

## The Legend that is Sam Cunnington

By Jane Downing

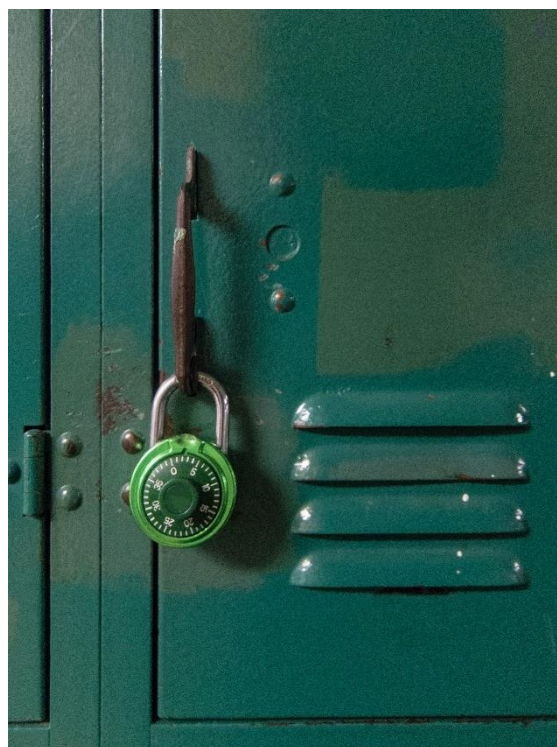
High school is a battlefield. Sam Cunnington had the nous to understand he wasn't the first person to realise this. What he couldn't work out was who the enemy was.

Getting out from under the doona was the hardest part of the day. Well, most days. But wagging too often wasn't an option in a small town. Things got about. His room was no cocoon anyway. His end of primary school poster of Optimus Prime had fallen with a concertina crash long before and was still on the floor amongst a centipede of trainers—worn out but not thrown out—leaving his wall an alienated modern artwork of Blu Tack splotches. Though he only vaguely smelled it himself, the room stank: of the trainers, and of old socks and new cum. Sam had recoiled from his mate Spit's room the day before he became a legend. He recognised Spit's stench as an echo of his own room.

Maybe it was an age thing.

His dad was a teacher—both before and after he shot through—and he'd say that year nines were the worst. "We write the lot of them off from go to whoa," he said on behalf of teacherdom everywhere.

Sam hated being in year nine. All fucking woe, woe and more woe. One day he'd find out the



spelling of the word was different and wasn't quite as he'd thought, but that wouldn't help with his memories of that year. And back then he couldn't imagine any other year being any better. He saw the expressions on the grown-up's faces when they didn't know someone was looking. Down the long main road of town; from the pharmacist putting out the stand of old-people shoes first thing; to the baker at the end of the laneway exhaling long poisonous gasps of fouled smoke and knocking his fag on the bricks before slinking in the back door; even the lollipop

woman who hadn't cracked a smile in any of the ten years Sam had seen her being held up by her stop sign outside the primary school. None of them smiled. The downward corrugations beside their mouths would crack and the fleshy, mushy insides of their cheeks would leak out if they ever did. He knew their quiet desperation was his future too if he let this town trap him.

So he pedaled hard on his bike down the main road. He forced his lungs to take up his whole chest and squeeze his heart into a tiny space. He swooped into the wake of the school bus bringing in the bush kids, extra low on his already low BMX which his mum couldn't afford him to grow out of. Bending almost horizontal like he was perpetually riding into a headwind.

He never locked up his bike in the sheds. That looked too much like caring. Spit would be there too each morning, fidgeting over his big sister hand-me-down girly bike. Sam hadn't been able to get rid of him since primary school, this lump of a pity-friend. They walked the halls side by side—better than walking alone. They knocked along, every step defiant. On the vinyl tiles they ground their rubber soles in a twisting motion to create the right pitch of teeth-fuzzing squeal. On the nylon carpet in the library, they dragged each step, collecting an electric charge to shock the little grade sevens.

It shitted Sam that Spit had a nickname and he didn't. As awful as it was, his mate had grown into Spit; turned proudly when it was called. Sam wondered if he was the only one who actually

remembered the day a cockroach got into Boris's sandwich, by fair means or foul, and he spat it out. And spat and spat and spat all day, a reflex to still the spasms of peristaltic action going on in his throat when he remembered the scrabbling of insect legs against his tongue and cheeks. Spitting in the playground, spitting in the wastepaper bin, on the wool of his sleeve. They'd been six.

Spit practiced new backstories when they got to high school, attempting to rebrand himself. He'd won a spitting competition or he'd lost his virginity on a fishing trip to Franklin Spit, anything that was more heroic than cockroach sandwiches.

Sam had tried his luck creating his own nickname. He wanted to be *Volpe*. His granddad—his mum's dad—was Italian and it meant fox. He explained this countless times when the feeder schools were tossed in together and the lot of them had to jostle for positions in a new battlefield. Sam Cunnington, cunning as a fox. *Volpe. Capisci?* The closest he got to a nickname though was the usual conflation of vowels from boys too lazy to get their tongues around real words. Like the morning of the day he finally walked into legend status; Joe from the footy team screamed it out from the other side of the quad, "See ya this arvo Cunt."

The week before, Mr Hempel had slipped on the steps outside the Home Ec room and broken his collarbone, which meant it was open season on the supply teacher brought in for his History

classes. Or rather *replacements*, plural, as the year nine write-offs ensured.

Mr O’Shannessy was defeated first, though he was not much of a combatant in his post-retirement years. He’d been tall once, back when he was teaching their mums and dads. Now he stooped and shambled into class. Sam imagined people were like marionette puppets, held up by thousands of slender strings. Time snipped and snapped the threads, and those left had to carry the full weight inexactly, inexpertly. No wonder old folks slumped.

Some of Mr O’Shannessy’s remaining marionette strings were at breaking point. He only raised his ferret-thick eyebrows when emotion was inescapable. He finally had to when the year nine version of *What’s The Time Mr Wolf* got too in-your-face to overlook.

The class played the game every time Mr O’Shannessy turned his back to write on the whiteboard: dates, the names of *real* battlefields like Gallipoli and The Somme, using his elbow to rub out various spellings of Ypres. It was an adaptation of the game they’d played in the pool on long summers when they were kids. In the classroom, the students stayed behind their desks and in their chairs, and hopped forward centimetre by centimetre when his back was turned. After half an hour of incremental small steps the herd of furniture crowded round the whiteboard like cows turning up for milking. Sam and Spit, who always sat up the back so they could tilt their chairs and lean on the wall (“You’ll

break your necks one day,” Mr O’Shannessy would chide) were poised, expectation flickering in their eyes each time Mr O’Shannessy turned to face the class. He held his nerve remarkably well for most of the lesson, as if he was one of the Diggers he went on and on about. He held his nerve on so many turns that it was impossible to see what it was that suddenly broke him.

“I bet your father’s proud,” he screamed at Vince, who was no more the ringleader than any of them. Mr O’Shannessy’s eyebrows were tugged so far up his forehead they sent his receding hairline for cover. Then the marionette strings snapped and his face crumpled in on itself. “I bet your father’s proud,” he screamed, this time at Marty. “You’re chips off the old blockheads, you great lumps of coprolite.”

It was the cleverest thing he’d said all class, Sam thought, especially after Ella told them what coprolite was.

Vince went around telling the rest of the school he was T-Rex poo and high-fiving all round. Mr O’Shannessy didn’t return the next day. Enter Ms Megalakas. She was short, no taller than Ella and Chloe and Jess and most of the other girls in year nine. Her hair was streaked, naturally—not something a beautician would lay claim to—with grey, and her cardigan sagged more on one side than the other from constant tugging. A handkerchief poked out of one of its pockets. She looked as vulnerable as Bambi’s mother. Calling the roll was interrupted by hyena cackles as friends switched names and shouted

out “Yes Miss,” like they were from the posh school on the hill. Ms Megalakas acted like this was normal. She was so useless that she didn’t even get the world war they were up to right. Rhiannon Barnett started to correct her but got a kick from behind she couldn’t ignore. “Fucker,” she snarled at Spit’s boot.

Then the handkerchief came out of Ms Megalakas’s cardigan pocket. She rubbed it over her sweaty palms again and again before she remembered to stop.

1941 was all she’d written—hugely—on the board.

Maybe she’s dyslexic, Sam thought, an uncomfortable charity in his heart. His little sister was dyslexic. He should’ve been looking after her at lunch break by now, but she’d been held back another year in primary school. She got her letters and numbers topsy-turvy, or as the counsellor put it, transposed. 1914 was close enough. And it was all in the past after all.

“Can I have some help distributing the textbooks?” the naïve woman asked, as if no-one had ever advised her against using questions when commands were needed.

Surprisingly Vince and Max were up immediately to help. Unsurprisingly, it wasn’t because of any charity in their hearts. They hadn’t grown out of the challenge passed down from older brothers. Stick some pubes in the pages of a book, see which girl touches them: you’re in.

Puerile. Sam rolled the word around in his mouth. They’d learnt it in English along with

juvenile and futile. He was probably the only one in the class to remember it. Use in a sentence: Puerile boys reach up their shorts to pull out pubic hairs, sneak them into a history book and squabble down the aisles so pretty Chloe would get the gift and not Rhiannon and certainly not soft Joshua who they knew more about than he did himself.

Sam Cunningham closed his eyes and wished he was anywhere but here. His imagination, however, couldn’t stretch to where this anywhere might be. It had not yet been broadened by having greatness thrust upon him.

“Tobruk,” the mouse voice up the front intoned. “Turn to page one hundred and thirteen. The Siege of Tobruk. 1941.” She was speaking to a fixed point above their heads. The class shuffled and ruffled pages, waves of noise crashing intermittently into words, “What page again Miss?”

For all the death tolls from the two world wars, it struck none of them that wasting time would one day be a regret. One day, when they realised time actually did run out.

Voices droned like blowflies against the windows down the side of the classroom as the students were put to reading the chapter out loud, the readers chosen in alphabetical order. Sam’s corner was too far away to have a view out the window so he stared at the readers in turn; they twitched with anxiety, probably aware of the stares by that seventh sense all adolescents have. Vince ran his finger under the words of his

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section. Arnold stumbled over Africa Corps, making it sound like the fighters had already died. It was Rhiannon who got the biggest laugh. She read out that one of the officers was a leg-end. She paused, and asked, innocently (which was why all the boys laughed so much) if he was described like that because he was a famous cricketer back home.

Ms Megalakas looked as confused as Rhiannon.

“Like a deep fine leg or a leg gully silly mid off or something—” Rhiannon said, digging herself in deeper.

“Keep reading,” the teacher said, her hanky out again, a crumpled flag of near-defeat.

Sam scanned the rest of the column for other hyphenated words that might trip him up when it came to his turn. He wasn't dyslexic like his sister but this reading to a bunch of animals was torture.

Sam didn't think the next bit through, but when Ms Megalakas was looking down at her clammy hands, he slid off his chair, cracked open the door into the storage cupboard behind him and squeezed himself in.

Sounds were muted and echoey in the shadow world of the storage cupboard. Sam wondered

what he was supposed to do next.

It was smaller than a bedroom wardrobe inside. Shelves on each side and up the back wall made it even smaller. A band of light under the door allowed Sam a vague impression of his hidey-hole. The only thing for certain was there was no way through to a better world; any Narnian universe was closed off to putrid year nines. It smelt like none of the books had got out of the cupboard for a long time, And it surprised him to think history texts could become history themselves. As if the past changed.

Life on the other side of the door hummed along, in that echoey muted way, which also surprised Sam, and as Spit told him later, surprised the rest of the class too. Ms Megalakas didn't seem to have it in her to play it cool. His text lay open on his desk, he was a big lumbering adolescent, so she must have noticed he was gone. They expected a shout, a shot of anger—surely a student hiding in a storage cupboard deserved a loud response from his teacher. But nothing.

Jess started reading her section about the German supply lines. Suddenly all the Australian battalions were trapped in the small town of Tobruk, which was somewhere in northern Africa; hence, Sam clicked, the previous mention

of the Africa Corps. The siege on their position in Tobruk lasted 242 days.

Sam slid down and sat with his knees up under his chin, in the small floor space surrounded by shelving. He wondered why he was there.

Bombs were dropping on Tobruk.

Sam wondered why *blow me up* and *blow me down* had such different meanings. Surely, Ms Megalakas would haul him out by his arm any minute and he could smirk “Blow me down!” and make the class laugh and then he wouldn’t look such a dick. Because there was no point, and never had been, in trapping yourself in a storage cupboard with one conical lamp netted with cobwebs, but without a bulb, swinging above you.

And yet the siege and the class ground on. It was the kind of afternoon when the second hand on the clock above the whiteboard moved in slow-motion.

Ella read next. Sam manoeuvred himself in the small space so his ear was up against the door. Her voice was a velvet caress against the wood. He was almost positive Ella had had a crush on him the year before. He’d catch her staring at him, then she’d blush, because dark girls can blush too. She’d turn away, but her gang wouldn’t giggle so he knew it was a secret crush. A secret longing.

Inevitably, Sam thought about sex next; what with Ella’s voice purring in his ear. He wondered why *blow me* was so, *so* different to the other two sayings. His ridiculous body reacted like

something out of an embarrassing sex-ed text book. He tried to stand, he shook his legs and lent his forehead against a shelf, feeling the grit tattoo his skin. He forced himself to think about his Uncle Pete’s job sexing chickens. Sex switched meanings. He had the graphic image of the process playing on repeat; little girl chicks pushed to one side to live another day, the little boys thrown on a moving conveyer belt into teeth that ground their fluffy yellow balls of cuteness to shredded flesh. Maceration.

Shit, he hadn’t wanted to move his mind from masturbation to maceration but life was one big tangled mess and he couldn’t see his place in it, unless he was heading for those grinding teeth. He didn’t need to search for memories of hanging out at Spit’s dad’s dairy to know male calves were as disposable as male chicks. So why bother with boy humans—send us off to war as cannon fodder. It made sense.

He slumped back onto the floor, unable to arrange his body into an origami of ease. He was a mummy in a sarcophagus, a foetus in a womb. Somehow he had to get out; resurrected or reborn. It dawned on him that this was a double period. There was no way out except into the arms of complete humiliation. Which was worse than a bullet.

The gloom intensified. His gloom. His dad had truckloads of advice, which he delivered over the phone every couple of months, when he checked in on his DNA. year nines were a write-off from go to *noe*, he said, but recently he’d

added a corollary; only then do you become a man. Then Sam had blocked his father's number on his mobile. He didn't want to be a man if it meant being like his father. He shifted again, stretching a cramped leg under the lowest shelf, deep into dust territory. His trainer slipped on something gravelly. Ossified coprolite of more recent vintage? Was he in there with the rats? He withdrew his leg and curled himself back into the foetal position. And he began to think his discomfort might not be angst. All along, it might simply have been an intestinal complaint.

As soon as this thought entered, however, the fart escaped. And what an escape; it reverberated off each and every wall of the confined cupboard. It was an explosion. That's how Spit described it later. They all heard it from the other side of the door as an underground explosion. They'd taken it as an act of defiance. They'd fully expected Ms Megalakas to storm down the back and put an end to the charade. Not so cunning now, boy!

This didn't happen. She must have been as deaf as she was dumb. Or she wasn't being paid enough to give a fuck.

So Sam still had no way out without sacrificing his pride.

He sat in a soup of his own cauliflower stench. His mum hadn't cooked cauliflower in weeks.

Back then, Sam didn't know the story of Abu Hasan of the Fadhli tribe, but the universal truth of that story squatted like a dread toad in his heart as he waited and waited in the storage cupboard,

all the way through the double period.

Abu Hasan's story came years later, told by beautiful, sweet Caroline, after she'd wheedled the events of this horror day out of him. Spit had come up to the uni to have a look. They went by the names Sam and Boris now, but after a few beers in the corner pub they reverted to Rat and Spit. "Why Rat, why Spit?" sweet Caroline demanded. She had no understanding of the culture of boys and nicknames.

And yet she could tell a tale from *One Thousand and One Nights* as expertly as Scheherazade. As soon as Sam's fart was described and she immediately launched into Abu Hasan's story.

Abu Hasan invited his family, his friends and his foes to his wedding banquet. They ate like kings and as Abu Hasan rose from his divan he (obviously, for the story to make sense in Caroline's exuberant retelling) let rip one prodigious, unmistakable fart. Mortified, the man fled. Not just the wedding banquet—he fled the town, and then the country. He stayed away ten years until homesickness called him back. In disguise, he crept home. On entering the city, he heard a young girl ask her mother, "When was I born?" The mother answered directly.

"My daughter, you were born on the night Abu Hasan farted."

Abu Hasan fled a second time and died in exile.

"You are a brave, brave man to live it down," sweet Caroline said, coming to sit on Sam's lap in the corner pub, and to kiss the tip of his nose.

Sam wanted her to believe he was brave. He wanted his first lover to think him a man who'd stand up for himself, unlike poor Abu Hasan. Spit was determined she'd realise he was much, much more than that. With a beer moustache and unfocussed eyes he told the real truth of it.

“No, it wasn't like that at all. We thought Duong or Josh would dob him in. We thought the teacher would force him out and have the last laugh. The tension in the room—well you could have cut it. All we got from Ms M was the Rats of Tobruk. Some Nazi propaganda guy called the Australians under siege in Africa that, but the taunt backfired and our blokes took the insult on proudly.”

Sweet Caroline, from another town, another grisly high school, knew the history curriculum just as well as they did. Her eyes sparkled and one arm hugged Sam while the other brought her beer to her lips.

Sam relived the final bell. Ms Megalakas gathered up her pointless roll book and squidgy whiteboard markers and made a rushed retreat to the staff room. He cracked the door to the cupboard a centimetre. He cautiously pushed it open. No one came to help. Sam crawled out shamefaced.

And the cheer went up spontaneously. Applause and desk whacking. It took him seconds to understand none of it was ironic. They loved him. He'd stayed the distance, he'd hung in there. He'd not given up or given in. The story

ran like a bushfire around the school; Sam Cunnington had farted in a storage cupboard and got away with it. He was a star, a larrikin, a hero.

Ms Megalakas never came back, and if she had, she would have been amazed how successful her class had been. Not one student ever forgot the Siege of Tobruk, all 242 days of it. Not when they had their own Rat.

“Now, why are you Spit?” sweet Caroline asked Boris, and he launched into a new version of his origin story, all spit-and-polished up.

Sam listened to his best mate, watched his hands embellish the story. He seemed to know what it meant to be a man. Sam wondered whether he was just acting the part, like Sam was.

He buried his face in Caroline's hair and inhaled perfumed chemicals.

“Another round?” he asked.

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