never save him again. So he got ready to give Bomber a punch in the guts, and swung his arm, fist clenched. But he saw Mr. Gowt now hurrying towards him, and found, to his consternation, that his fist just as it reached Bomber's middle, opened into an open hand and became the slightest of slaps.

"What's going on here?" called Mr. Gowt.

Suddenly, the circle of kids dissolved and there was no one there, except Bomber spitting and snarling, and Midge, standing, arms hanging by his side.

"He's been bullying me, sir," whimpered Midge. "He pushed me under the tap."

"So I see," observed Mr. Gowt. "Bomber, put out your

hand!”

Bomber meekly put out his hand. Mr. Gowt put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the leather strap with which all, but especially Bomber, were familiar.

Bomber looked at Midge as if to say, “don’t think you won’t get yours too,” and down came the strap making a loud crack as leather hit the well-worn skin of Bomber’s right hand.

“Now the other,” said Mr. Gowt as Bomber put out his left hand and received the same, this time hurting a lot more.

The bell rang sounding the end of recess. Midge ran back to class. Bomber followed, plodding slowly .

Mr. Gowt was looking forward to lunch time.

*Moral: Fair punishment depends on the hands that use or abuse it.*

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