

Chapter Two: The Ghost of Emiline Brown

I got in early a few evenings later, hoping that I might meet Carl's parents and maybe get their perspective on his school years, especially those first days, which, as detailed as Carl had been, still seemed a little foggy to him. They had visited that afternoon, however, and, knowing that he was helping me, had decided to leave the evening free for him to continue telling me of his experiences. I didn't know if they were merely being considerate, or if they'd seen some positive change in Carl as a result of our conversations and were therefore eager for it to continue, but I wasn't entirely comfortable with it. I couldn't help feeling that Carl was working to keep us apart—as if I, like Sunnyvale, might somehow taint his other life if our paths crossed.

He was reading his H.L. Mencken book again and I briefly considered showing my ignorance and asking him who this Mencken chap was. It wasn't relevant, though (*I must keep it relevant*, I told myself), and I therefore simply asked, "So you didn't die, then?"

I think it was obvious to him that I wasn't in the best of moods, but he didn't rise to the bait. Closing the book, he looked at me and smiled. "No, I didn't," he said. "At the time, they thought there was only one type of Spinal Muscular Atrophy. What today is referred to as Type I. Type I is always fatal in early infancy, or was thought to be, at that time. That's what they originally thought I had."

"But you didn't."

"No. I had Type II—towards the milder end of the Type II spectrum, actually. We didn't find out until I was about seven, but as it turned out, I wasn't under the death-sentence we'd originally been led to believe. I could expect to live well into

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adulthood, old-age, even.”

“Must have been a huge weight off your parents shoulders,” I said. I couldn’t help myself. I had to try to bring his parents back into this.

“I can’t even begin to imagine,” he said, eyes downcast and difficult to read. “I was a kid. Death was very much an abstract concept to me, even with the things I’d experienced. Mam and Dad had always spoken openly around me, and encouraged the doctors to do the same, but I didn’t ‘get’ it, not really. They did. They had to listen to every cough for about seven years thinking it might be my last. I’m still surprised they managed to keep things so normal for me.”

“They sound very special.”

“They are.”

“I’d like to meet them some time.”

Carl nodded to himself, smiling again as if he’d just figured something out.

“You will,” he told me. “I promise.”

Andrea, who worked in the hospital in a voluntary capacity, was on duty. She came in and chatted with us for a while, bringing two cups of tea and a plate of Ginger Snaps, and only when Carl told her to take a hike, we had work to do, did she leave to go about her business. She smirked at me as she left. I knew she’d give me a hard time later; for the Andreas of this world, poor, misguided fools that they were, such enthusiasm could never be for the accuracy of the dissertation alone. There had to be more to it than that.

“Was that not a smart move?” Carl said.

I shrugged. “Andrea sees subtexts everywhere,” I told him. “It’s not something that can be easily avoided.”

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Carl had this habit of picking at the skin on the index finger of his left hand. I'd noticed him doing it the day before and he was doing it again now. It was not an easy habit to analyse, but it seemed to suggest intense concentration—maybe even a slight discomfort. I gently nudged him on, away from the subject of Andrea and her subtexts and back to the matter at hand.

“You were telling me about Christmas yesterday,” I said. “How nice it was to not have to go to school and how magical it all felt.”

He nodded, slowly. “It did,” he said. “But, then, it didn't take a lot to get me in the Christmas spirit when I was six, understandably. It wasn't just the presents, either. It was the whole feeling of it—being with my parents and family, everyone pretending that times were wonderful even if they weren't. So much of it seemed to be about me.”

“It was a happy childhood?”

“It was the best. My parents didn't have it easy. They had a mortgage and bills to pay, on top of their worries about me, but I was always loved and looked after. I don't remember ever being unhappy. Not really. I must have been, of course. Life couldn't have been that perfect. But I don't remember it.”

“School was different, though,” I said, gradually herding him back in the direction of Sunnyvale. “Yes?”

“I tolerated it, and returned after Christmas very reluctantly...”

~

Monday morning, the first of the New Year, there was a whole school assembly in the hall. The decorations had been taken down, little tabs of crepe paper remaining on the walls and ceiling in places, and the whole school seemed gloomier than ever. People, pupils and teachers alike, smiled at each other and chatted, but you could tell their

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hearts weren't really in it. Everyone wanted to be back home. Even our headmaster, Mr. Dixon—with his shiny bald head and his floppy jowls—even he seemed preoccupied as he walked to the front of the hall and took his place. I distantly wondered if he'd had a good Christmas, too. If he'd got lots of presents and if, like me, he just wanted to stay at home and play with them, or whatever it was headmasters did with their Christmas presents. He certainly looked pretty fed up, clasping his hands behind his back and rocking on his heels—staring down at his shoes and breathing in noisily through his nose as he waited for complete silence. And when he spoke, his voice even harder to hear than usual, his words languid and considered, it only seemed to make everything feel even more cloying and grim.

“Today's assembly is going to be rather short,” Mr. Dixon said. “We will say a prayer, sing a hymn and then each of you will return to your classrooms where your teachers have something very important to discuss with you. This is not, naturally, how I would have hoped to begin a new year—but I'm sure you will all understand why it has to be this way once the facts are made fully available to you.”

I didn't have a bloody clue what he was going on about, but it all sounded a bit scary—and Tommy agreed. “I don't want to be here,” he whispered. “I don't know what's going on, but I *definitely* don't want to be here. He's going to tell us tell we're going to get locked in like them next door. You wait and see. I bet you any money.”

“They don't get locked in,” I told him—looking over at Miss Porter and thinking, in spite of my insisting that it wasn't so, that he might be right, after all. Miss Porter was dabbing at her nose and eyes with a paper tissue, glancing about anxiously as if she didn't want us to see her. I was getting a really, *really* bad feeling about this. We should have all been talking excitedly about the toys we'd got for Christmas, not sitting around here like this, as if we were waiting to be sent to jail or

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something.

As he had said we would, we sang a hymn (*Give Me Oil in My Lamp*), said a prayer and then filed back to our classrooms in uncharacteristic silence. We all knew that something bad was going to happen—or already had—and now it was merely a matter of preparing for the aftermath, whatever that might entail. It felt like my first day all over again. I had no control over this. It happened however I felt about it because, when you got right down to it, life was what adults did to children. We just had to put up with it.

Back in Miss Porter's classroom, we all went dutifully to our places—glancing at her as she positioned herself behind her desk, standing and staring out of the window while she waited for us to settle down. I noticed that Mrs. Wallace, one of the less scary nurses had joined us, positioned by the door like a sentry. Tommy nodded in her direction and mouthed “uh oh” to me and I knew that he was working through all the possibilities just like me. There was a plague or something going around and we all had to have these big needles stuck in us so that we wouldn't catch it. We'd all been poisoned and had to have our stomachs pumped. The Martians had landed and we weren't allowed to go home because it was too dangerous. These and many other thoughts passed through my fertile mind, truly predicting nothing but nonetheless guaranteeing that when Miss Porter finally spoke, it was bound to be an anticlimax.

“I need you all to be very brave boys and girls today,” Miss Porter presently said, doing an admirable job of keeping her emotions in check. “Because...” she glanced over at Mrs. Wallace, who nodded back at her encouragingly... “because I have some very sad news to share with you.”

Bugger, I thought (I'd learned that of our bus driver), *the bloody buggering Martians have landed.*

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But that wasn't it. What Miss Porter had to tell us was—to her mind, at least—far graver than that. She perched her bum against the front of her desk, staring down at the floor like Mr. Dixon had. I wondered what it was with adults and floors. Could they divine something in the parquet that we couldn't, or did they merely do it because they'd seen another adult do it ages ago and thought it looked so good they just had to copy it? It was weird, but if Miss Porter was doing it, I could only suppose that it had some worth. She wasn't the type to do something for no reason, I was sure.

“You may have noticed,” she continued, “that not everyone is with us today.” I looked around. Tommy looked around. The whole class looked around. If anyone else knew who was missing, me and Tommy certainly didn't. We looked at each other and shrugged. I for one was actually a little relieved; this wasn't going the way of the Martians or the big needles, after all. Or it didn't appear to be.

“Emiline!” a girl I didn't like called Karen shouted out. “Emiline Brown isn't here, Miss.”

I vaguely recalled a girl with pale pink National Health glasses and pigtails. She had a way of rolling her head from side to side when she got excited that made her look like a loony. When I noticed her (which was rarely), I usually ended up feeling embarrassed for her... or by her.

“That's right, Karen,” Miss Porter said, as if Karen had just got a dead hard sum right. “Emiline isn't with us, and I'm afraid she won't be coming to school any more because... over Christmas, Emiline got very poorly. You know how she had fits, right?”

News to me.

“Well she had this *really* bad fit and poor Emiline died and went to Heaven.”

Something occurred to me and I put my hand up.

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“Yes, Carl.”

“She won’t be coming back to school?”

“No, pet, I’m afraid she won’t.”

“Not ever?”

“No. She’s in Heaven, now.”

I knew a bit about this dying thing, because I’d been meant to do it when I was about two and still hadn’t got round to it—but no one had mentioned the bit about not having to go to school when you died. It was a massive oversight on the part of Mam and Dad, I thought. I couldn’t believe they’d let me down so badly. If I’d only known, all this one add two equals three and “see Spot run” stuff could have been avoided!

“Is Heaven like London, miss?” one of the other girls said, and me and Tommy sniggered.

“No, sweetheart,” Miss Porter said, glancing at Mrs. Wallace—just to make sure she was doing this right. “Heaven is where you go when you die, when it’s time for you to be with God and Jesus.”

“And she can’t come back?”

“No, love. And we won’t see her again until we die and go to Heaven, too.”

It seemed to be finally starting to sink in. Karen started to snuffle and Mrs. Wallace went over to make sure she was all right—her nurse’s uniform that wasn’t quite a nurse’s uniform shushing and cracking as she bent down. I heard Karen say something about how her goldfish had died and how they’d flushed it down the loo—her conclusion seeming to be that you got to Heaven via the toilet, and if that was the case then everyone’s poo must go to Heaven, too. It was a fascinating idea, but I didn’t have the luxury of thinking about it for long because Tommy was kicking me under the table.

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“What?” I hissed.

Tommy didn't say anything, just nodded in Miss Porter's direction. She'd turned her back on the class and her hands were up near her face. Her shoulders hitched, and it was pretty clear—as preoccupied as I was with the problem of all that poo in Heaven—that she was crying. I didn't know what to do, or even if I was meant to do anything at all. Staring at Tommy, bewildered but also a little exhilarated by the unusual turn of events, I felt sorry for Miss Porter. If it made her feel bad to tell us about how Emiline had died and everything, she shouldn't have to do it. Someone else should have done it for her. Mr. Dixon in assembly should have said, instead of making us sing *Give Me Oil in My Lamp* (although, I had to admit it was a good song—not exactly up there with *Burning Love*, but good nonetheless.) It wasn't fair and I wanted to make it better for her but didn't know how.

Tommy was apparently more well informed than I, however. He got up out of his chair and bounced over to her—putting his arms around her when she bent down and giving her a huge hug. This didn't stop her tears, as Tommy no doubt hoped—in fact, it even seemed to make her cry more—but she seemed to welcome his effort, and I couldn't help but hate him a little bit for that.

When Tommy returned to his place, I refused to speak to him. It wasn't just that I'd fallen out with him over his shameless attempt to get into Miss Porter's good books (when everybody already knew that I was her favourite), it was more that the morning's sombre mood was finally beginning to have a real effect on me. I couldn't stop thinking what it must be like to be dead. If it was all angels with harps and God and the Baby Jesus, why did Miss Porter cry? It didn't make sense. Not really. Not unless death was a bad thing.

Later that morning, I tapped Miss Porter on the arm and asked, “Miss? Is there

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really a heaven?”

Try as I might, I still can't recall her answer.

As seemed befitting, it was cold and grey that lunchtime—the mood in the hall as we ate our meal of leathery beef, tepid, lumpy mashed potato and plastic carrots was sombre and unusually respectful. Knives and forks clinked and scraped, crockery crocked—or whatever it is that crockery does, apart from smash, when it's banged together—and only a monastic murmur could occasionally be heard. If I'd known what a wake was, that was the comparison I would have made. But I didn't—and so only thought of it as “boring” and “unhappy”, desperate for it to end again so that we could get on with the already difficult business of being kids.

It was times such as these that made me especially grateful to have Tommy as my best friend. He could be annoying, there was no doubt about that, and sometimes I wished that he'd have a fit and bugger off to Heaven, too (though I would have felt very sad and guilty, for an hour or two, if he had)—but he had his uses, and today he proved this yet again. At the time, I couldn't have known where it would end, but even if I had I doubt I would have said anything to shut him up. It was too much fun.

“I thought it was just my eyes at first,” he whispered to me as I forked around with my leathery beef. “It was just after I'd given Miss Porter a cuddle.” I still hadn't decided if I'd totally forgiven him for this. Whatever he had to tell me was probably going to be the deciding factor. “She smelt dead nice. Like flowers and... I don't know. Something nice, anyway. I wanted to cuddle her all day. But I couldn't and so I didn't, and when I didn't, that was when I saw it.”

“What did you see?” I was duty-bound to ask. Not to do so would have been like not responding with “who's there?” to the opening of a knock-knock joke.

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“Well,” he said, determined to drag this out as long as possible. “I wasn’t sure, at first. The wind was blowing a lot outside and them roses over by the windows near Miss Porter’s desk was wafting about a bit, so I thought it might be me eyes seeing things like, or that it might be a shadow, you know?”

“Off the roses?”

Nodding enthusiastically, Tommy said, “But it wasn’t.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Nope.” He looked characteristically pleased with himself.

“Then what was it?”

Tommy leaned in closer. I could smell gravy on his breath. “It was *her*,” he told me, looking around to make sure no one else was listening—and seeming rather disappointed when he saw no one was.

“Her?”

“Yes—*her*.”

“Her who?”

I hated it when he looked at me as if I was stupid. Everyone knew I was loads cleverer than him, but still he insisted on doing it—admittedly not very often, but enough to make me want to stab him with my fork.

“You know who,” he said.

“No I don’t.

“Think about it.”

“Just tell me.”

“You’ll kick yourself.”

I shrugged and started putting more salt on my mashed potato. It was too salty already, but it wasn’t as if I was planning on eating it or anything.

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As I knew it would, the act worked and Tommy leaned in closer still. “Emiline Brown,” he told me. “I saw Emiline Brown.”

There was a part of the playground that went round the side of the school hall and led to some steps up to the classroom where Mme. Crook taught me and a couple more kids French, and it was here we positioned ourselves after lunch to discuss *The Strange Case of Emiline Brown*.

Tommy hadn’t got the duffel coat he’d wanted for Christmas, so he sat on the bottom step hugging himself through his powder-blue bomber jacket, shaking his head at the sheer scale of the peculiar events with which we were now faced.

“She was glowing and sort of wobbling,” he told me. “But it was definitely her. I’d have recognised her anywhere.”

“But she’s dead.”

“Aye, I know. But that doesn’t change owt. It was still her. Standing there and glowing and wobbling and pointing.”

“She’s was pointing, too?”

“Yes. Didn’t I tell you?”

“No.”

“Well she was. Glowing and wobbling and pointing.”

“What at?”

“Eh?”

“What was she pointing at?”

Tommy thought about this for a while, sniffing his top lip and looking up at the cloudy sky. “Hard to be sure,” he said. “She was wobbling, don’t forget, so her finger was sort of moving about a bit. Like this.” He demonstrated. I could see what

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he meant. “At first, it looked like she was pointing at Karen—but that didn’t make sense because no one ever points at Karen. Then I thought she might be pointing at Miss Porter, but that would have been rude and Emiline wasn’t rude, was she?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Me neither.” He sighed with the burden of it all. “Anyway,” he continued, “it was neither of them.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Nope.”

“Who was it, then?”

“Dunno. I’ll tell you what, though.”

“What?”

“We better find out quick.”

“Why?”

“Cos it probably means someone else is gonna die.”

As long as it wasn’t me, I didn’t care. I’d decided that, on balance and in spite of it being a sure-fire way of getting out of going to school, dying didn’t sound all that good, after all. Tommy assured me that Emiline’s ghost (for that was what it most assuredly was) certainly hadn’t pointed at me or him, so we could rest easy and, you know, just get on with enjoying trying to work out who *was* going to die.

“It’s got to be someone she didn’t like,” Tommy insisted. “She wouldn’t do it to a friend, would she?”

“Unless she was trying to warn them.”

Tommy smacked the palm of his good hand against his forehead. “God. I never thought of that. I bet that’s it. A *warning*. Who was her friend, then?”

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The truth was, I didn't know. Emiline was the kind of girl who people only truly noticed once she was no longer there, and if she was looking down at us from Heaven, I was sure she'd be surprised by her sudden popularity.

"Great," Tommy said. "So what are we supposed to do now?"

It seemed perfectly obvious to me. I smiled and Tommy's eyes opened a little wider.

"What?" he said.

"I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner."

"Think of what?"

"Let's tell the girls."

~

"That was a bit cruel," I said, nevertheless smiling at him. The picture he was painting of these two little boys, sitting on and by the steps, trying to find a way through the complexity of the subject had touched me and I couldn't help but feel that my own subject, the whole disability integration thing, was possibly going to be more complicated than I'd expected, too. I'd understood that every child was an individual outside of its disability, of course, but it certainly hadn't been central to my dissertation. Instead, I had been intending to focus on the more obvious, physical requirements of ramps and suitably wide doorways—only superficially grasping that disability integration brought with it more demanding problems.

"What can I say?" Carl said. "We were six."

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Jenny Jennings—the first girl we told about Emiline Brown's ghost—ran around the playground, screaming, shaking her head from side to side, as if trying to rid herself of the image we had there planted. Tommy and I sat by the edge of the playground,

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fascinated by the sight and utterly dumbfounded. That wasn't supposed to happen. I hadn't expected that kind of reaction, at all. Okay, so I'd known we'd probably scare her a bit. That's why it had seemed like such a good idea. But this? It was just dead weird.

"She's historical," Tommy told me, and I nodded. "Someone should slap her."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"It's what they do on the telly when someone gets like that."

He was right, of course. I'd seen it, too. When some *girl* started doing some screams there was always someone on hand to give her a right good slapping. It worked wonders—and the girl always thanked the person who'd done the slapping once she'd calmed down. I never really understood this, but it had been on telly—and if it had been on telly, it had to be right.

Nevertheless, I said, "I'm not going to do it. She might hit me back. She's got a right temper on her, her."

With a resigned shrug of his shoulders, Tommy got to his feet saying, "Well, I suppose I better do it, then."

At that precise moment, however, Miss Porter came running out of the school hall onto the playground. Chasing Jenny Jennings, she finally managed to catch up with her—grabbing hold of the terrified girl and kneeling down on the tarmac before her. We couldn't hear what she was saying from where we were, but it was obvious that Miss Porter was speaking to her soothingly, as she had to me on my first day. I could almost hear her in my head, working hard to find out what was wrong and make it better...

...find out what was wrong...

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that. It made me feel a bit sick, and I was just

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about to tell Tommy that I thought that now might be a good time for us to go somewhere else when Miss Porter finally made her breakthrough.

Jenny's screams had now worked their way down to sporadic sobs and hiccups. She shuddered and nodded, and I knew it was probably too late. We were *doomed*, Mr. Mainwaring.

With a painfully slow turn of the head, Jenny Jennings pointed at us.

"We're dead," Tommy said.

Maybe Emiline had been pointing at us, after all.

We waited before Miss Porter's desk, the only ones in the classroom apart from her. She stood with her back to us, letting us stew whilst she read something in a little paperback book she always kept in her handbag. I thought it might be a Bible, but it didn't look big enough.

She sighed and Tommy glanced at me, making a face that suggested that he didn't quite get, whatever he'd said about us being "dead", just how much trouble we were probably in. I turned away from him—ashamed not by what we had done, but by the fact that Miss Porter knew about it. I wouldn't be her favourite now, I thought. She'd see that I wasn't really clever and hardworking. I was lazy and bad, just like everyone else—only I usually hid it better. She'd see and she'd tell all the other teachers, and the nurses, and...

... Mam and Dad.

I didn't want them knowing about this. It wasn't so much that I was afraid of them playing war with me—I could cope with a telling off. I just didn't like the idea of them being disappointed in me. They looked at me with love and pride in their eyes, and I didn't want that to change.

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“It’s been a difficult day for us all,” Miss Porter finally said—putting away her book and turning to face us. “We’ve had to deal with something that just feels so wrong that we can’t even begin to put it into words.” I wondered if she was actually talking to us. “And we each find our own way of making sense of it.” She looked directly at Tommy and me. Her eyes were red and puffy. “That’s why I can’t really be angry with the two of you.”

Must’ve been our lucky day.

“What you did was wrong.”

Bugger.

“There’s no escaping that. But I know that it was just your way of trying to understand everything that’s happened today—and that isn’t easy for any of us.”

She came round to our side of the desk and perched on its edge.

“What the two of you did to Jenny was wrong,” she repeated. “I think you both know that, now. It was always going to scare her, now, wasn’t it?”

Tommy and I nodded, albeit reluctantly.

Miss Porter sighed. I think she wanted to go home, just like me. If she’d had her way, she would probably never have come in today—knowing what she now knew about what she’d have to contend with. It made me feel sorry for her. This was short-lived, however; I was too preoccupied with feeling sorry for myself.

“I’m not going to say anything more on the subject,” she said. “I want you both to promise me that nothing like it will happen again, apologise to Jenny and that will be the end of it. Will you do that for me?”

Understanding on some level that we were both getting off extremely lightly, we nodded—this time rather less reluctantly.

Outside again, on our way to find Jenny and say we were sorry, Tommy

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sniffed indignantly.

“What?”

“Don’t alter owt,” he told me. “Whatever she makes us say, I still saw her.”