

Chapter Three: Leaving, but Not On a Jet Plane

I wasn't feeling at my best the following Monday. The weekend had been taken up with working on my notes for my dissertation, too much cheap wine and intermittent, futile appeals from Andrea to take a break and, laughably, go out on the pull, and to say it had taken its toll was to understate it. This meant so much to me. I'd put so much work in over so many years to claw my way through my "mature" education, working part time jobs and borrowing heavily, that I really didn't want to mess it up now. My dissertation had to contribute something significant. It had become about more than personal achievement; I wanted to write something that would make a difference.

Carl patted the bed as I sat down on the chair beside it. "You look like the one who should be in this," he said. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I said, smiling unconvincingly. "I've just had a busy weekend."

"Andrea told me. Apparently you need to get out more."

He seemed to enjoy the irritation I was always quick to exhibit when the subject of Andrea came up, and I suppose I piled it on a little for effect, enjoying the way in which he chuckled along with me as I told him about her latest efforts at distraction. It would have been all too easy for us to sit there all evening, talking about nothing in particular and generally having a nice old time of it, but, thankfully, Carl was the one to point out, this time, that we had work to do.

He understood that this meant as much to me as it did to him, and I was grateful for that.

"That's how it was at Sunnyvale," he told me, referring to the steady, sheltered

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day-to-day predictability of it all that we'd been speaking of the Friday before. "I don't really remember much more than what I've told you, other than those last couple of months before Resolution School opened. It became normalised, I suppose. Going there was just what I did and I probably even quite enjoyed it most of the time. I started to grow up there, I even saw my first vagina there," he added with a comical twitch of an eyebrow.

"Whey hey."

Looking out of the window, he continued. "I learned a lot there, but I was still ultimately glad when I found out I would be leaving."

"And this was when?"

"About the spring of seventy-six, I think."

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Mrs. Aspel was nothing like Miss Porter had been. She was nice, but a lot stricter. And older, too. Habitually dressed in her much more teacherly twin-set and pearls, she didn't like our talking too much when we were meant to be working—and if my voice rose above the background murmur, she would only have to quietly say my name for me to get the message. Her authority lent the class a sense of calm that Miss Porter's never had—there was never any doubt that Mrs. Aspel was in control—and during my couple of years with her, I'd learned to appreciate this. When I wanted to read my book in Mrs. Aspel's class, there were no loud noises to distract me. I liked that.

Today, a Monday morning, she stood at the front of the class waiting for *complete* order. A few of my fellow classmates took a little longer than was usual—the excitement of the weekend still clinging to them, disinclined to let go—but once they had complied, Mrs. Aspel clasped her hands behind her back and started pacing

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about the classroom, as she liked to do when she was talking to us.

“As you all know,” she said, “Carl is leaving us at the end of term and starting a brand new school in September.”

This was the first I’d heard of it—and judging by the way in which Tommy looked daggers at me, it was also the first he’d heard of it. I shrugged at him, but he just turned away.

“We will all be very sorry to see Carl go, I’m sure,” Mrs. Aspel continued. “But I’m just as sure that we are all excited for him.”

She smiled at me while the class mumbled noncommittally.

“Anyway,” she told us, pacing with renewed vigour. “In a few minutes, Carl’s new teacher will be visiting to meet him and have a little chat. Her name is Mrs. Shires and I want you all to be on your best behaviour. Is that understood?”

A multiform “yes” echoed around the classroom, and I suddenly felt more isolated than I ever remembered feeling in my entire life. It was like my first day all over again, only somehow worse because now I had friends who, if Mrs. Aspel was to be believed, wouldn’t be going to this new school with me. I looked at Tommy and whispered his name, but he refused to look at me—very deliberately talking to Jenny about the book he was reading. I knew he was snubbing me, but this wasn’t my fault and I wanted to tell him that. I didn’t want this anymore than he did (although that was soon to change) but I hadn’t had the opportunity to object because *this was the first I’d heard of it!*

I sat there silently, staring at the book I was reading—something with pirates and sea monsters, a story that, only moments before, had completely captivated me, as rubbish as it was, but which now left me cold. It was kids’ stuff, I told myself. Real-life was more complicated than sailing the seven seas and fighting monsters. In real-

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life, you could hurt your friends without doing anything and get the blame for things for which other people were responsible.

It wasn't fair, I thought. It just wasn't *bloody* fair.

There was a gentle knock at the door; so quiet I almost missed it. In a book, I thought, they'd say something about how there was an "air of expectation"—but it wasn't like that at all, really. Most of my classmates were already bored by this. It had nothing to do with them. Someone they possibly liked a bit was leaving, but so what? It wasn't as if he was someone important, or something really unusual was happening to him. People left places all the time. Yawn.

Normally, Mrs. Aspel would have merely called out "enter!", but today it seemed that our honoured guest was getting the full treatment. She actually got up off her chair, walked to the door *and opened it*. Anyone would have thought that this Mrs. Shires was the Queen or something, the way Mrs. Aspel acted.

I was just glad she didn't curtsy. That would have been really embarrassing.

They exchanged pleasantries, Mrs. Aspel saying something really lame about the bad weather, and then Mrs. Shires was brought over to meet me—smiling at the other kids as she came, saying hello here and there.

I liked her right away. She had a good smile (Mrs. Aspel's always looked as if it might make her face crack) and wasn't too tall. In fact, she was short—which was always a bonus, in my opinion, when you had to spend every day looking up at people.

"Carl," Mrs. Aspel said, with great formality, "I'd like you to meet Mrs. Shires. Mrs. Shires is going to be your teacher at your new school."

Mrs. Shires immediately knelt down beside my desk, and told me how pleased she was to finally meet me. She had, apparently, heard a lot about me.

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“What you reading?” she said, Mrs. Aspel leaving us to it as Mrs. Shires lifted the front of the book so that she could see the title. “Ah. *Paul and the Pirates*. Is it any good?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Not bad,” I said. “It’s about this boy who gets kidnapped by these pirates and they go on this adventure and...”

“What?”

“That’s where it gets a bit daft.”

“Why, what happens?”

“Paul, the boy, he teaches them all about being good and having good manners and stuff.”

“Not very believable?”

“They’re pirates,” I said, grinning.

Mrs. Shires laughed and then said, “So what would you rather be reading?”

I thought for a moment before answering. Mam and Dad had got me a book at the motorway service station the last time we’d been up to Newcastle to see the doctor. That had been good. “I like the Enid Blyton Famous Five books,” I told her. “They’re good.”

“An adventure fan, eh? I’m impressed. Those books were written for kids a little older than you.”

“I’m advanced for my age,” I told her. “That’s what Mrs. Aspel says.”

I could tell Mrs. Shires found this amusing, but she tried very hard not to laugh. “And you clearly are,” she said. “I’ll have to make sure we have plenty of Famous Five books in the library at the Resolution for you, won’t I?”

I nodded, and then asked, “The Resolution has a library? All of its own?”

Mrs. Shires made herself more comfortable, folding her arms on the desk and

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leaning forward. I could feel Tommy watching me, but I didn't look over at him.

None of this was my doing.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Shires said. "It's got a library, all right. It's got a library, bright, new classrooms, open plan design—that means with only a few doors—so it'll be easier to get around in your wheelchair... it's even got its own swimming pool."

"A *swimming pool*?"

"Well, a hydrotherapy pool, really—but it adds up to the same thing, right?"

I nodded again. "I do me hydrotherapy at the North Tees Hospital now," I told her.

"Well there you go, you see," she said. "You won't have to go there when you go to the Resolution. You'll be able to do it without leaving the school."

Mrs. Shires remained there, talking to me for another quarter of an hour, telling me about all the things I would learn at the Resolution and how good it was going to be. She mentioned the schools next door to it—Overfields Primary and the Almsby Comprehensive—where I would be going in "due course".

"It's a very new idea," she told me. "And you're one of the first. We'll be just like Captain Cook, sailing into uncharted waters together. It'll be an adventure."

She made it sound like a Famous Five story—and I liked her, I really did—but that didn't alter the fact that Tommy still wouldn't look at me.

"Was Captain Cook a pirate," I asked her.

Tommy wasn't going to make this easy for me. At playtime, he sat with me on our steps by the side of the school hall—his face somewhere down around his ankles and flat refusing to accept that I hadn't known that I was going to be going to a new school in September. He laughed a little bitterly when I tried to convince him, yet

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again, that I was as surprised by the news as he and that, in fact, I didn't actually want to go, even if it did have a swimming pool. This, of course, was an outright lie—I now couldn't even begin to imagine staying at Sunnyvale for the rest of my school years. It seemed, having heard from Mrs. Shires just how modern and “ground-breaking” the Resolution was, that Sunnyvale was nothing more than a place for kids who had no place else to go. I did. I had the Resolution. After that, I had the Overfields Primary and the Almsby Comprehensive. And after *that*? Who could say? I was sad to be leaving Tommy behind. Of course I was. But I was nonetheless glad that it was him that was staying and not me.

“You're a bloody liar,” he told me. “You knew all along, I know you did. You knew all along and you didn't tell me because you're *sly*.”

Being called sly by a friend was about as bad as it got when I was nine. It stung to hear Tommy say that, but I was determined to rise above it. He was upset. That was all that this was about. His best mate was going to another school and he was being left behind. It was only natural that he should hit out in this way. What he needed was a little understanding—calm reassurance that that wasn't the way it was at all.

“Well if that's what you think,” I said, “fuck ya. If you won't believe me when I'm telling you the truth, I'm glad you're not coming to the Resolution. I'll be glad to see the bloody back of you.”

“And I'll be glad to see the bloody back of you, too!” Tommy was struggling. He wanted to say something else—hurl more insults, no doubt—but his voice was getting all squeaky and strained, and I think he was afraid that he might start crying.

He took a deep breath and stood up, limping a few paces away from me before coming back and sitting down.

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“Why can’t I go there as well?” he said, more calmly, now.

“I don’t know. I think it’s because I live closer to the new school and you live closer to this one.”

“You reckon?”

I nodded. “It’s about five minutes by bus from where I live.”

“That’s good, then, isn’t it?”

“I suppose. It’s still scary, though. I’ll hardly know anyone.”

“Some other kids from here are going,” he told me.

“I know.”

It was cold and I wanted playtime to be over. This conversation was getting weirder—I was *feeling* weirder, beginning to wonder if I did actually want to leave Sunnyvale, after all. I was safe here. Protected, almost. The teachers and staff, as peculiar as some of them could be, were generally nice—and whilst Mrs. Shires had seemed nice, too, there was still so much I didn’t know about Resolution School.

“Was it really a surprise to you?” Tommy said, as the bell went for us to return to our classroom.

Nodding, I said, “I don’t think even my mam and dad have been told about it, yet.”

“Because they would have told you, right?”

“Exactly.”

“So they’re going to get a surprise, too, then.”

“They’ll be glad,” I told him. “They don’t like me travelling all this way every day.”

Tommy was behind me, pushing my wheelchair. I could hear him thinking.

Tommy was just about the loudest thinker I ever met.

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“I’m sorry I called you a liar and sly,” he said.

My last day at Sunnyvale was hot and bright—the school for once, it seemed, living up to its name. The holidays were upon us and everyone was looking forward to being able to play every day for a whole six weeks, without ever once having to worry about school. Everyone except me, that was. When I thought about the summer holidays, I also invariably thought of the uncertainty that awaited me at the far end of it—the new challenges and, quite possibly, the monumental failures.

Mrs. Aspel had decided that a “breaking-up” party was called for, but we all knew that it was really a “goodbye Carl” party and I for one wished she hadn’t bothered. I mean, it was nice and everything—but I wasn’t really sure that leaving Sunnyvale was a cause for celebration. I hadn’t even *seen* the Resolution, yet. For all I knew, Mrs. Shires’ library might be nothing more than a few tatty paperbacks on a shelf—her hydrotherapy pool a puddle in the playground. Until I’d had chance to breathe in the newness of which she’d spoken, I was determined to withhold judgment.

Or that’s what I occasionally told myself.

The party took the form of a picnic on the field outside our classroom—with sandwiches and cake and even jelly. Mrs. Aspel had made a real effort, and it seemed churlish not to at least *try* to enjoy it.

Tommy was devouring a fistful of cake—utterly unconcerned by the mess he was making. Looking up at me, he winked. “Guess where I’m going for me hols,” he said.

The joke was getting old now. He’d told me where he was going about a dozen times already, and seemed intent on telling me a dozen more. Nevertheless, I

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played along.

“Dunno,” I said. “Where are you going for your hols?”

“Butlins.” To say he was excited about this was to understate it. Getting stuck into his chunk of cake, his good leg twitched with the sheer expectation of it all and he told me, once again, that he was going for two weeks. “We go there every year,” he said. “It’s usually freezing cold, but I don’t mind that cos there’s always lots of stuff to do indoors where it’s warm. Last year...” he took a drink of pop to swill the cake down, “... last year we saw Morecambe and Wise there. Well, it wasn’t really Morecambe and Wise, but it was these two blokes who was just like them—only funnier. Or that’s what me and our dad thought. Mam reckoned they were just copying and that wasn’t good. I don’t see the problem meself. There were still funny.”

He rabbitted on like this for a while longer, eating his cake and drinking his pop whilst I looked from my classmates (in various stages of cake) to the expansive school field. I’d never realised before just how big it was. How big and, truly, how small. When I’d first arrived there—*millions of years ago*—it had seemed to go on to the ends of the earth, but, I now saw, it actually stopped short just before it got to the council houses.

Mrs. Aspel was looking at me and smiling. She was sitting a few feet away from me on a blanket on the grass, her legs tucked under her. She didn’t look like Mrs. Aspel much at all today, truth be known. She seemed cooler than usual, not so worried by us not being on our best behaviour. I supposed that had something to do with it being the end of term and everything. Maybe she was going to Butlins, too.

“A penny for them,” she said to me, in a voice that was quite playful (for Mrs. Aspel.)

I shrugged, very aware that Tommy was also waiting for my response. The

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way he'd suddenly stopped cramming cake in his gob suggested that he was expecting something suitably profound. Not wishing to disappoint, I said, "The field's a lot smaller than it used to be."

Both Mrs. Aspel and Tommy looked at it, frowning and, I imagined, trying to remember how big it had been the last time they had really taken notice. Tommy seemed to find this especially difficult, frowning severely as he sniffed his upper lip—but Mrs. Aspel was quick to nod.

"Ah, yes," she said. "I think I know what you mean, Carl. It's a matter of perspective."

"Perspective?"

"Perspective," Tommy told me, authoritatively.

"That means where you look at something from and how all the things you see fit together," Mrs. Aspel explained. "That tree over there." She pointed. "You and I have a different perspective on it. And that's what's happened with the field. It hasn't got smaller—you've got bigger, pet."

Now that she mentioned it, I thought I knew what she meant, because it wasn't just the field. It was everything. Nothing was as big and scary as it had once been (except for Godzilla in the rubbishy Jap movies on telly.) The world had seemed to have shrunk, in all its generalities and detail, but it was all down to *perspective*. Even the shops in Eston were considerably less impressive than they'd once been.

Jenny wanted to know if Mrs. Aspel had ever been up in an aeroplane, and she (Mrs. Aspel) turned away from us to tell her all about her experience of air travel. I wasn't as jealous as I would have been if it had been Miss Porter turning away from me, but I was still mildly annoyed. Maybe that was about perspective, too.

Tommy looked sad. I knew how he felt. This wasn't such a big, bad place after

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all, and as glad as I might sometimes feel about going, it would be odd not seeing him again. He was the best mate I'd ever had, and I wanted to tell him—but didn't, in case he thought I was a fairy or something.

“We can be pen pals,” he said, as he got stuck into another chunk of cake. “I'll send you a postcard from Butlins and you can tell me stuff about your new school and everything. It'll be fun.”

“You'll forget,” I told him.

“No I won't,” he insisted. “I never forget important stuff like that.”

“Important stuff like what?”

Grinning at me, he said, just as I had expected, “I can't remember.”

As we drove out of the Sunnyvale School gates later that afternoon, the day still warm and full of promise—my forehead tingling from the afternoon I'd spent in the sun—it struck me that I really was off on the adventure of which Mrs. Shires had spoken. I had made promises to return some time in the not-too-precise future to pay them a visit and let them all know how I was getting along, but I think I knew even then that that would never happen. I was leaving Sunnyvale School for the last time—and I wasn't sad. Not anymore. I wasn't sad because that was that and I was going to be like that Captain Cook bloke that Mrs. Shires had gone on about, sailing into uncharted waters and everything.

It was going to be good, I told myself. Dead good, in fact. It might be weird to begin with, but my *perspective* would change and I'd soon see just how brilliant (compared to Sunnyvale) it really was.

Resolution School was a new beginning; I think even then I understood that. But that didn't mean I had to forget where I had come from.

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I will write to Tommy, I told myself.

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“And did you?” I asked him.

I’d stayed later than expected, the nurses showing a flexibility that I thought might have had something to do with Andrea’s limited influence, and whilst Carl was sounding a little croaky, he still seemed anything but tired. I nevertheless made a mental note not to drag the evening’s session on for much longer.

“Once or twice, yes,” Carl said. “Then... well, I suppose we ran out of things to say to each other. Tommy and I never really had that much in common, I suppose. And the older we got, the more evident that became.”

“So you never went back there? You never saw him again?”

Carl shook his head. His breathing seemed a little more laboured than usual and I underlined my mental note not to drag this on too much longer.

“No,” he said. “Going back there was something that just never came up, actually. It never occurred to me or anyone around me once I got to the Resolution.” A little light went on at the back of Carl’s eyes—distant, but bright nonetheless—and he lifted his chin a little higher, looking directly at me and smiling with a warmth that had nothing to do with me. “I *did* see Tommy again though. Christ, I’d forgotten all about that.”

“Not at Sunnyvale, though.”

“No. It was at a regional sports event up Gateshead way. I was entered in the electric wheelchair racing events and while I was hanging around with my mates, this kid comes bouncing up to me. I didn’t recognise him right away, even with the hand and the bouncy limp, but as soon as he said my name, I knew who he was.

“He’d grown up,” Carl continued. “I suppose we both had, but it seemed more

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evident with him.”

“When was this?”

“I’m not sure,” Carl replied. “Two, possibly three years later. He’d really changed—seemed quieter, more considered. Gentle. We chatted for a while and he told me that Sunnyvale had closed. Or they’d moved it or something. The school he was now at sounded similar in concept to the Resolution and he was being integrated into a mainstream school.” Carl shuffled himself about, making himself comfortable before continuing. “I suppose once one school started, they all jumped on the proverbial band wagon.

“Anyway, I asked if his new school was warm enough for him.” He smiled again, fondly. “I remember that bit vividly because he just didn’t get the joke at all. It was as if he’d left the old Tommy back there on the steps at Sunnyvale, probably with the old me right beside him—talking about the ghost of Emiline Brown without ever realising they were ghosts themselves.”

I pulled a face and Carl laughed. “Too deep for me, mate,” I said. Closing my notebook and putting it in my bag, I got to my feet and said, “Might be a good place to stop. You’re clearly getting tired and rather too fanciful for my liking. A good night’s sleep will do you the world of good.”

“I was just starting to enjoy myself.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. Facts, dear boy, that’s the business I’m in. I can’t be taking the risk of you dressing it up with your ghostly imagery. It’s a dissertation, not an international bestseller. Dry sterility is the order of the day.”

In the short time I’d known him, Carl had quickly become someone I’d grown comfortable with. I liked him. There was no escaping that. He was not a man without faults, but he’d lived long enough to know what they were and, it seemed to me, he

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would always be quick to admit to them. That was rare, and even as I told myself, yet again, that this was about my dissertation—and *only* my dissertation—I suspected that I would continue visiting him even if it turned out he had no more information to offer.

Carl Grantham wasn't just a project. He was becoming a friend.