

LOVE FIRST GRADE

By Robin Bower

His name was Michael. Nothing unusual about that. He wore a grey shirt and shorts, and brown sandals. In winter, he varied his wardrobe by adding grey jumper and pants, and exchanged sandals for white socks and black shoes. His hair was short, perhaps too short, and his skin glowed white beneath the grey of his uniform. He was just like any other kid. The only difference was that he was a boy.

There were three in our class. Three in a class of thirty. Three boys and twenty seven over-confident, brash, strong, tough little girls who were growing up in a woman's world, dominated by brash, strong female teachers. Female teachers who, in the cold winter months, would keep their rheumatoid hands warm by smacking supple young calves.

I was running late that first important morning when seating arrangements could make or break a future reputation. But my luck wasn't running that day. All the blocks of six chairs were eagerly grabbed by babyhood girlfriends clutching each other's hands in first morning frenzy. They would no sooner give up their new place in class than dress their Barbie doll in leather.

As I bumbled my way through the door to my education, I looked across the room and managed to fix my attention on one spare seat in the classroom. The spare seat is, of course, never next to the funniest, most intelligent member of the class. My chair, as it had to be, was located directly in front of the teacher, in a group of four opposite Neville and Tony. What great sorrow and shame followed with the realisation that I had to spend

the whole coming year sitting at 'the boy's table'. To be always known as 'the one at the boy's table' was a stigma that took years to overcome. The only redeeming feature of this sorry awakening was the fact that I was also going to sit next to Michael for the coming year.

It was only when I sat close to him that I noticed his eyes. They were warm, brown puddles of mellow subtlety that seeped through my consciousness in an insidious wave of the unreal. And he was only six years old! From that moment, I was his. We would generously tick each other's work, drink cold, wet milk together at recess, deeply gouge crevasses in the dry ground for the barriers of our game 'Countries', and slide the soft, fresh steel of the monkey bars. But most important of all, he asked me to his birthday party.

I tried to block out the fact that everyone else in the class was asked too, and preferred to see myself as his special choice. I was the last to leave. It was our most special moment. We shared the last chocolate sundae in the darkness of his mother's verandah. Our hands met on the tip of the straw as we both held the plastic cylinder that would reveal to us the moist and nutty richness that lay below. Finally, the glass receptacle felt cold and our eyes were dazzled by the headlights of my mother's car coming to collect her daughter.

The next few days would bring a change to Michael. Just a little louder in class, just a little less attentive, just a little more gregarious with the rest. Milk sharing days were over, replaced with the lonely sup of slightly warm, white liquid on the green steps near the hall.

It was time to say goodbye. When Michael approached me at the end, his hand grasped the hat elastic around my neck, and pulled.

He let go, and so did I.