

## Claudio consumed

A week before the new school year began Claudio started feeling ill. Nights became endless voids filled with torturous emotions and distorted memories. It was fear of the unknown in the year ahead that consumed his mind. As Claudio had experienced in previous years, the less sleep he got, the more he ate, the fatter he became. His appetite was insatiable. Every waking moment was spent with food in his hand. The weight gain added to his anxiety. Then came the nervous tics and the shaking. Whenever Claudio's mother or grandmother noticed his anxiety they would ask 'Are you alright?'. Claudio would squirm under their gaze, mumble a less than believable 'Fine', and leave the room as quickly as he could. As Claudio's anxiety grew, so did theirs.

Three days before school resumed for another year the tears came. Claudio found himself overcome with breath-wrenching weeping multiple times a day. On a couple of occasions this occurred while he was with his mother or grandmother, and he had to rush to his bedroom to hide the tears. The first time this happened they followed him to his bedroom and stood outside his door, listening to his sobbing. Tears flowed silently down their own cheeks as they overheard their lovely boy's grief.

The day before he returned to school Claudio was a wreck. His skin was pale and he had dark circles under his eyes. Ignoring his mother's objections, Claudio drank cup after cup of coffee all morning. By lunchtime the caffeine and anxiety combined to create a kind of psychosis. Voices whispered from the corner of the room. Often the voices would just make noises, like people talking quietly amongst themselves. At other times the voices would call out Claudio's name and he would whip his head around. There was no-one there.

As the day wore on Claudio fell into a stupor: eyes glazed, mouth open, body limp. He would get up to eat or go to the toilet, but spent most of the afternoon sitting on the back porch staring at the veggie patch. Around nine o'clock that night Claudio went inside, kissed his mother and grandmother goodnight, and went to bed. There he lay, for several hours, staring at the ceiling, until an exhausted sleep claimed him.

The first day of school arrived and Claudio rose from bed groggy, drained and depressed. He did not look forward to his classes (being an average student); he did not look forward to seeing the friends he hadn't seen all summer (having no real friends to miss); he did not look forward to being in his last year of school (it was still a whole year to get through). What Claudio did not look forward to most was seeing Brad O'Connell, his tormentor since the star of high school five years earlier.

As he prepared for school, Claudio could not stop thinking about the first time he met Brad. He had kissed his mother and grandmother goodbye and run to the end of the street to eagerly await the school bus. Claudio had not enjoyed primary school, and looked forward to the rewards high school would bring: the freedom, the *friends*. The school bus arrived, Claudio scrambled aboard and headed down the aisle looking for a seat. He had smiled hello at the boys he passed, and some had smiled back, before he had found a seat.

'Look, another fat wog! This school will let anyone in,' boomed a voice from the rear seat, followed by cruel laughter. Claudio ignored the taunt and calmly looked out the window as the bus drove him to school.

Wham! Something suddenly hit Claudio's head so hard he had whacked his skull against the window. He looked down at the burst orange lying at his feet as the back seat burst into screams

of laughter. Claudio turned around and locked eyes with Brad. Claudio saw a look of pure hatred on Brad's face.

'Why'd you do that?' Claudio asked.

Brad rose from his seat and walked slowly towards Claudio, who shrank back against the window.

'Because you're a fat wog,' Brad said. 'You got a problem with that?'

'N-n-no,' Claudio whispered.

'Good,' Brad said and he punched Claudio as hard as he could in the stomach. Claudio doubled over in pain and struggled to breath. He had remained like for the entire bus trip, partly to ease the pain in his stomach, and partly to hide his tears from the other boys on the bus. Brad returned to the back of the bus where he was hailed with high-fives and laughter.

That probably would have been that, with the occasional bullying incident throughout the years, if not for the untimely accident as they were getting of the bus. Brad had pushed in front of Claudio and was just about to go down the bus steps when Claudio was pushed from behind, causing Claudio to lurched into Brad and send him face first into the dirt. All the boys around had laughed at Brad's fall. Claudio rushed down the steps to get past Brad when a hand shot out and grabbed his ankle, tripping him up. Brad crawled across the dirt until he was sitting on Claudio's chest, his bloody nose dripping onto Claudio's face. Brad began punching Claudio in the head. Claudio tried to dodge the punches, but he was trapped under Brad's legs, defenceless. Brad laid punch after punch into Claudio's face until the hand of a teacher grabbed the back of his jumper and hauled him up. Even as the teacher dragged him away, Brad's hands had kept punching the air like a wind-up toy. Another teacher had helped Claudio up and led him towards the office.

'I'll get you!' Brad yelled as Claudio walked away. 'I'm gonna make your life hell!'

Brad had kept his promise. Claudio's teachers and his mother said it would all blow over. The other boys at school knew better, and looked at Claudio like he was walking a death sentence. Most avoided him, to avoid getting caught in the periphery of any violence Brad was bound to send Claudio's way. Since that first day of high school Claudio had felt the same fear, the same almost uncontainable panic inside, every year, every school day.

Claudio tried to block those memories of Brad from his mind. His breakfast was unpalatable; the walk to the bus stop an eternity; the bus ride to school (without Brad on board, thankfully) a momentary flicker in time, over way too soon for Claudio's liking.

Once he arrived at school, Claudio slipped into what he called his 'undercover spy mode'. He would try and blend into the walls and lockers as he walked the corridors. He would shrink unobserved into other groups of students, using them as camouflage. All day his senses were heightened. He was constantly on alert for any sign of Brad: his laughter echoing down the corridor; the sound of a victim pleading with him for leniency; a glimpse of him leaning against the lockers, waiting for his next victim. Claudio knew if he were to open his locker he would not be in a position for immediate flight should Brad appear, a trap he had fallen into more than once over the years. So now Claudio carried everything he needed for the day in his school bag, and left everything else at home. All his locker contained was some spare paper and pens.

Claudio managed to get through the first three classes without running into Brad or any of his cronies. At morning recess Claudio stayed in the library, a safe haven for the bullied and shy. Claudio also spent his breaks outside the staffroom windows, outside the canteen, and behind the administration block. These places were all in full view of staff members, ensuring a quick salvation should Brad find him and start beating him. Unfortunately, this protection was not available everywhere in the school. Claudio was most nervous when going to the toilet. Brad was

known to stalk the toilets during breaks looking for victims hiding from him. Finding Claudio in the toilet was a moment of glee for Brad, knowing he could inflict as much pain as he wanted without interruption. Claudio avoided the toilets as much as he could, often only going during class or holding it in until he got home (often resulting in a mad dash from the school bus to his house).

Worst of all, worse even than being found in a toilet, was gym class. Claudio and Brad shared the same gym class. It was the one class Claudio consistently failed, mainly due to absenteeism. The gym teacher, Mr Walker, was a cruel sadist who relished turning a blind eye to Brad's antics. The only time Mr Walker became upset at Brad was when he broke a student's arm. Mr Walker said this would trigger an investigation into health and safety of his class, and blamed Brad for this unwanted attention and additional work. Brad learnt from this mistake, and in future the pain he inflicted left marks, but no permanent damage.

On this day, the first day of school in his senior year, Claudio did not have gym class and breathed a sigh of relief. Amazingly he had also not seen Brad once throughout the day. Claudio ate his lunch behind the administration block; went to the toilet during his afternoon geography class; hid amongst a group of younger students as he made his way to the bus; and caught the bus without incident.

On the trip home, he heard some boys talking about Brad and instinctively tuned into their conversation, knowing any information about Brad could be lifesaving.

'I heard it was a car accident,' one boy said.

'No, it was a boat accident,' said a second.

'How could he have a boat accident around here?' said the first boy. 'There's no water!'

'It was while his family was on holidays,' said the second boy.

'He must be devo,' said a third.

‘Yeah, I don’t know how I’d cope if that was me,’ said the first.

‘What happened?’ Claudio asked without fear or favour. The three boys looked at him, and recognising him as Brad’s most cherished victim, shared their news.

‘Brad was in a car accident,’ said the first boy.

‘Boat accident,’ said the second boy.

‘Whatever,’ said the first to the second. ‘He was in an accident.’

‘What happened?’ Claudio asked again, pressing for details.

‘His dad was killed,’ said the third boy.

‘Shit,’ said Claudio.

‘That’s not the worst,’ said the first, ‘he’s in a wheelchair now.’

‘Brad is?’ Claudio asked.

‘Yeah,’ said the first boy.

‘For how long?’ Claudio asked.

‘Forever,’ the first boy replied. ‘He broke his back and can’t walk. Can’t feel anything from the waist down.’

‘Shit,’ Claudio muttered.

‘Good for you though,’ said the third boy, watching Claudio with a critical eye.

‘What do you mean?’ Claudio asked.

‘You being Brad’s biggest victim,’ the third boy explained. ‘Now he’s crippled you won’t have to worry about him coming after you.’

‘Oh yeah!’ the second boy intoned. ‘That’s right! Good for you!’

‘Umm ... thanks?’ Claudio said, avoiding the stares of all three boys. He went back to staring out the window for the remainder of the journey.

Claudio entered his home lost in thought. He walked past his grandmother without acknowledging her and went straight to his bedroom. Could this be true? Was Brad really confined to a wheelchair? Could this actually be the end of the torment Claudio had suffered for the past five years? Could this year be the one of high school Claudio could enjoy?

Claudio logged onto his computer and did a search for accidents over the past month. He immediately found the news article about Brad's family. According to the report his dad had been driving drunk, with the family aboard, and crashed the car not far from their home as they returned from the footy. Brad's dad and his younger sister had been killed. Brad's mother and younger brother had minor injuries, but Brad had suffered spinal injuries and was left with paraplegia. It was all true, Claudio thought. Brad would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Claudio cruised through dinner on auto-pilot, shocked and elated by what he had learnt. He laughed at his grandmother's jokes, even the ones he had heard a million times before. His grandmother and mother passed curious looks at this upbeat change in their lovely boy, but did not comment. They just enjoyed the fact Claudio was happy.

The next day Claudio bounced out of bed and prepared for school. He packed his gym clothes into his bag, laughing aloud at the thought of gym class without Brad. He half jogged to the bus stop, and waited impatiently for it to arrive. He sat quiet, but smiling, all the way to school. Once he arrived, he walked confidently down the corridor to his locker, opened it without checking if Brad was around, and began to stow his gym clothes for later.

'Well if it isn't the fat wog,' came a chilling voice from behind him.

Claudio froze, turned around slowly, and was confronted with Brad in a wheelchair. Claudio looked down at Brad, confused by what he saw. Surely Brad should be different now?

Surely Brad couldn't bully anyone if he was in a wheelchair? Brad and two of his cronies smirked at Claudio.

'Grab him!' Brad ordered and his cronies leapt forward, each taking one of Claudio's arms, and dragged him to the nearest toilet. Brad followed, pushing himself along in his chair. Inside the toilet, the two cronies pushed Claudio onto his knees so his head was closer to Brad.

'Thought you'd get away from me because I'm in this chair?' Brad asked.

'N-n-no,' Claudio replied.

'That's fuckin' right!' Brad said and swung his fist into Claudio's face. For the next few minutes Brad continued to punch Claudio around the face, head and stomach while his buddies held Claudio up. When Claudio became heavy with exhaustion they let him fall to the toilet floor. Brad wheeled himself to the sink and washed his hands, glaring at Claudio in the reflection of the mirror the entire time. When he finished, he wheeled himself over to where Claudio was lying, breathless and crying on the stinking tiles.

'Listen here wog-boy,' Brad said, leaning forward in his chair. 'Don't think I've forgotten about you. And don't think I can't take you just because I'm in this chair. I told you five years ago I'd make your life a living hell, and I never break a promise.'

With that final threat Brad sat up and quickly wheeled his chair directly into Claudio's face. One of the foot plates hit his nose and cause it to start bleeding again. Brad laughed and wheeled out of the toilet, followed by his cronies.

Claudio continued to lay on the toilet floor, not caring he was bleeding or that he was probably lying in urine. All the hopes he had held for one night had been demolished in five minutes. I can't take this anymore, he thought, and let the tears flow free.

That night Claudio's mother and grandmother noticed his reversion to the anxious and depressed teenager he had been for the past several years, but they didn't comment. They didn't want to intrude on Claudio's thoughts. He was almost a man now, and they wanted to give him the respect a man deserves.

Claudio couldn't have felt less like a man if he tried. He replayed his beating in the toilet over and over in his mind. He felt nothing, numb, as he thought about it. He realised, lying on that filthy toilet floor, that this was his life for the rest of the year. Brad was not going away or going to change, accident or not. Brad was going to hunt Claudio out and make his life hell, as he had promised, and there was nothing Claudio could do about it.

After his mother and grandmother had gone to bed Claudio crept quietly into the kitchen and took a paring knife from the knife block. Without making a sound, he tip-toed back to his bedroom and closed the door. He wrote a note to his mother and grandmother, apologising for being weak and useless, then lay down on his bed and heaped towels around his arms. This was all he had in his control. This was how he could make Brad stop. This was how he could make it all better. He barely felt the knife as he slid it up one arm, and then quickly changed hands and slid it up the other. He lay back on his bed and rested his arms on the towels, and felt the warmth trickle into his hands. He closed his eyes and smiled. Finally, peace.