

## [Transcript] Conversations / Confessions of a drama kid

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Before Brendan Cowell became a playwright, a novelist, a director, and a famous actor, he was a drama kid. And today we're going back to the 1980s, to the world of Brendan's suburban boyhood, where it all began, in the southern suburbs of Sydney, the Sutherland Shire.

Brendan Cowell was that loner kid at primary school, who read poems out at assembly, made up little plays and forced people to watch them.

He was also a child actor, appearing in TV ads for Cornflakes and for Pavlova Magic.

Needless to say, Brendan was singled out for attention at high school because of this.

He was bashed by the rugby captain. He had his head dragged through the urinals and the boys' toilets.

And kids shouted at him to say the lines from the ads.

But that began to change in year 11, when the right teacher came along at just the right time.

Brendan has often drawn on these formative experiences in his writing,

and he has a novel called Plum. Hello, Brendan. Hello, Richard.

I had a couple of years of primary school in the Shire in the 1970s.

I remember lots of brick houses. I remember cricks, tons of kids in the street to play with, and a cul-de-sac with a rocky park down the end of the street.

Was it like that for you in the 80s? Yeah, it absolutely was.

Well, I lived in Dolan's Bay, which is at the end of Gannon's Road in Caringborough, and that not only backed onto a nature reserve, but also onto a little estuary.

So it was fishing, it was cubby houses, it was remote-controlled cars, it was climbing trees, and in the cul-de-sac all the kids were out. 3.30 to 6.30 was a festival of activity.

The girls were in the sprinklers, there was cricket games where you have to move the stumps, every time a car comes back up, and then you move the stumps back.

We all had mice. We kicked the footy, throw the frisbee.

There was this woman, Mrs. Linky, on the corner, who if the ball or the frisbee went over to her into her yard, you never saw it again. But yeah, it was like you said, those long afternoons.

It's beautiful that they were endless and a real sense of community and playfulness.

And the innocence of the shy extends, you know, kind of just into your teens, and then it turns a little bit down in the southern shy.

But for those days, the most beautiful place probably on earth to bring up kids.

Across the road from our place in our cul-de-sac, there was the spooky house with the spooky man that lived in it. And I now realise I think he was just an old single man and a drinker.

And me and a bunch of kids just sort of sneaked in and crept through his house and found him sort of sleeping it off in the afternoon on his bed. And we never woke him and then crept back out again. Did you ever go on adventures like that with your mates and your school friends going up and down the street? Oh, absolutely. And lots of break and enter. And lots of stealing booze and putting it in tall bottles and then taking it to the park and then going skating.

And yeah, it was it was kind of a low level crime was going on the whole time. And that was pretty much accepted because we all had skateboards, you know, and if a party was on in Bonnet Bay, which is, you know, 15 kilometres away, we just get on our skateboards and go.

And then we go, oh, you know, Kelly's parents are home, we'll just skate back.

You know, if we were hungry, we might smash in the glass and steal a big,

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you know, thing of chips. You know, it was kind of quite rebellious but also really innocent. And that was the weird juxtaposition. We're all staying at each other's houses. This is more into my teenage years. So we did a lot of sleeping at the front of churches as well and waiting, you know, waiting till McDonald's open because I had that 20 cent coffee that you could keep refilling. And, you know, so many stories of, you know, but that's why I think that a lot of those friendships I have from back then have maintained themselves because, you know, there was a real solidarity in what we experienced around then. Were your family ever churchgoers? Yeah. My grandmother, who passed away a couple of years, kind of lives right next to Jesus, you know, and, you know, even though she kind of had the devil's tongue at times, she was quite critical and not the most open-minded woman, but she loved the Lord. And so I, a priest actually said to me when I was, you know, 10 or 11, he goes, you'd make a great priest, you know, and I was going, I was going to the church with Nan a few times a week plus the days at school. And because I was a performer and a rider and which got me into a lot of trouble, the priest would say, why don't you respond to my sermon and put it in the kids' terms? So I'd get up and do a little bit of the gospel. And I'd go, you know, when you're playing handball, this is how, you know, this is how Mark chapter three, you know, if someone, you know, accidentally does that, that means you don't do that and you give them their ball back. And I'd put it in the kind of kids' terms and because I just love the stories and the performance aspect. And then Father Chris, who was a young priest who, you know, was actually really, really amazing semi-counselor to us. And he'd also let us have a light beer here and then in the parish house. He really endorsed me getting up after him and kind of capturing the kids' imaginations with the keeping it real sermon response. Like if you've got five marbles and your mates got one marble, you give them a marble, don't you? That's Jesus at work.

So how did you end up in your first ad on TV? How did you get cast for that, Brendan? Well, it was definitely thrust upon me. My sisters were dancers and singers. My older sister, Belinda, until she got glandular fever was probably going to be part of the Australian ballet. She was down in Melbourne and she was just the most beautiful ballerina. And my other sister, Jackie, who ended up in the girl group, girlfriend, she was at keen kids dancing, singing and dancing. I grew up going to these deadfits. I grew up in Mum, Sigma, waiting for them to come out of dance class in San Susie. And like when my sister would get up and do Gloria Gayness, I will survive. I'd be seven in my overalls and singled up the front. I'd be laughing at this kid who knew all the moves. So I thought performance was pretty normal. One day I was at the keen kids waiting room and there was probably 25 kids that looked like me, blonde hair, blue eyes, chubby cheeks. They went into this room with this weird 50-year-old man and then their mums took him downstairs. And then right there and they'd all go on and the guy said, come on. And I was like, what's this creepy dude want? And Mum said, come on in. You know, she just got to put me in this room with this guy. Who knows what could have happened? I could have been an abducted mum, but instead I ended up in the arts. Who knows which one's better? And he said, you know, eat the corn flakes and say this line. I think the line was something astounding like I love corn flakes. And so I did it and he said, you've got a good head, son. And you can smile with your eyes, which in food commercial world is very important because you've got your mouth full. So you need to be able to show us your love and the burger or love and the corn flakes. He said, who's your agent? I was like, Mum. And she'd come in and we

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signed with this agent, Joan Gibson, in North Bondis, this old lady. And I started performing. And I did about 20 ads between the ages of 10 and 16, 17. Then I started getting to afternoon TV shows with one of the daddos where I'd be like the kid that eats spaghetti upside down, you know. And then I think I've got a little part in Sons and Daughters and I've got a little part in, you know, Joe Wilson's mates and the story of Les Darcy as his son. And so hang on, I think I'm an actor here. Did you like it? Did you enjoy it? Or was it something you felt you were pushed into? Or was it was it all pretty much fun and games for you as a kid? Oh, I loved it. I mean, that's one thing that I've always known is what I'm about. And I think if I didn't have writing and acting inside me all those years, I'd be in big trouble or maybe I wouldn't even be here. Because it just kept me connected. It still keeps me connected. And it keeps me on the straight and narrow, oddly enough. And I was performing plays in front of Mum and Nam when I was eight and 10. And I wanted to be up there and watching my sisters just made me want to be on stage. And it came very naturally. When you did the Pavlova ad for Pavlova Magic, that was huge. I love Pavlovas, but Mum reckons they're too tricky to make. She says you've got to get all the stuff like eggs, cornflour, vinegar, everything in the recipe. And this is the tricky bit. I'm not allowed to use the oven. Mum! All natural Pavlova Magic. What did that mean for you at school being the kid on the Pavlova Magic ad? Well, there was this term in the ad scene called 100%ers. And, you know, in the ad scene, there was me, there was the redhead girl, there was a slightly Asian boy, there was the tall handsome. And we'd all meet each other on these ads or in the waiting rooms. And I was the blonde boy with, you know, blue eyes. And there was another one of me that I was kind of against all the time. So you have that perfectly wholesome kind of tapestry of young kids. You know, she got the toilet paper ad and he got the Crisco oil ad. And when I got Pavlova Magic, which was one minute of me speaking, which is called 100%, it means you get \$10,000 because you're speaking the whole time. But it was a monologue. And because everyone was watching 7 and 9 and 10 at night, everybody in the Shire knew the new ad. A new ad was like a new Marvel movie. You know what I mean? Like everyone was like, did you see the new ad? Cows in it. And I thought, here I go, I'm going to be a superstar now. But that's not how it worked out. It actually really turned on me around year seven and eight. And people use the juices fruity and the Crisco oil and the Pavlova. All I used was his egg and that's all they said to me everywhere I went. And I was already getting moved at school because my name was Cal. So I would arrive at school and everyone, the whole school would just go, like the whole 400 kids from year seven to 10, all boys. And year seven and nine is a dark time. And then it gets better if you're weird. But I just get moved. Then I'd get, oh, I used with his egg. My Jesus, fruity. It ostracized me more. And I had really dark thoughts. Meanwhile, I had \$17,000 in my savings account. I bought mum four new tyres. I could buy Air Jordans. You know what I mean? Like, but at the same time, yeah, I got bullied. I got bashed up a little bit and I felt very alone and had some dark thoughts.

Were your parents pushy about this? Were they encouraging or too encouraging or not encouraging? How were they when it came to appearing in these ads or child action?

No, mum wasn't the astead for mum. Mum's an eccentric, you know, and I think that's why when the doors closed at our house, it was very silly and playful.

And mum would make a production of everything. And anything you could do, you'd put a silly hat on and you'd do a thing. And around dinner, it was all fun and games. And it still is with her. And meanwhile, my dad was really supportive in cricket, you know, and he was like,

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you're going to play for Australia. And that was kind of where I was headed. But they were both incredibly supportive. But if I put up my hand and said, I don't want to do this, you know, I remember I went for a combantramad. And the line was, Richard, the line was, I've got worms. And it was an offer straight away. And mum said, this is \$8,000. And I said to mum, I can't do it. She's like, what do you mean it's \$8,000? I said, it is over for me, mum. If I go to deal ourselves carrying bar, the day after I've said, I've got worms, I might as well kill myself now. And, you know, and that was when I learnt the art of turning down an offer. You know, that was the first part I turned down. Your parents broke up. That wasn't very uncommon. But was it uncommon in the Shire back in the 1980s for parents to divorce?

I think my mother may have been the first woman to divorce her husband in the Sutherlandshire in 1989. I was 13. And everybody kept, you know, my uncles would come over and go, you know, are you okay? And I was like, oh, it's bloody great. You know, I can get to sleep. No one's yelling and throwing wine bottles and frozen poppers at each other's heads. And it's quiet. And on the weekend, I'd go and meet dad at Miranda Westfield. He'd buy me a filler shave and a cappuccino and we'd catch up. And it was so weird to catch up with your dad. So the sadness wasn't in the divorce? It was to lead up to the divorce?

Yeah, it was it was it was awful at home for a little while. And dad was getting home late. And look, I don't know, I was young, but it wasn't good. And my sister had also moved out with a boyfriend. And Jackie was famous traveling around with girlfriend. And so it was a lot just with me towards the end. And it was really unpleasant because I loved them both. And my dad, like until that time, he was the dad everybody wanted. He was at home at three 34, smashed me on the cricket, you know, in the back with the basketball thing in the thing, bringing my uncle down training me, you know, and he wanted me to go far with cricket, you know, and maybe I could have, I don't know, I think I lacked maybe a bit of talent and some desire. And also I was always a performer. And I remember like, after they broke up, I didn't realize, but there was actually an option for me to go and live with dad. And mum said, there's this production of Donald and the dragon at the subtle and arts theater that I want you to audition for. Cause there's a role for a 13 year old boy and Donald, the lead. And the subtle and arts theater didn't get a huge crowd. Didn't have a huge subscription, you know, but it was a cool little, you know, shy based theater. And dad said, there's the Carl Rackerman cricket camp. And cause you're playing representative, you could, and what is the Carl Rackerman cricket camp? What is that? It was in Queensland. And I got into it. And because I was averaging, you know, I was averaging well with the bat and I was taking a few wickets with legs spin. I think I was vice captain. And so I could have gone and the British fast bowler was there. And a few people look at you. So there's an idea that next year I could go into, you know, subtle and under 16s maybe if I did well. And dad was like, you've got into Rackerman's cricket camp. So you're going to come and live with me and Nan, Nan, and then you'll go to Queensland. I'll take you up there and you'll go to the cricket camp. And mum's like, you'll stay with me. You'll audition for Donald and the dragon. And you're how old when this decision is 13, 14? That's a big decision to put in front of you, isn't it? Yeah. So what did you do? Well, I remember having to go and see dad at Miranda Fair for the cappuccino session. And he's like, you go into the camp, you come to live with me. And I said, Dad, I've got to tell you something. He's like, well, and I said, I'm going to play

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Donald. And the life just drained out of his face, really, only because he'd put 100,000 hours into me in the backyard. And he was amazing like that. And he was 8am, Saturday morning, setting up the field. And, you know, he was a great sports dad. I think for the next 10 years, we struggled. And do you think he might have also been devastated because you were going to go and

live with him? He was going to have all that time with you. He was going to reestablish that bond with you, a father-son bond with you at a really important time, not just in your life, but really in his life too. So do you think that might have been it as well, that sense of loss of what he thought was going to be a great year with your son? And I think his heart was breaking over the loss of the family unit as well. And he wasn't, you know, he wasn't the perfect dad in those years, by any means. But, you know, in 1314 is around the time where you transitioned from seeing your dad as a hero who can do anything. And all you're trying to do is impress him, going, look at this dad. What's this dad? I'm going to throw it this far. I built this dad. I built this. And suddenly you're like, I think my dad's insecure. I think my dad's human. You know, and that happens around 1314. And I don't think it was till I got love my way as a writer and an actor. And I bought a house on Australia Street, Newtown. And dad came to the auction and I won the auction against these two brothers who were, you know, really going at me. And we went across the park and had a champagne.

And, and dad said, you know, in all earnestness, he said, well, I guess Donald and the dragon paid off. You know, and I remember, and he was just like, I should have, like I should have known because you're a tenacious little bastard. Because what he was, he's a financial advisor accountant. And when I said to dad, I'm never going to have a real job, mate. I'm never going to go to work at the same time. And you, and I just want you to know that now. So your expectations are managed. And I think he was just worried that I'd be on a futon with a, you know, an apple crate for a coffee table for the rest of my life struggling. You know, he just wanted me his son to be alright. Having said that, what was Donald and the dragon like? Look, it blew my mind as back then. But, you know, I think there was more people on stage than were in the audience. That's sort of that way. I think we're about 15 people and lots of people playing dragons inside paper mache dragons. So, you know, it wasn't one for the ages, but I loved it. And, and I never, when I was doing it, I was never thinking about cricket. I knew where I was.

So tell me about your first TV drama pilot, a drama called The Siege of Bartender's Bathroom. What was that experience like for you, Brendan? Well, it was unreal. And then it was quite traumatic.

Rebecca Elmalogalu played my sister and Max Phipps, the late Max Phipps played my father and I was shooting out in French's forest. And it was my first big part. And basically the premise was my sister locked herself in the bathroom for these reasons. And most of the pilot was me sitting in the hallway on the other side of the bathroom door talking to her, trying to get her to come out of the bathroom. Dad's really pissed off. And, you know, I was really young, 12, 11, maybe. And I, I couldn't cry. Every time they wanted me to cry on camera with my dad yelling at me, I just laugh, you know, because I was a kid. And then Max Phipps, you know, he kind of grabbed me and shook me. And he was a big man and up against his tree and he scared the living shit out of me, you know, as a kid. And I just start, I remember I just started crying and then they got the two cameras coming in on me and they got it. They got this kid bawling his eyes out and it looked great. And a couple of days later, I was already obsessed with the Crenola sharks. And I was like, and,

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and to make me feel better, they were like, let's play Touch 40 with the kid after lunch. And so I was playing Touch 40 and I was running down the sideline. I think the director of the DOP hit my ankle. I went flying through the air and I hit the coffee urn table. I buckled the legs. The entire coffee urn turned on its head and I went inside it with boiling water. And layers of skin fell off me. And I was in agony. And this Sri Lankan boom swinger jumped over the fence in this suburban house and grabbed the hose and opened the hose up on me and apparently saved my skin.

I knew what to do. And I was recut, Matt Day was recast in the role and I was sent off and I stayed at home for the next six months in foam. And people would come and visit me, which is when I established my passion for sympathy from girls and teachers going, boy, I'm like, I know, come tomorrow. And I homeschooled with mum, which I loved because I loved being with my mum. I loved just reading books with mum and being with mum. And I thought at that young age, and this is weird because I was always weird, I thought this is a sign from the gods. This is hot water. This is a natural element. This is don't act. This is don't ever act again, mate. So really, a sign from the gods. Yeah, I thought don't don't be an actor. You got burnt on a set. The world isn't for you. And I think also Max yelling at me really shook me. It was, you know, he's a big kind of German, huge scary man. And that and the burning made me go, I'm out. I'm out. Or maybe don't work with the ABC. I don't know which one it was. We've all been scolded by the ABC, I'm sure. Oh, yeah. And my instincts have always led me. And I just always went, I'm going to back away from this and I'm going to write jingles. I'm going to write stories. I'm going to be an advertising. I'm going to be a novelist or something. And then, of course, that all changed inevitably. I wonder if that had some effect on you, on focusing your mind on who you were and what you wanted to do. I think even license to think about yourself as something special was something I always had. And I know that sounds arrogant, especially in an Australian context. But I've always had an unquestionable confidence in the fact that my life is important and I'm going to go for it. And no one's going to stop me. Even when I was bullied and had my hair dragged through the ear and all that stuff, I'm like, I would do a poem two days later at assembly. I would dress up and do appa and play one of the female members. I would be Olivia Newton, John and Grace. Like just stop me. You're not going to ever stop me being who I am. I don't care. Punch me in the face. And so I always had that. And I think, you know, I wrote my book Plum last year in five months of lockdown and I had COVID for three months of it. And it doesn't faze me. It's like, here we go. I'll isolate again. I'll create something. And it's always resulted in creativity and connection for me. And yeah, I was always, I guess, felt a bit of an imposter. I was always a bit isolated, but I never felt alone because I had mum and I have my stories and I have my imagination. Do you like your own company? And did you always like your own company? I did as a kid. Yeah, because I had to. And I was a weird creative kid and I wrote poems, you know, I wrote poems from books and books of poems to make sense of the world and to kind of laugh at all the people at school that were bullying me. But there was a while there in my 30s where no, I didn't, I partied a lot. I would, you know, have lots of short relationships. I couldn't be alone. And I think I was very unhappy at that point. And in the last five or six years, I think I've, you know, returned to being probably dangerously too good at being on my own to the point where I'm like, Oh, people, which, especially in the last 10 days of freedom has been quite confronting. I love my own company now. And I, you know, and I don't drink and go to bars anymore and all that kind of stuff. So

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and oddly enough, you don't, you don't meet girls drinking Roy Boss and reading the Russians at home on a Saturday night. They don't stroll past. So that's become an issue that I've got to work on. But no, once you've read the Russians, though, your conversation improves and it does improve your chances with girls. That's that will happen at the time. It's a sort of consider that a long term investment, Brenda. And I'd say, okay, okay, let's talk a bit about some of that bullying. Tell me how you got on the wrong side of rugby team captain at school.

Yeah, well, this was another heartbreaking one. And I don't mean to paint a picture of a victim tail. And I hope it doesn't sound like that. But yeah, I was friends with this guy, David, and we were getting along really well. And he was a really popular good looking sporty dude. And then him and Matt came over to my house. And Matt was the rugby captain, big guy. And we'll listen into Faith no more and eating so many chips and playing basketball. And then the next week, Matt and Dave were like, we're best friends, you're not best friends with Brendan anymore. And you just get told it's like how you get told you're going out with someone, you know, and you're like, do you want to go out with Emma Giuliano? Yeah, you're going out with them. You know what I mean? And I haven't had a chat to her about it. You just find out you're going in a relationship and could do with that now, actually. And so, and then all of a sudden it was like, oh, and also your fight no Brian Wednesday on the oval. I'm like, what? He was at my house on Saturday. It's like Cal Vio Brian, you know, and and then suddenly the whole school was Cal and Brian five, five, three, 30 on the sandpit on the oval across from the cricket nets, across from DLSL, Caringbar. And I said to him, I said, I don't want to fight you, Matt. I don't know what I've done. I've got no interest in having a violent exchange with you. And he's like, we'll fight, you know, we're going to have a fight. And then Smith wasn't talking to me anymore. And I went to bowl at recess, Smith hit me with a cream bun. And I was like, oh, shit. Okay. And yeah, the ads were on. And I was the theater kid. And I was easy target to kind of further ostracize. And so I went and saw the principal, Dennis. And I said, Dennis, you know, because I was vice captain or captain of year seven and eight, I was always vice captain or captain of the year, which was great because you got to meet with the girls from OLMC and have a session with them.

And maybe even a patch with one of the vice captains, you know, both of you wearing your stack hats. And it was great. And and you organize events and stuff. And I had a suggestion box at school, but most of the suggestions kids put in with cows are poor for more surfing more days off. I'm like, thanks for the suggestions guys. Loving it. Yeah. And so I went to the principal and I said, Dennis, you know, I've got to fight Matt on Wednesday and he's my friend and I have nothing against him. I don't really understand. Can you help me please? Because he was always really nice to me. And he said, Brandon, for a guy in your position, I could only say that sometimes in a man's life, he has to do a couple of things he might not like to do. And I would say if you turn up Wednesday and do your best, school life is going to be a lot better for you, young man. And kind of walked down. I'm like, the principal's telling me to go to a fight. I mean, can you imagine that now in the progressive school or something that there are 100 parents will be in there going, how dare you? You must be fine. You must go to ethical prison. That's right. Yeah. But I remember three o'clock on the Wednesday getting on my BMX and people are moving and people like fight. And

I was like, I can ride home now go and sit in my weird cave in Dolan Bay and hide or tell mum. And then I was going to go do that. Then I just turned the bike and went, just go and just go and

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fight.

So you were saying for no apparent reason, the captain of the rugby team had picked a fight with you and you were sort of told you had to show up for it after school. What happened when you got there?

So I went to the oval and I was like, girl, girl, Brian, then I got a sand bit and he's like, you're ready? Three knockdowns, three knockdowns. And I went, Matt, knock me down three times. I'm not going to hit you. I don't dislike you. And he's like, yeah, you are. Comes over, he goes, big right hand, decked me in the face. Black eye, I fall down. Everyone's like, I get back up. I don't put my hands up. I go, I'm not going to hit you, mate. And he comes over, he goes, bang, punch me in there again, got back up, said, I'm not going to hit you guys. You're not going to fight me. And I went, no, he hits me again. And then he got up and he's like, good fight and walked off. And suddenly the whole crowd were like, that was weird. The next day I'd come to school. Everyone's like, Cal's tough. No one mess with me again. And also I was playing in the footy team and I was a great tackler, but something happened by taking three punches. Suddenly the guy, they all called the F and the P words because I was theater-y. Suddenly I was tough because I took three punches from a big guy and, and Dennis O'Brien in all these peculiar wisdom, he was right. Get punched, have a fight. And that, that will put you further up the pecking order of toughness and people leave you alone and they'll find the next kid to bully. You know, I think in that moment when he knocked you down the third time, that was oddly enough a moment of weird vulnerability for him. You'd taken his honour from him. He was hitting a man who wasn't going to fight back and he'd hit you three times. So that was a shameful thing for him to do. And I think maybe, I'm just guessing it, maybe part of him knew that, which is why he had to accord you honour and go, oh, good fight, Brendan. That's pretty shabby. It's like a guy sobering up on a Saturday night halfway through doing something he's not proud of. You know, and it was like Matt was kind of doing that and he was kind of looking at me and everyone's egging him on. So he's going off that too. And I think he started looking at me going, why do I hate this guy? Which is what I was trying to say to him. What happened? And there was so much of that. Like even on the bus, a person would just smash you with their backpack, rip your tie off, punch you in the head. And that just happened to guys like me. And it was really standard. And it happened with Bart, who ended up being my best mate. It was just violent. And it was just part of it. And when you went to school every day, you were going to get knocked around a bit, especially if you're in the kind of lower echelon or you're eccentric. And in year seven, eight and nine, year nine, I think is the darkest year on earth in Australian suburbia. If you are 3% different, you're suddenly in year 10, 11 and 12, everyone's desperate for a personality. They all want to be weird and gregarious and have female friends. Suddenly the weird kids are like, oh, he's playing in a band. I want to play in a band. He's wearing a crazy t-shirt. He's got a mohawk. He goes to raves. And suddenly being the eccentric, you know, you're a hero. So you just got to survive the horrible year seven, eight and nine and not die. And then all of a sudden, your eccentricities are kind of lauded. There was another friendship you had with the big school bully, a guy named Bart. Tell me a bit about Bart and how he was with you to begin with. Bart was a beautiful specimen, a kindle. He was six foot four. God. And model American college boy model, good looks, Calvin Klein, good looks.



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And he had an older brother, Ben, who was bouncing in the city and a big guy and big gym guy. And Bart was beautiful and terrifying. He worked out. He took steroids and already, you know, in year 9 and 10. And he was feared and women loved him and feared him. And he, yeah, he'd have a crack at me because I was part of the bullying, you know, theater widows. And I was often very scared of him. I remember the school coming to me because I was already excelling in English. And they said, you can earn \$22 an hour cash tutoring kids. And I went, oh, yeah, I'll do that. \$22 beats a convent, right? Doesn't it? Yeah, really? Well, from turning down the convention matter, I had to make that money back. That was \$8,000. I wasn't going to get from a worms, you know, endorsement. So like, I'm going to have to do, I'm going to have to do 40 hours with, with a kid that can't read. And that ended up being Bart. And I was like, I've got, I've got Bart. And they're like, yeah. And I had another kid who was a friend of the family. And so I'd done that. And I'd gone really well. I'd really enjoyed it. And you know, you learn so much from teaching someone something. And I love the word. I love the letter. I love what words do. So I could have done it for hours. And I did. And I was sent Bart. And I went over to his house. And his house has got moose heads and, and lion heads on the wall from where his dad hunted them in Africa. Wow. And it was intimidating. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. My next cow going to be up there next to the road. He was in there washing his boat. He didn't say a lot. And, you know, and the mum was lovely. She always had a white wine. The fire was on. And then his brother would be on the, on the balcony with BB guns, shoot magpies and drinking. And there was older women there, you know, with boobs and stuff. And, you know, and 30 and went to nightclubs, you know what I mean? And he was 15 and 16. And it was, it was oddly warm. It was really lovely. I felt instantly quite at home there. And, and there was a movie on called this violent world about all these violent things. Bart's like, check this out, you know, and this guy cuts his tongue and I would watch that with him. And, and then we'd go and, you know, they'd be like, Bart, you've got to do your special learning. And, and he couldn't read, you know, and he, I think he, he would have been dyslexic. A lot of these things, they weren't dyslexia wasn't really spoken of widely. Then I think it might have been identified. It probably was, but it wasn't commonly used. And it wasn't seen as an obvious explanation for why an otherwise bright kid. Yeah. Might not be reading. Nor was there any mental health diagnoses or anything as well. And ADHDs and anxieties and panic and depression and none of that was around. You were just a moody kid. That's right. And the treatment for it was to get punched in the head three times in the playground. Exactly. Or drink your dad's beer, you know what I mean? And, and one of the two. And, and when the first time I sat down with Bart, Bart said, you tell anyone about this, I will kill you. And when Bart says that, he means it. And, and he'd already smacked me in the head, you know, at gun him out of bay at a dance because he thought that I said something to a girl about him. He'd smash me into a wall. He'd hit me on the bus. You know, he had other guys he preferred to pick on more, but he scared the shit out of me. And then he, I started to get to know him. And I started to teach him stuff. And we would then play a bit of basketball. And I was quite a good point guard. Excellent pass. I hit the threes. He was a big tall guy who could play. We want to come together. I mean, I remember playing in the grand final up at Sutherland basketball courts. And I was, I got a fast break and I was going off to the layup and a guy hit me, pushed me into the brick wall, Bart got the guy held his chin up and just went bang and broke the guy's jaw. He wasn't allowed back into Sutherland basketball for six months. But if anyone

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went near me, he would kill them. And that's what happened at school. You know, after I started playing basketball with him, after I started teaching him how to read, he just went into the school yard and went crows with me. No one touched me again. I had Bart's protection. And also he was then like, what's this drama? You know, and so he, he joined in year 11 and 12, he came into the drama group. There's chicks there and it's a bludge, which is why everyone joined drama. Did he, did he, I mean, I'm sure that's part of it. But was that all there was to it? Do you think there was, there was something more to it than that? Do you think he might have actually been into the kind of, he might actually have a sneaking regard for the art of it all? And especially standing there being looked at, because that's all he ever wanted. And never I wanted to look at him. I mean, he'd come over to my house and he'd tell my mum, she looks sexy with the low cleavage top. And, and my sister's be like, is Bart coming? Is he going to get in the pool? Cause he was bloody gorgeous. He was gorgeous. And also he was building up. And I remember when he got too far into the steroids and he started to get the female boobs. And he's like, oh, I just get an operation. You never get them back again. It's awesome. And I was like, you know, and he was sitting there naked, drinking a chocolate move in bed. And I'm like, you know, I'm trying to, I'm trying to tutor the guy, you know, and, and then after a while, he got into the nightclub, the tank light club scene and everything. And he'd leave school Thursday, come back kind of Monday afternoon. And he would have had a big party and he'd be bouncing in there. And, and he often started saying, you know, here for a good time, not a long time. And it got a little scary. And, but he came and visited me when I went to university in Bathurst. He visited me a few times, but he was meant to come to my, to my major work, but he didn't make it up. And, and then yeah, shortly after my 21st, he turned up to my 21st and when you're quite late with about 15 people from the nightclub, you know, my Catholic suburban family, like what is going on? And, you know, he called me one night, we had a, you know, he said, I need a real mate. And I was, and I said, madam, back in Bathurst, I'm going to come to Cranulla. We're just going to play golf. We're going to eat kebabs. We're going to chase girls. We're going to surf. We're going to hang out. And I said, I can't wait to see you guys. Yeah, I really need you, mate. I really need, I really need a mate. And I was like, all right, chill out. Like, I was the one being like, calm down. And about short time after that, he's doing his own life. Yeah. And, and I think I probably, yeah, drank on that or agonized on that for another 10 years. And I miss him. I still miss him. I loved him. He was the best friend I've ever had, you know, and, and sometimes he appears to me, you know, I was in, I was in New Zealand shooting avatar and, and I was on, was going on those eight hour hikes, because I had like three months off and I couldn't leave. And so I got on these hikes on my own. And this little yellow bird would come down and fly next to me. I'd go, hey, Bart. And this bird would find me on all these hikes. And I was like, hey, Bart. And, and, and we would have a little chat. And then right at the end, I'd be like, okay, piss off, you know, and the bird would piss off. And it was him. And I know he's there. And it really annoys me because, you know, and that's what my first book, how it feels was kind of about like, why do these beautiful boys not make it out of their youth? And it was really prevalent. I think Southern Shires are highest youth suicide rate amongst young men. And there's so much beauty there, but there's something that's not being discussed, which is in that violence, which is in that shame and that third hit and the dads and

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the lack of an emotional language. And that's something I've tried to do with my work is question that, you know, why do young men not make it out of their youth? And as much as he was saying, you know, he had surfed every wave, he had had great sex and drugs and everything. But there was another Bart there, because he's a really charming, intelligent, observant man. And he was really amazing. And I miss him.

What do you think happened to him? Was he depressive by nature? Or did you think he just had a bad week? No, I think there was a group of guys who were all talking about it. And I think it was, there was a mission statement. And, and I think there was like, there was an act, there's often a, you know, there's often a theatrical act of rebellion about it. But I think now he would see, Oh God, that was a small speed bump in the greater kind of roadmap of life. And that's all you've got to see is that when you're young, you get so stressed and you think everything is the world. That's not the world. It's just out of lessons. If you can get through this, you'll see that life's going to always be like that. But you keep learning from your experiences, you read chow, you're going to be okay. That's the battle. Meanwhile, in your final years of high school, you met this wonderful drama teacher. Tell me about him and the effect he had on your life. Well, it was funny because I tried out for a new term performing art school, because mum could see I was quite depressed and quite in a little bit in trouble and not having the best time being bullied. And so I went in Newtown for my art school and I got in, you know, in year nine or 10. But then dad said, you know, there's, there's homosexuals in there and, and you go worry about

them and you're probably, you'll probably get stabbed, maybe by a homosexual. And when I bought my house in Newtown at 26, I said, dad, we better look out below and say, I couldn't go. Dad basically

said, you're not going to Newtown. So I stayed in Cronella and I wanted to get out. And I wanted to go amongst the pink head flamboyant maniacs of which I was one. And I was going in and out of the city with mum and seeing movies with subtitles. I knew these kids existed. And I was going to this drama camp. So I was getting into all that kind of stuff. And I wanted out of the show. I wanted to be amongst my people. And I thought, well, this is year 11 and 12 is going to be horrible. But then this kind of seven foot Dutch man called Ken Graniman turns up, you know, in these kind of old Toyota Corolla. And suddenly there's drama in year 11 and 12. The first year the show had drama,

93 and 94. We didn't have languages, we didn't have drama, you know. And I'm like, what, what? He walks in, he's an expert in mime and mask. He'd written this device play, what was it called zone, where it's all these kind of these weird uniforms of masks. He taught us that we performed that. And he said to me very early on, because he saw what school was like for me, he said, make waves. And I went, what? And he goes, make waves, Brennan, you've got it, make waves. And when I left year 12, he wrote it on the back of my shirt, make waves. And I thanked him in my novel recently, because the more and more I go on and enjoy this great career that I've had, the more I see what that tall, strange Dutch man did to my life, which was he opened it up. And at lunchtime, me and a couple of the chicks from drama and the other weird dude, we'd go in there and we'd do a play at lunch. And I'd be like, okay, Kate, you've got cancer, but you can't tell me. And you're the weird neighbor who's blah, blah, blah, you're having an affair with him. Ken, you're postman. Go. You know, and we just do this awful play for 40 minutes till the bell rang, but I was in heaven. And he also, you know, he played music and I played

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harmonica and bass. So we jammed at assembly and I formed a comedy trio with Richard Badalardo and Sean Batman. And we got up at assembly and the principal would say, you can't do that. He would go, go do it. Push it, boys. I got you back. Make waves. You make waves. Absolutely. Let art speak. Ken was just like, go and don't let this world hold you back and the shire and all the people that call your names. And the fact that there isn't a huge cultural landscape here of creativity, you've got a career out there I can see. You've got it in you. Go and bloody do it and don't let them drag you down. You know what I mean? And that was a blessing. And he's been there

every step of the way with a little email and stuff. And he's a lovely man. You're still in touch? We're still in touch. Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. But he definitely, I don't know what would have happened without him. And I mean that. I know everyone says that in thank you speeches. I wouldn't be here without you. But I actually mean that one.

So you got over the speed bump of year nine when into year 11 and 12 when it's kind of called to be a little bit weird and have a band and it'd be a bit arty. How were you around girls at the time? Were you confident with asking them out? I think I was confident talking to girls because I grew up with two sisters, Mum and Nat. And it was a female household. And so I wasn't intimidated by women. And I knew all the stuff that happened in an all female world. And I always knew that women around the show, women are extraordinary. And I was relaxed with girls because of theater and drama because of Mum and my sisters. But I wasn't confident romantically at all. And I remember in year 11, like I stumbled upon another thing accidentally where there was the debut. You didn't have a formal you had a debut, did you? Yes, which is women's

debutant really to society as women. And I remember in year 12 when I went with the younger a girl the year below me, she asked me and her mother really pissed on the night said, feel free to make her a woman tonight. Feel free to make her a woman tonight. And I just looked at her mum going, what is that thing? Okay, where? It was a different era. It was a different era. And they would wear the wedding dress sort of thing. And you'd be in the suit, you'd pick them up with the courtage. Courage. Exactly. Courage was a type of car that I had. Sorry. Courage. But I remember in year 11, Leedson Mickelson, Olive Skin, Mercurially, Elle McPherson, Beautiful, bit of a mystery. Her parents were getting divorced. You know, that girl that everyone was like, oh, Mickelson's hot, you know, and everyone was afraid of her. Probably just a really normal girl. But we'd fostered this myth around her because she was really striking. And also she was harder to get to know. And I remember talking to her and because I was sitting with all the girls with drama and stuff. And she was kind of friends with some of those girls. And I remember her going, are you going to the debut? And I'm like, no, no one wants to because the girls

had to ask the boys or something, you know, and I was like, no, no one's asked me. And all the sporty boys and the other boys were going. So I just figured I wouldn't be going. And I said, what about you? She goes, no, no one's asked me either. And I went, well, I guess that means we'll be going together. And she went, okay. And I went, oh, oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah. So what, I'll just pick you up with the Courage. And I remember turning up to the debut.

And they introduced you like your adult couple coming into the royal family or something like Brennan Carl and Lisa Mickelson. And like November rain or something was playing with guns and roses. I come through the flowery arch and the whole school turns around and goes,

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Cal? We're Mickelson? Like, and they were looking at me and I just strolled through the carpet going,

I'm the man. Sadly, she danced with Justin Burstle at the end of the road by boys to men that night. And I was dancing with Tracy Archer looking over at her going, geez, I somehow lost it through the night, which was not uncommon and couldn't find her at the after party. But, you know, we did go out for a couple of months and we chatted about it at the 20 year reunion about what could

have been. But what it taught me was have a crack and that often the most beautiful girl is not being asked out because she's and she's human. She's another girl and you're another boy and don't ask, don't get like back yourself. And I think after that, I did that with my career.

I did that with trying to get a park out the front of the opera house, like just go and have a look what's there. And you never know. And and that was a huge lesson for me.

You were talking earlier about how you were really longing to be with your people, the purple haired, gay, stabby people of Newtown, right? But as you said that, I kept thinking the way you're talking with such, you know, complex affection about where you're from, they're your people too, aren't they? I mean, and you've been writing about this. This is the thing that fuels your novel. They're your people as well, aren't they? Even though you sort of walked away from them, you've sort of been there this whole time talking about them, haven't we?

I think that little boy in me, that lost little boy, is living there still. And I contact him when I write a book and plum is that little boy too, trying to grow up in the skin of a 49 year old football player with a brain injury. He's stuck in that place. He's wounded, he's scared, and he's got to try to share his pain with someone. And down there, the greatest storytellers, because I grew up, you know, the tennis days and the families and everything, big women in bikinis, smoking and drinking beer, telling you about their job at Woolworths or their job social workers. And just the normalcy and the bigness, the big epic lives that happen in tiny suburban towns, it's just, it's beautiful. And I think that's really kind of lives within me.

And the boy is still back there. And I can contact him through my fiction.

It's been so great speaking with you, Brennan. I've enjoyed this enormously. Thank you so much.

Oh man, means a lot. Thank you for having me on, Richie.

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