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A Sweet and Sour Dish

by Nick Barrett

It was a sprawling Edwardian brick and hung tile edifice, our old school, but smaller than I remembered. This was my first visit since 1942 and now it had closed down.

God, I had hated the place and hadn't been back since our wartime move to Canada. My memory was of seemingly constant cold, never enough to eat, cod liver oil cure-all from Matron - but mostly I remembered sadistic School Prefects.

The contents were being sold off to the public but I wanted no mementoes, I was after a couple of benches to use in our garden.

Some old retainer type I didn't recognise was acting as caretaker, giving me extra attention when I told him I was a former pupil. "I've got some old papers you might be interested in sir," he said, before toddling off.

I wandered into an old classroom with a large number of mostly damaged frames scattered around, some turned facing the wall. All were photographs of young airmen, in full flying kit minus the leather hats and goggles, all in a similar pose looking up to the sky.

I was slow to notice the small brass plaque on each frame. The usual wording was along the lines of "Died over Holland 1942".

A familiar profile loomed from one of the undamaged frames, that also had intact glass - my nemesis, Alex Blansford. The 50 year old loathing came flooding back. Every nasty trick in the sadistic prefects black book of torments had been visited upon me by him at every opportunity. My foot went through the glass and smashed down on the frame before I could even think about how good it would be to take this small revenge.

The old retainer type re-appeared with a shoe box full of letters. "A lot of the servicemen seem to have sent letters to the school sir, the headmaster might have asked them to, but the school couldn't trace you all. See if you recognise any names," he said.

I noticed one addressed to me. Which of our school heroes would think of me in the middle of a war? I couldn't believe it. It was from Blansford! To me! The infernal cheek I thought, he'll be having a bloody go at me for not oiling his blasted cricket bat while he's away, or not putting vaseline on the metal studs in his stinking rugger boots.

It was an apology! From Blansford! "Dear Squirt," it started, "sorry for calling you stupid names and for giving you such a hard time.

"We were hard on you lot because we knew there were tough times coming, and you would be hard pressed if called into service, so you should benefit from a taste of harsh discipline during schooldays. I have earned however that nothing prepares you for what is coming, but don't worry, there is nothing the services will throw at you that you can't handle.

"If our vileness helped, all well and good. If not, I pray you will accept that we did it for your own good. I would rather we had been friends and I look forward to a renewal of our relationship over a few beers when this lot is over. Yours Sincerely etc etc."

I picked up the ruined frame, noticing for the first time the plaque: "Died over Holland 1943." I shook off the broken glass, rolled up the photograph and set off to find a framing shop. And to have a drink to a new friend.