

Chapter One: In the Place of Old Times

I wasn't the big boy they said I was, that was what that first day taught me. I was a leaf in a stream, tossed about on the current of adult opinion and action. They "knew best". They had seen more and done more. They had been *educated* into believing, as I one day might, that this was the road down which we had to travel. The "big boy" had to go to school. That was just the way it was. He had to go to school and he had to learn his lessons, but—oh yes, there had to be a but—he couldn't go to *that* school. Oh, no. *That* school, the one where all his neighbourhood friends would be going, was unsuitable.

Mam and Dad took me in—the car journey seeming to take forever. I sat on the back seat, looking at the scenery passing by but not really seeing it. I should be *memorising* it, I told myself. I should be mapping it all out in my mind like a secret agent so that I could find my way home the minute the teachers' backs were turned. But it was too late now. Something had changed forever—everything *felt funny*—and all the *memorising* in the world wasn't going to fix that.

I'd never known Mam and Dad to be so quiet. Dad was concentrating on the road, he'd told us, but I didn't believe him. He knew these roads like the back of his hand, and would usually delight in telling us every few minutes—battling with Mam for superiority as she pointed out landmarks like Newport Bridge and the General Hospital—so I could only guess that he, like Mam, had other things on his mind.

I didn't want to think about that, though. I wasn't a big boy. I was little and I was scared and I *just didn't want to think about that!* I shouldn't have to. I should have been at home playing, pretending I was Neil Armstrong like I had been

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

yesterday—when the world had been a very different place.

It had been safe and warm, that was what I now understood, if only in a very peripheral, difficult-to-grasp way. I had been loved and protected, Mam and Dad the binary stars at the centre of my small but perfectly comfortable solar system. I only had to look around to know where I was and know that they weren't far away, that, whatever happened, they would be there, making the right decisions for me, carefully explaining the world and all its difficult-to-comprehend shades. Everyone else didn't matter. They did, but they didn't. All the doctors in their white coats and half-moon reading specs, tapping me with their hammers and flexing my ankles so severely that they sprained, all the grandparents and aunts and uncles, solicitous and looming—they had roles of range and a certain merit, but they weren't up there with Mam and Dad, and they could never hope to be.

But things changed. That's what I now had to try to assimilate. Mam and Dad, I didn't think they would ever change. Not in their hearts. Not in any way that mattered. They would always love and care for me, always bend over backwards to keep me from harm (*even if I did a murder or something*, I thought.) But it wasn't them I had to worry about, because, I was coming to realise, Dad wasn't a big boy, either, and Mam wasn't a big girl. They were scared and small, being made to do things with which, I now know, they at the time hadn't felt comfortable. The world and the people in it exerted an influence, and sometimes Mam and Dad could do nothing about it, however much they might want to.

It's for his own good. Carl needs the best education possible if he's to excel and compete—and a mainstream school just wouldn't be able to provide the specialist support he needs. Trust me. It's not like it's a boarding school or anything. It's a

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

wonderful place. The name says it all. Sunnyvale School. He'll love it there, I promise you.

"I hate it."

"Now I don't think you do, Carl," Mam said as we drove up the drive to the school's main entrance. "You haven't had time to hate it."

"I don't need time. It looks like that film."

"What film?"

"The one in the prison camp with the German Nasties."

Dad chuckled and Mam shot him a warning glance. "You've got to admit, love," he said. "It is a bit dismal."

"It's nothing of the sort." Mam thought it was *dismal*, too. I knew she did.

"That's just the weather. You wait—you wait until the sun comes out. It'll look loads better."

Dad stopped the car, pulling on the handbrake so hard I thought it was going to come loose. I did hate it. I hated it so bad it made my throat ache. But I didn't say anything—we none of us did. We just sat there in silence for a few minutes, the rain pattering against the windscreen, the distant windows of the classrooms—each a separate building connected by roofed pathways—illuminated from the inside. They made me think of my friend's dad's aquarium, strange, glowing tanks of bizarre looking fish that all too often ended up floating on the surface, dead and having to be fished out with a little net.

I imagined a big hand coming down and lifting the roof off one of the classrooms—a net fishing out the lifeless form of one of my future classmates—and then Dad said, "Time to gird our loins and get on with it, I think. No use putting it

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

off.”

A grey-haired, bespectacled woman dressed in a nurse’s uniform that wasn’t *quite* a nurse’s uniform was waiting for us in the milk-sour lobby. Dad had lifted me out of the car and put me in my pushchair (this was a time before I got my first, bright red wheelchair), and as he wheeled me towards the woman I would come to know as Mrs. Attenborough, I felt myself becoming smaller as she loomed ever-nearer. She looked mean, with little hairs growing on her chinny-chin-chin and a pencilled-in frown—but when she saw us, she smiled and became a totally different and much nicer person. It was a good trick, and I was momentarily impressed.

“Let me guess,” she said, going down on her haunches in front of me. She had big knees. “You must be Carl. Yes?” I thought about shaking my head, just to see what would happen—but instead nodded. “Excellent! It’s very nice to meet you, Carl,” she said, shaking my hand. “My name’s Mrs. Attenborough and I’m one of the people who’ll be looking after you while you’re at Sunnyvale.”

I was about to tell her that I hated the place, but Dad skilfully cut me off at the pass. “He’s a little nervous,” he said.

Mrs. Attenborough got to her feet again, smiling and shaking first Dad’s and then Mam’s hands. “Understandable,” she said. “But there’s really no need. He’ll love it here once he settles in. Won’t you, Carl?”

I shrugged. My throat was aching again. Mrs. Attenborough was nice, but I didn’t want to be left here with her and her knees.

“Can we go home, now?” I asked Mam.

“Home?” Mrs. Attenborough said before Mam could answer (a bit rude, I thought.) “You’ve only just got here, pet. There’s still so much more to see and do.”

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

She took my pushchair from Dad and started wheeling me away, Mam and Dad trotting to keep up. “Come on. Let’s have a look around, shall we?”

“Then can I go home?”

I didn’t take in all that much of what Mrs. Attenborough said to us as she showed us around the school. I was too preoccupied with the strange and overwhelming sights with which I was presented—big kids in big pushchairs that, I was told, were *wheelchairs*, other kids with bits of metal strapped with leather to their vine-like legs, others who seemed normal enough until they looked at you, when it became obvious that they couldn’t see properly. One boy, a lot older than me, couldn’t keep his arms or legs still; they moved about with a will of their own, like some weird monster out of that Sinbad movie I’d seen.

I looked but I could never have understood. Not really. I felt no sense of belonging. I shared no affinity with these injured souls because I wasn’t like them. I was different and didn’t belong here.

As Mrs. Attenborough led us into what she said would be my classroom, I breathed in the sickly smell of poster paint and tried to push it all away. I was a secret agent, again, *infiltrating* enemy territory, and it was of vital importance that my cover shouldn’t be blown. I tried to think of everyone around me as unsuspecting foreigners—but it didn’t work. There was only so much the very able imagination of a five-year-old could manage, however much television he’d watched.

The tables and chairs in this classroom were so much smaller than the others we had seen—smaller and painted gaudy shades of red, green and blue. The walls were decorated with “A is for Apple” posters and pictures that my “classmates” had painted (badly), and the large French windows at the south end of the room let in

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

more light than would have seemed possible on such a gloomy day.

Mrs. Attenborough and her knees seemed to be enjoying herself a little too much. This wasn't anywhere near the fun she clearly imagined it to be—and when I looked up at Mam and Dad, their fixed, unsmiling faces strongly implied that they agreed with me. Dad had again taken possession of my pushchair and me, but this was cold comfort—for by now even I realised that it couldn't last. Sooner or later (probably sooner), I was going to be wrenched away from them, and there would be nothing any of us could do about it.

My teacher, who Mrs. Attenborough introduced with a little flourish of the hand, was called Miss Porter—and I thought right away that it was going to be hard not liking her, because she actually seemed quite nice. Young, with long, shiny black hair, tall but not tall enough to make my neck ache really bad, her smile wasn't something that had to be switched on like Mrs. Attenborough's. It was just there, honest and real and permanent.

“Hello, Carl,” she said, very softly, her voice almost hypnotic. “It's very nice to have you with us.” Turning to the other children in the room, she added, “Children, this is Carl. I want you to say hello to him and make him feel welcome.”

A chorus of hellos rang out and I felt my throat start to ache and tighten again. It couldn't be long now, that much I knew. They would be going. They'd told me as much. They would be going because I was a “big boy”, but they would be there waiting for me when I got home with chicken rissoles, baked beans and chips.

And, sure enough, the time came—just as I'd known it would. Mam and Dad said goodbye to me, Mam trying her best not to cry, and I felt the depth of my predicament slowly start to truly pull me down. This was when things really started to get bad. I knew that, now. They were going, hustled away by Mrs. Attenborough, they

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

were gone—and I was suddenly more alone than I'd ever known, sitting at a red table with a bunch of odd-looking kids I didn't even like.

That was when I started crying.

Miss Porter was very patient with me, even though she had eight or nine other kids to teach and look after. She knelt down beside me, her arms folded on the table-top, and talked to me in that soft, precise manner of hers, assuring me that things weren't as bad as they seemed and that, before I knew it, I'd be *looking forward* to coming to school.

That seemed silly to me, and I was quick to tell her. Biting back a smile, she said, "It's like this, Carl. You're a big boy now..." I was getting *really* sick of that one... "and big boys and girls go to school during the daytime so that they can learn lots of fun things and—"

"Every day?" I said.

"What?"

"Do we have to come *every* day?"

Miss Porter smiled. "No," she said, apparently relieved that she could finally give me some good news. "No, you don't have to come every day. You have the weekends off and... here, I'll show you." Getting up, she took a calendar off the wall by her desk and returned with it—kneeling down and taking a pen from behind her ear. Putting a little cross in the days of that month when I'd be coming to school, and a tiny circle in those I wouldn't, she said, "See? These are the days you'll be at school, and these are the days you won't be. Not so bad, see, is it?"

I looked at the calendar. I looked up at the smiling, pretty face of Miss Porter. I looked back down at the calendar.

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

And then I started to cry again.

The day went a lot more quickly than I ever could have reasonably hoped, and by the time it came for me to be lifted into my seat on the school bus, I'd even managed to make my first friend.

Tommy Blackbird had a bouncy limp when he walked and a wasted right hand that curled in on itself at the wrist. He smiled like he wanted to be everybody's friend, but so far looked as friendless as me—so I suppose it was fairly inevitable that, on the journey home, we would find ourselves chatting away at the back of the bus, both of us glad the day was over.

“Miss Porter said you've got a bad leg like me,” Tommy said.

I didn't know what to say to Tommy. I liked him, but it was a daft thing to say and I didn't like the idea of Miss Porter being daft. It was fairly obvious to me that, while my legs certainly didn't work the way they were supposed to, they were nothing like Tommy's. Thankfully, as I would quickly learn, having a conversation with Tommy didn't always mean that one had to actually *say* anything. He was an independent chap, and he could manage perfectly well on his own, thank you very much.

“She looks like Marie Osmond,” he continued. “Don't you think? Just like her only a lot prettier and not a moron like my dad says Marie Osmond is.”

I nodded noncommittally, wondering if Mam was really doing me chicken rissoles for tea. I loved chicken rissoles. I'd been looking forward to them all day. I didn't mind if she didn't do the chips and baked beans, as long as there were chicken rissoles.

The cigarette smoke from our driver—a big woman who talked like a man and

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

said “bugger” a lot, even when we could hear—made Tommy cough and he stopped talking for a minute until he had it under control. “I don’t mind it, really, though,” he finally continued. I couldn’t remember what he’d been talking about last, but I was quite sure it wouldn’t matter. “School,” he clarified, obviously spotting my confused frown. “It’s warm. I like being warm, don’t you?”

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Carl had been talking for a good half an hour, filling in details for me, backtracking when he recalled something he’d forgotten to mention. He seemed to grow in confidence as his story gathered momentum, and I couldn’t help feeling that he was more comfortable visiting these times than even he might have expected. As he talked, his words found a rhythm all of their own and, even though it wasn’t difficult for me to see that he was growing tired, it was clear that he wanted to continue.

“I settled pretty quickly after that, I think,” he told me. “It’s surprising how quickly kids adapt. They’re far better at it than we adults—far better at it than me, anyway.”

“Me, too,” I admitted. “My friend Andrea... you know Andrea... she’s always trying to get me to do different things. From going to a new club in town to bungee jumping. And all I want to do is—“

“Stay in with a good book and a bottle of wine?” He was smiling and I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Pretty much.” I didn’t want this to become about me. As much as I liked Carl, this was about my dissertation and I needed to be sure that I kept him moving in the right direction. He had insisted that it was important that I understand the “pre-integration climate” if I was to ever grasp the whole sense of promise and revolution that came with the new philosophy, and I’d agreed with him. This, however, meant

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

that it was probably going to be a longer job than I'd originally envisaged. The fewer distractions and diversions the better.

Glancing down at my notes, I said, "So how did Sunnyvale feel in those first few months? You say you adapted, but how did it compare with, say, your out of school life."

"Very different," he quickly answered. "I didn't like overlap. I didn't like my parents attending open days, for example. I could never have understood why at the time, but it was as if I was afraid that my home life might become somehow tainted by it if it got too close. Sunnyvale was... I thought of it as old, something from bygone times. In reality, I'm not sure how long it had been there—but... it had the feel of a sanatorium for TB patients, you know, even down to the French windows and the south-facing perspective. Everyone there, the teaching and nursing staff, they all, as I remember it, worked with the best of intentions, but even before I had something with which to compare it, it always seemed stuck in a time warp to me."

"And what about the fact that you were going to a different school to the one your friends at home were going to?" I said. "That must have at least seemed a little odd."

Carl shrugged, looking suddenly rather more tired than I liked. "I don't think it occurred to me, much. Certainly not in any way I could have easily expressed at the time. Maybe on that first day..." he trailed off and nodded to a glass of water on his bedside locker. "Would you mind?"

Leaving my notepad and pen on my chair, I held the glass for him so that he could sip water through the straw. "I'll come back tomorrow," I said. "You're tired."

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Tommy wanted a duffel coat ("because they are warm") and some marbles for

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

Christmas—which seemed to me a very reasonable request—whilst I was leaning towards clackers and a spud gun. I also wanted my own record player so that I could play my Elvis LPs, and possibly a carpentry set, but I wasn't banking on them.

We were sitting at the side of the playground, me in my new red wheelchair, watching some of the bigger kids play football. It was funny, because some of them were also in wheelchairs and every now and then the ball would get stuck underneath one of them and there'd be this chaotic scrum of people trying to kick it out. Tommy seemed to especially enjoy this—but, then, Tommy enjoyed everything.

“They lock them in, you know,” he said, out of the blue.

“They lock who in?”

“The kids in the school next door. They lock 'em in.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why do they lock them in?”

“Dunno. They just do.”

I sat and thought about this for a while. I didn't like the idea of being locked in. It was bad enough having to come to school and *not* being locked in, I couldn't imagine what that added indignity would be like. But I wasn't entirely sure that I believed Tommy, anyway. I was already finding out that he was more than happy to make things up as he went along, telling me stories about the time his dad fought Ali and won, how he'd once played professional football with Georgie Best, and this had all the hallmarks of being another of his fibs—especially when it occurred to me that I'd seen them outside at playtime, as free to move around as we were.

“That's not what I mean,” Tommy said. “I'm talking about at night and stuff like that. They don't let them go home. They lock them in and make them stay there,

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

eating bread and water and cockroaches.”

“Cockroaches?”

“And beetles. My dad says they’re *delli ink wents* or something and it’s no worse than they deserve. He says they should put more of the little sods away in places like that. The world’d be a saferer place.”

I gasped, my eyes wide.

“What?”

“You said ‘sods’. That’s a swear word.”

“No it isn’t.”

“It is. And you said it.”

“Well, if I did,” he said with a shrug, “you did, too.”

I’d never thought of that, and this seemed to give Tommy an inordinate amount of satisfaction. He chortled to himself and pointed at me as if I was the funniest thing he’d ever seen. “Don’t worry, pal,” he finally said. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

I would never have told, and I was quick to assure him of this—before returning once more to the matter of the school next door. It was separated from our school on the other side of the driveway by nothing more than a drystone wall no higher than Tommy’s shins... and I had an idea.

“Can we do that?” Tommy wanted to know. He looked rather worried. I wasn’t sure why, but I thought that that was a good thing.

“Yes,” I said, with a confidence that belied the fact that I thought we probably couldn’t. “They haven’t told us we can’t, anyway.”

“That’s not the same thing, though.”

“Yes it is.”

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

That was something else about Tommy that I was quickly learning. He trusted me. He might ask a lot of questions and express doubts, but if I said a thing was so, it wasn't long before he believed it as if it were something his dad had told him. He nodded thoughtfully to himself and chewed the side of his mouth, staring into space as he worked through it, slowly, in his head—the football game now forgotten. I knew he'd go along with it. It was just a matter of being patient and letting him arrive at the obvious conclusion in his own good time.

“It's not like we'd be leaving the school or owt, is it?” he said. “We'd still be in our school, just looking over the wall at them, right?”

There was no one over this side of the school, which was good, since it meant it was far less likely that we would be caught and get told off. The driveway was quiet, no cars coming or going, but we nevertheless crossed carefully—determined not to get run over by some unforeseen speeding vehicle. On the far side, we moved over the grass, Tommy pushing me, towards the low brick wall and the oak trees that overlooked it.

The other kids seemed oblivious to us—distantly playing away on their field without a wheelchair or a caliper or a crutch in sight. Tommy and me watched them in silence, and I wondered if they really did get locked in at night or if their school was actually better than ours.

It was just a little wall, but I still couldn't get over it.

Tommy was growing impatient. There was nothing *happening* and he just couldn't stand it. “You think they'd at least come over and say hello,” he said.

“They haven't seen us,” I told him.

“Yes they have. They're just ignoring us because they're snobs.”

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

I wasn't sure what snobs were, but I vaguely wondered if that was why they got locked up at night.

"We could shout them," I said. "If they ignore us, then we'll know for definite they're snobs, won't we?"

"Good idea, old pal," Tommy said, patting me on the back. "Go on, then."

"What?"

"Shout them."

"I thought we'd do it together. That way it'll be louder and they'll hear us better."

Tommy had a look on his face that I couldn't quite work out—but I thought I knew how he was feeling because, yes, I suspected I was feeling the same way, too. We'd come this far, and it would have been stupid to turn back now, but nonetheless I wished we were still on the playground watching the big kids play football. Maybe if we'd asked nicely they might even have let us join in. As it was, we were facing an unknown that was bigger than both of us, and I for one didn't like it. What if they were bad kids? If they did get locked in at night, there had to be a reason. What if they were bad and they did something to us? There was no one around to stop them and my kung fu was a little patchy. They could beat us up and rob us of *all our worldly possessions*. And there would be nothing we could do about it, except scream a lot.

"Shall we go back and watch the football?" Tommy said. "This is boring."

I nodded, glad that he had been the one who'd suggested it. I didn't want to look *yella*, after all, especially when it had been my idea in the first place.

Before we could get back across the drive, however, a cry rang out. "Oi, you!"

I didn't want to turn round and reply. Christmas was nearly here and we had the party to look forward to and the holidays and the presents and this wasn't really

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

what we should be doing. The wind had picked up and it seemed to carry with it a warning; *turn around*, it said, *turn around and it will change your life forever*. *Nothing will ever be the same for you*. Maybe that didn't happen. Looking back, it's difficult to say. But in my heart, in the memories of that time that I've carried with me ever since, that was how it seemed. The voice called out and we stopped in our tracks, that sense of dread growing ever more insistent, and before I could say anything to stop him, Tommy had turned my wheelchair around and we were heading back towards the wall—back towards the wall and the gang of children that was already gathering there.

There was about four of them—all of a similar age to us and looking, as lacking in wheelchairs and crutches as they were, as much of a mixed bag as our other schoolmates. One looked neat and tidy, another like she'd been dragged through the dirt, whilst the other two merely looked reticent and a little dim. The neat and tidy one seemed to be the one to watch, however. If there was a ringleader, he was it. His hair parted cruelly down the middle, shoulders unnaturally squared, he managed to make himself look taller than he actually was—and I felt Tommy shrinking beside me, his bad hand going behind his back.

“What?” I said, as belligerently as I could muster.

“You were looking at us,” Mister Neat and Tidy said.

“So?”

“We don't like people looking at us, do we, Chris?” he said to the scruffy girl by his side.

“No,” she agreed.

“Especially people like you,” he added. “People with *diseases*.”

“We haven't got no diseases,” Tommy told him—and I nodded quickly,

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

hoping that this would lend his statement a little additional weight. “We’ve got *disabilities*—that’s summat different, and if you don’t know that, you’re stupid.”

“Are you calling me stupid?” Mister Neat and Tidy said, taking a step towards the wall but stopping short of stepping over it.

“No,” Tommy quickly replied. “I’m saying you’re stupid if you think *diseases* and *disabilities* are the same.”

“I don’t.”

“Then you’re not.”

“Good.”

We seemed to have reached something of an impasse. The scruffy lass looked at her two quieter friends, obviously growing bored with the whole scenario. She scratched her bum and looked back over her shoulder at the rest of her schoolmates, running about on the field and generally appearing to have a much better time than she was having. I thought she might walk away. I was hoping she would because, judging by the flaky patches of skin on her neck, if anyone had a disease, it was she, and I for one didn’t want to catch it. But Mister Neat and Tidy wasn’t done with us, yet, and so she remained by his side, ever faithful and patient.

“Don’t alter owt, though, do it, Chris?” Mister Neat and Tidy continued. “We still don’t want you and you’re *disabilities* looking at us. We don’t like it cos you’re weird and we don’t like weird people.”

“We aren’t weird,” I said.

I expected it to be a straightforward exchange of the “no we aren’t”, “yes you are” variety—but it didn’t go that way at all. Mister Neat and Tidy looked directly at me and something changed. I didn’t know what, and to this day I’m unsure how he came to switch so completely and quickly. Maybe he saw something in my eyes, I

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

don't know, or maybe he was, like his Chris, growing bored of such a pointless exchange. Either way, his reaction was quite unexpected.

First stepping over the wall, he then sat down on it and stared at me. "You're different, though," he said. "That must be right horrible. I wouldn't want to be you."

I didn't know what to say to this. I didn't really understand what he was saying—even though, on the surface, what he was saying wasn't all that difficult to understand. It was like there was more to it than there first appeared, and even though he now seemed to be trying to be friendly, I wished he wasn't. I liked him the other way best.

"What do you do in there?" he asked, nodding at Sunnyvale. "Play games and stuff?"

"Only at playtime," I said. "Mostly we learn to read and do sums, that kind of thing."

"Fuck off!" Mister Neat and Tidy said in disbelief. It wasn't the first time I'd heard someone say "fuck off", but it was certainly the first time I'd heard someone as young as him say it. "*You* can't read and do sums."

"Oh yes he can," Tommy chirped up. "He's the best in our class. Our teacher said he's a genius."

"Genius."

"A genius."

"What's one of them when he's at home?" Mister Neat and Tidy said. Chris and her two friends had finally wandered away and it was just the three of us now.

"Someone who's dead, dead clever," Tommy said, sitting down on the wall beside him. "He should be on the telly, on some sort of quiz or something, that's how clever he is. He's so clever that he even knows how to spell really long words like..."

Children of the Resolution.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

like... like *house*, don't you, Carl?"

I nodded and, as I'd expected, Mister Neat and Tidy called me on it. "Go on, then," he said, in a not unfriendly manner. "Let's hear it."

Pulling a face that I hoped made it look more difficult (and therefore more impressive) than it actually was, I spelt it slowly and deliberately, knowing it probably wouldn't matter if I made a mistake, since Mister Neat and Tidy undoubtedly couldn't spell it, anyway, but still not wanting to.

Mister Neat and Tidy looked at Tommy, evidently impressed. "He's good."

"I told you."

We chatted for a while longer, and whilst it wasn't exactly the most settling conversation I'd ever had, it was pleasant enough. Mister Neat and Tidy's real name, he told us, was Eric—and even though Tommy and I would never speak to him again, I would always remember him as being the first person from my peer group to make me think—*really* think—about just how different I was... just how different we all were. At the time, and as amiable as he became, he was someone I could never have imagined myself thanking. His role that day had, to my undeveloped mind, been a dubious one, and I gave him no credit. He had served only to cast a cloud over the run-up to Christmas, and it's hard to imagine my ever liking him for that.

Today I wonder, though. Today, I can't help but think that maybe Eric did me a favour. I was different. I suppose I'd known that for quite some time—ever since we'd had the conversation with the doctor about how I was going to die—but Eric had underscored that in a way that showed just how bad difference could really be, or how bad people could believe it to be if they didn't really understand it. He also helped me see, in my way, that being different didn't mean that I wasn't intelligent. I was clever, and sometimes being clever could be *really* useful.