

The Scar in the Grass

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Introduction

The grass grew back.

That is the very first thing that must be understood about the mechanics of erasure. Long before the heavy, suffocating heat of the western Sydney summer finally broke into the bruised purple skies of autumn, the earth simply consumed the evidence. It began with the herbicide. Whoever had crept onto the school grounds under the cover of a moonless night had used an industrial-grade chemical, pouring it from heavy plastic drums with a terrifying, deliberate precision. For three days, the three massive words burned into the front lawn of Parramatta School reeked of acrid sulfur and sweet, rotting chemical solvent, a noxious vapor that

hung invisible in the humid air and caught sharply in the back of the throat. The kikuyu grass, normally resilient and stubbornly aggressive, had withered into a shocking, skeletal white, the blades curling in on themselves like burnt paper. The words were huge, geometric, and impossibly loud against the emerald green, screaming an accusation that no one in the administration dared to read aloud.

Then came the frantic, desperate choreography of the cover-up. Outside contractors were finally summoned after three days of administrative paralysis, arriving with heavy machinery that rattled with the frantic energy of an emergency. The air filled with the deafening roar of diesel engines, the rich, loamy, blood-dark scent of freshly turned topsoil, and the sharp tang of artificial nitrogen fertilizer. They dug out the poisoned earth with small excavators, carving deep, jagged trenches into the lawn until the white letters were violently excised. Trays of new, fragile seed were laid down, packed tight beneath a layer of dark, damp earth. The sprinklers hissed to life, a rhythmic, mechanical shhh-shhh-shhh that sprayed a fine, iridescent mist over the wounded ground, forcing the new roots to take hold in the wet mud.

Inside, beneath the soaring, echoing ceiling of the assembly hall, the air was thick with the smell of cheap floor wax and the collective, nervous sweat of a thousand teenagers. The principal stood at the wooden lectern, the microphone whining with a high-pitched spike of feedback. He spoke into the heavy silence, his voice a calculated, resonant baritone. He spoke of vandalism, the syllables snapping like dry twigs. He spoke of institutional respect, of the sacred trust of community, and of the absolute, paramount need to look forward, never back. He did not sweat. He did not waver. The students sat on the unforgiving wooden floorboards,

their lungs filled with the stale air of the hall, and listened to the architecture of a lie being built in real-time.

By the following autumn, a stranger walking past the rusted iron gates on the main road would have seen absolutely nothing amiss. They would have breathed in the crisp, cooling air, smelling only the faint, lemony crush of eucalyptus leaves underfoot and the exhaust of the M4 motorway humming in the distance. They would have seen only a vast, meticulously well-kept expanse of turf, vibrating with a uniform, synthetic perfection. It was the kind of manicured green that speaks loudly of institutional order, of deep pockets, of scheduled maintenance, and of the quiet, dangerous pride of a place that knows exactly how to scrub its own face clean.

Yet, those who had been there—those who had stood at the chain-link fences and watched the pale, toxic geometry of the accusation slowly disappear under successive, desperate mowings—could still find it. They could find it on certain late afternoons in April, when the humidity dropped and the sun sank low over the Blue Mountains, casting long, razor-thin shadows across the oval. When the amber light fell at just the right oblique angle, and the evening breeze sweeping off the Parramatta River parted the blades just enough, the ghost revealed itself.

It was a faint, almost imperceptible difference in the texture of the green. A subtle depression in the soil. A dark memory locked fiercely in the roots. The scar did not announce itself with the violence of the original poison. It simply waited. It was as patient as the porous red brick of the English block, as patient as the muddy, tidal river that moved relentlessly beyond the tree line, utterly indifferent to whatever comforting, sanitized stories the living chose to tell above it.

Parramatta School stood on heavy, ancient land. Before the concrete foundations were poured, the earth had been a sprawling citrus orchard, the air once thick with the dizzying, sweet perfume of orange blossoms and the sour tang of fallen, rotting fruit. Before the orchards, it had been a wild, tangled riverbank of paperbarks and mangroves. And for thousands of years before that, it had been the dreaming places of the Dharug people, places of deep, resonant power whose original names the busy, coffee-scented staffroom never once spoke. The earth beneath the school was already a graveyard of forgotten things, deeply accustomed to swallowing history.

In the chaotic, bell-driven years that followed the writing on the lawn, the school aggressively continued its ordinary, mechanical work. The timetables dictated the flow of bodies through the narrow, echoing corridors. Lockers slammed with the percussive crack of gunfire. The institution engaged in the slow, grinding manufacture of young adults who would, one day, look back through the hazy lens of time and wonder what, exactly, they had actually been taught in those hot, airless rooms.

Some of those lessons arrived officially, printed on the crisp, bleach-white pages of the syllabus. But the most profound, most damaging lessons arrived elsewhere. They arrived in the blinding, hallucinatory heat of the upper oval, where the air shimmered like liquid glass. They arrived in the heavy, suffocating silence that flooded the classroom the moment after an express train roared past the windows, rattling the glass in its frames. They arrived in the incredibly careful, mathematically precise way certain teachers learned to never, ever place a hand on a student's shoulder, measuring their distance in inches. They arrived in the specific, chilling hush that fell over the courtyard whenever a particular