

Chapter Four: Poppies

It had been the hottest summer anyone I knew remembered—a summer of drought and discomfort that even a boy of nine had found difficult to cope with, at times. On the beach at Sandsend with Mam and Dad and my cousin Mark, between sessions in the dingy, I had sat in a deck chair with a large towel draped over my head to keep the sun off, reading a book and thinking about September. One minute I looked forward to going to the Resolution, the next I wished I was returning to Sunnyvale. I didn't know what I wanted, and this on top of the extreme heat probably made me a pain to be around. I really was becoming a “big boy”, and I wasn't too sure I liked it.

My first day at Resolution School bore no unyielding resemblance to my first day at Sunnyvale. I was too aware of what was going on. Going in on the school bus, sitting next to the escort—a kind, enthusiastic lady in her fifties called June—I was sure my anxiety showed, as cool as I tried to look.

June made it easier, though. She lived near the school and had watched it being built, so she told us all about it as we picked up the other kids—in far more detail than even Mrs. Shires had.

“Does it really have a swimming pool?” I said.

June nodded quickly and put her hand on my arm. “Does it ever!” she told me. “They took me and the other escorts round to have a look last week, and we saw it. You are going to *love* it. Everything's shiny and new, and the front doors open by themselves and—”

“The doors do what?”

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“Oh! Didn’t I tell you about that? They’ve got these sensitive mats in the floor or something. In front of the doors. And when you go on them—*whoosh!*”

“Whoosh?” I wasn’t sure if “whoosh” was a good thing.

“Yes, *whoosh*—the doors open just like magic.”

“Electric doors,” I said. I knew all about them. They weren’t magic. They were good, but they weren’t magic. And “whoosh” definitely struck me as a bit of an exaggeration.

“The teachers are smashing, too,” she told me. Everyone else had stopped listening, so I felt I had to keep talking to her.

“I’ve met mine already.”

“You have.”

“Yes.”

“And was she nice?”

“Yes.”

“Told you, didn’t I?”

“She’s called Mrs. Shires.”

June continued talking and I sort of listened—hearing her say something about having met Mrs. Shires herself and how she had known immediately that she was a very nice lady with “a real passion for the job”. I missed most of it, however, preoccupied with the fact that we were getting close to the school. The tension and excitement on the bus became palpable, and I thought back to the summer holidays—how Mam and Dad had brought us round this way to have a look at the Resolution when we had been taking Mark home once. From the outside and from a distance (which was all I had to go on), it had vaguely reminded me of the Hinton’s supermarket that had been built near where I lived. It even had a loading bay! New,

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unweathered red brick, aluminium framed windows and freshly laid tarmac. That had been the overwhelming impression as Mark, sitting beside me in the back of our Ford Escort estate, had commented on how small it looked—small but nice—and I now wondered as we drove along the road that led to the school entrance if that would be how it was today. Would it still seem small, or would it be as big as Sunnyvale had seemed on my first day there?

I was learning not to trust the early morning September sunlight. It was a low, temporary thing that so often betrayed—weak and watery, and yet solidly associated with the new school year. Driving into the carpark, it streamed in through the windscreen and caught me square in the eye, dazzling me and causing tears to well. I blinked rapidly, desperately afraid that June or someone might think that I was going to cry. This wasn't Sunnyvale. I didn't cry now.

“That sunlight really got you there, didn't it, love?” June blessedly said as a tear escaped.

“Just a bit,” I said—laughing, just to make absolutely sure there was no confusion.

“Not to worry,” she told me. “It'll probably be raining by lunch time.”

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that. It seemed too much a reflection of the way in which the day might yet go. I looked at June as we pulled into our parking space, hoping she might have something more encouraging to add. She didn't, though. She merely sat there a moment, smiling, and then, once the bus stopped, jumped into action.

I had a wheelchair all of my own waiting for me, with my name on it, even, and June

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was quick to find it and get me settled, all comfy and excited. She seemed as keen as me—more so, even—and as she handed me over to one of the auxiliary nurses, she ruffled my hair and wished me luck. I smiled, but I hated it when adults did that to me. Now it was all messed up and I didn't even have a comb.

“A little bit thoughtless,” the auxiliary said to me, “but I think she meant well. Here, let me fix that for you.” She squatted down in front of me like Mrs. Attenborough had that first day at Sunnyvale, flattening down my hair with her hand where June had ruffled it up and telling me her name was Mrs. Alexander. Despite the fact that her name also began with “A”, she was nothing like Mrs. Attenborough. She had better knees, for a start. Not so big and imposing. But there was more to it than that. I didn't know what it was, exactly, but it was as if Mrs. Alexander knew me better than anyone at Sunnyvale ever had. She knew right away that I liked my hair nice.

“I bet you don't know how to feel today, do you?” Mrs. Alexander said as she got back to her feet. “Nervous, excited—a little scared, even, yes?”

I nodded, shrugging to show I was okay with that, though.

“Well, Carl,” she told me, bending down and speaking to me in a whisper. “I'm not going to make any promises or tell you how wonderful it is. I'm going to let you see for yourself. Then you can tell me what *you* think. Deal?”

“Deal.”

I vividly remember the poppies. Hundreds of them—thousands, it seemed. Velvety and deep, their striking shade of red touching me in a way that I would only understand years later, looking back and considering the poignancy of that moment.

“Beautiful, aren't they?” Mrs. Alexander said, softly.

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We were by the window in the library—which was, indeed, as impressive (by my then limited standards) as Mrs. Shires had suggested—looking out at the grounds. I said that, yes, they were, and then added, “There’s loads of them. Did someone plant them or did they just grow?”

“Just grow, I imagine. They’re wildflowers. Once they start cutting the grass and maintaining the borders, they’ll probably disappear for good.”

“Really?”

Mrs. Alexander nodded. “A crying shame, if you ask me.”

“Me too,” I agreed. “They should leave them alone. They look better than Livingston Daisies or anything like that.”

“Livingston Daisies are quite nice, too—in their own way.”

“Don’t make you stop and look like all those poppies do, though.”

Mrs. Alexander stared out of the window. “No,” she said. “I don’t suppose they do.”

The tour of Resolution School—my *new school*—was far more memorable than its equivalent on my first day at Sunnyvale... or maybe it would be more accurate to say it was more memorable for its impressive qualities rather than the choking feelings of abandonment and isolation I’d experienced that first day at Sunnyvale. Mrs. Alexander wheeled me around with a cheerfulness that was wholly sincere. There was no sense that she was trying to sell the place to me. She didn’t have to. It positively gleamed with its own sense of uniqueness and promise. Everything under one roof, no doors on the classrooms, it seemed ultra-modern and spacious—light spilling in through the large windows but somehow not intruding. From the library, Mrs. Alexander took me along to see the Home Economics area. A cosy, homely place

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with an impressive kitchen and a separate section set aside for craft and needlework. Mrs. Alexander explained that this side of the school was for the seniors, so I would only really come over this way for Home Economics or to use the library—and then took me along to show me what would, in time, simply become known as “the corridor”.

“When you’re old enough,” Mrs. Alexander said, squatting down beside me, again. “Next year. This is where you’ll come to go over into Almsby for some of your lessons.” With one wall of painted brick, the other wall and ceiling of the corridor was made wholly of wire-reinforced glass. It was painfully bright on such a sunny day, and as I squinted through the glare, the corridor seemed to go on forever—stretching away to that other place that I couldn’t quite imagine being for me, even though I knew in my heart of hearts that it was. “See that little recessed area?” Mrs. Alexander continued. “Between the two sets of doors at the far end? That’s where the lift is. You’ll use that to get up to the art department, the maths rooms and the Home Economics area.”

“Another Home Economics area?” I said.

“Another *school*,” she reminded me, and I nodded—seeing her point. “Almsby has about a thousand pupils, so it’s not like they can all come over and use ours, is it?”

“But I can go over and use theirs?”

“Eventually, yes.” She stood up again, putting a hand on my head (being careful not to mess my hair.) “But I think we’re getting a little bit ahead of ourselves, aren’t we? I haven’t finished showing you the Resolution and we’re already talking about your next school.”

“Hardly seems worth stopping,” I said, grinning what I was learning to think

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of as my “most charmingest grin”.

Mrs. Alexander laughed along with me and really meant it. “Come on, you,” she said. “Best till last. Let’s take a look at the pool before Mr. Johnson’s first assembly.”

“Who’s he?” I said. I thought I knew, but it didn’t do to take anything for granted where these things were concerned. Just that morning, both Mam and Dad had told me, separately, to speak up if I didn’t know or understand something. *Don’t sit there like a lemon, mate*, Dad had said. *No one ever gets into bother for asking polite questions—but if ‘they’ do, be sure to let me know about it, okay?* Whilst Mam had kept it much more succinct. *You’ll never learn anything if you don’t ask, love.*

“Mr. Johnson?” Mrs. Alexander said. “He’s your new headmaster. He’s a lovely man. You’ll like him.”

Important Lesson Number One at Resolution School: even Mrs. Alexander couldn’t get everything right.

It was a hydrotherapy pool. What more could really be said? However much of a step up it may have been, and as impressive as it actually was by the standards of the day, I couldn’t help but feel, as I sat with the other kids in the school hall waiting for the apparently late Mr. Johnson to arrive and start speaking, just a little bit let down. I’d expected something Olympic-sized with diving boards and stuff and what in reality I’d got was a poky little thing of about twelve feet by twenty—if that. Matters weren’t entirely helped when I’d spotted a cord hanging down from the ceiling over one corner of the pool and asked Mrs. Alexander what it was for. “That’s in case someone gets into trouble and we need to call for help,” she’d explained—and the very idea of “someone” getting “into trouble” sort of took the already dulling shine off it a bit. At

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first, I'd thought she'd meant someone doing something wrong and getting told off, but I quickly realised that she hadn't meant that at all; the cord was in case someone hurt themselves or—even better—*drowned*. The question that struck me most forcibly was: If it was dangerous enough to need an emergency cord, should we really be going in there in the first place?

My mind continued to work at this until, a whole ten minutes after the last of us had taken our places in the hall, Mr. You'll-Like-Him Johnson arrived.

Mr. Johnson was no Mr. Dixon, that much was obvious. He wore a pair of brown corduroy trousers that looked as if they'd seen better days and a shirt of a lighter shade of brown with no tie, whereas Mr. Dixon was *always* in a suit, however hot the weather. His beard in need of trimming, Mr. Johnson didn't look much like a headmaster at all, in fact—although the way he looked around at everyone with his bog-brush chin held high, I don't think he knew this. Someone should tell him, I thought, but I wasn't about to offer the information myself—not to him, anyway.

I was determined not to hold his scruffy appearance against him, however, even though I myself, a mere pupil, had made quite an effort. Mr. Dixon had always been a bit distant and unapproachable, and I thought that maybe this more “casual” look (I was still inclined to be generous towards him) would mean we'd actually be able to talk to him and ask him things. It was all too easy to jump to conclusions and this, after all, was a fresh, new start. I'd give him until tomorrow and then see what I thought.

“Today is a very special day,” Mr. Johnson said, pausing dramatically at the end of the sentence to look round at everyone. “My name is Mr. Johnson and I am to be your headmaster while you are at Resolution School—a position I consider to be both a honour and a privilege. There are few opportunities in life of such importance

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and validity and when they come along I believe in seizing them and holding on tight.” Another dramatic pause as he looked at us—individual by individual, it seemed. “Opportunity. It’s a word we hear quite a lot these days, isn’t it? And, do you know what?” One of the little kids down the front actually responded with a “what?” Mr. Johnson smiled and spoke directly to the little girl in question. Probably a good sign, I thought. “I’m not sure any of us actually know what it means. Oh, we *think* we do—and in terms of dictionary definitions, we more than likely do. But opportunity is more than just the sum of a bunch of words in the dictionary. Opportunity is the offering of possibility—a gift to be gratefully taken and cherished. And that’s what we all have today, with our new school, with Resolution School. A gift to be gratefully taken and cherished.”

Mr. Johnson seemed very pleased with this—very pleased with *himself*. He strode back and forth before us, arms folded behind his back, fingers twitching excitedly, and I thought for a moment that he’d forgotten we were there. He smiled, and then turned to look at us.

“We are fortunate,” he said. “We have to remember that. There will be difficult times ahead—for pupils and staff alike—but we must always bear in mind that this is a rare and privileged opportunity, a chance to show the doubters how it should *really* be.

“And with this in mind,” he said, taking a few sheets of foolscap from one of the other teachers, “it only remains for me to introduce you to your individual teachers and, as they say, get this show on the road.”

For the next quarter of an hour, Mr. Johnson very formally introduced the teachers to us, calling out the names of the pupils who would be in each teacher’s class before moving onto the next. It was fairly monotonous, until it was the turn of

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Mrs. Shires, and then Mr. Johnson's speech really started to take effect. This *was* exciting. Mrs. Shires stood at the front of the hall, small but looking like she meant business, and I suddenly understood just how important this really was. Mrs. Shires had told me when we had met at Sunnyvale that there had never before been a school like the Resolution. And she was right. I knew she was. You just had to look at the place to know she was.

When the time came for my name to be called out, Mrs. Alexander came over and collected me—wheeling me to Mrs. Shires and the other kids that had gathered around her. Mrs. Shires looked a little annoyed by something, but when she saw me, she smiled.

“Ready for that adventure?” she said.

Our classroom was a lot smaller than any of the classrooms at Sunnyvale had been—but it had a concourse nearby and its very own quiet room. I liked the quiet room right away. It was dark and, as its name suggested, quiet, done out in dark shades of blue with padded seating around the walls, and I thought that I might spend a lot of time in there, reading a book or something. The classroom proper, I suppose, could have been a bit of a disappointment, but its small size just served to make it seem safer, somehow.

Finding a place at one of the tables with Mrs. Alexander's help, I sat and waited to be told what to do—looking at my classmates and finding myself in the unenviable position of, once again, not knowing a soul.

They were a pretty mixed bunch, but I was fairly used to that. A few years at Sunnyvale had seen to that. A boy in a wheelchair across from me—his hair in his eyes and his head pulled into his neck as if he was expecting a fight, bear-like and

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oddly imposing—kept looking at me and glancing away every time I met his gaze. He looked like trouble (or maybe, I thought, that was just what he wanted me to think), so I instead turned my attention to the others, trying to figure who might be a potential friend and who might not. It was a bit of a puzzle.

“That’s Andrew,” the kid sitting next to me said when he spotted me staring at a twitchy looking boy with really thick glasses. “He’s got bad eyes. Then there’s Louisa next to him. Her eyes are bad, too.” He pointed to a Paki girl. “Ananda. She’s from India and she’s got asthma and eczema like me. My name’s Patrick, by the way.” I knew about asthma and eczema because some of my cousins had it. I didn’t know it could get as bad as Patrick’s, though. His skin was raw and scaly, and if it hadn’t been for him being so nice to me, I might have sat beside someone else next time.

“Mine’s Carl,” I said.

He shook my hand. “Good, isn’t it?” he said. “The school, I mean. Better than the last place I was at, anyway.”

“Same here,” I said. “The pool was smaller than I thought it would be, though.”

“Know what you mean.” Patrick studied me for a moment. “That Mr. Johnson don’t half know how to yap on, doesn’t he?”

I liked Patrick, in spite of his scaly skin and the fact that he smelt a bit. He reminded me of Tommy—though I got the feeling that Patrick was a much brighter button than Tommy had been. And when he said that about Mr. Johnson, I couldn’t help but grin.

“Didn’t understand half of what he was saying,” I admitted.

“Me neither.”

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“He seemed pleased with it, though,” I added.

“Too pleased, if you ask me,” Patrick said. “He thinks he’s god’s gift. The kind of bloke what kisses the mirror.”

It was a fascinating image and I chewed it over for a while as Mrs. Shires arrived with a girl in a wheelchair who she introduced as Kelly. Kelly was all it took to distract me from my conversation. Admittedly, my mind wasn’t as loyal and focused as it usually was, but I suspected that even if it had been, I would still have found it difficult to ignore her. Looking at her, I thought, *Now that’s disabled*. Her arms moved about with a life of their own, her legs following suit, and her face contorted as she struggled to turn her head to look at us—and I wondered how tiring it must be to move about like that all day. Did she ever rest? How did she sleep? I’d seen kids like her before, of course, but I’d never had one in my class. I tried to imagine how she had a wee, then stopped. It didn’t seem polite.

Interesting, though.

Once Mrs. Shires had found a place for Kelly, with a little help from Mrs. Alexander, she turned to look at us all for a moment. She could look a little stern, at times, could Mrs. Shires, I was learning. There was an intensity about her that could be easily misunderstood—but I thought I had a handle on her. Just because she sometimes looked pissed off, it didn’t actually mean she was (although I was soon to discover that she looked almost the same when she *was* pissed off, which meant it could all get a bit confusing sometimes.) Mrs. Shires’ face could be as hard and introspective as a concrete slab, but the minute she caught you looking at her the smile came and all was well.

Or that was how it was today.

“I expect you’re all feeling the way I am, this morning,” she said, finding her

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chair and sitting down with a sigh. “I feel as if I haven’t had a moment to think. My head’s all over the place.”

We all nodded—except for Kelly, who sort of wobbled her head about and made a squeaking noise like a hamster caught in lawnmower.

“I’ve had to meet and talk to so many new people that I thought my head was going to explode,” she laughed, looking at the bear-like kid in the wheelchair across from me. He slowly lifted his eyebrows and continued staring out the tabletop.

“Johnny, isn’t it?” she said, her voice a notch quieter. He grunted and looked at her.

“Yer-yer-yes, miss,” he finally said.

Yer-yer-yes? What was all that about?

“How are you finding your first day, Johnny?” she asked him.

Shrugging, he said, “All right, I ser-suppose. Bit b-boring.”

Now I may have been wrong, but I was beginning to think that this Johnny lad might have a stutter. All the clues were there, but I still wasn’t completely convinced; it seemed such a cruel quirk of fate to be in a wheelchair *and* have a stutter that it hardly seemed possible.

“Yes,” she said. “I know what you mean. Sitting around in the hall while everyone got sorted into their classes was a bit of a drag, wasn’t it?”

“I liked that,” Johnny said. “It was the bit before it that ger-got on my nerves. Swallowed a der-der-dictionary, I reckon.”

Mrs. Shires and Mrs. Alexander both coughed into their hands, but I don’t think they fooled anyone. Synchronised coughing among adults—teachers especially—only ever meant one thing, in my vast experience.

“Thought he was never going to sher-shut up,” Johnny continued, encouraged by the coughing. “Practly give me a headache.”

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Mrs. Shires apparently decided that ignoring this was the best policy—for today, at least (and always assuming Johnny would let her.) She made herself more comfortable on her swivel chair and said, “So where do we start?”

“Anywhere ber-but another speech.”

“Yes, thank you, Johnny. I think we’ve got the message.”

“Sorry, miss.” He wasn’t in the least bit sorry. I couldn’t help but like him.

“That’s all right.” She paused a moment to gather her thoughts. “No speeches,” she said, “for fear of upsetting our friend Johnny, but I would like to tell you a little more about Resolution School and what we—all of us—are aiming for, here. That okay with you, Johnny?”

“Be my guest.”

“Integration,” she said. “I know it’s a long word but can anyone tell us what it means?” No one’s hand went up. Today, it seemed, was not the day for risking a good guess. “No? Carl. What about you? You like reading. What do you *think* it means. It doesn’t matter if you’re wrong, just have a go.”

Everyone was looking at me—Johnny peering out from under his fringe and, I thought, smirking. I didn’t like being put on the spot like this, it carried too many intrinsic risks, but I couldn’t have Mrs. Shires thinking that I wasn’t willing to at least try to rise to her challenge. Even if it meant marking myself as the class clever kid, I had to say something.

“It’s got ‘in’ at the beginning,” I said. “So I think it might have something to do with bringing, you know, things *in* together or something.”

Mrs. Shires nodded thoughtfully and it seemed that I was on the right track. Other than this, however, there were no more clues as to just how well I was doing—and I was a little wary of continuing. Maybe it would be best if I just quit while I was

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ahead, I thought. That way I could appear to have done what was asked of me without seeming *too* clever or, perhaps marginally worse (depending on one's point of view), getting it wrong and falling flat on my face. Everyone was looking at me as if I was the fount of all human wisdom, though—even that Johnny lad—and the pressure was just too much.

“I've heard people use it a lot when they're talking about this school,” I told Mrs. Shires. “So I think it might be about the three schools. Bringing us all, you know, in together, like.”

Clapping her hands together quietly, Mrs. Shires said, “Well done. Nicely worked out, Carl.” She turned her attention back to the whole class. “Integration is, more or less, about bringing things together. Bringing *people* together. Making one thing a part of the other. And that's what Resolution School is about. The whole idea behind it is to give you the chance you deserve to learn in as normal an environment as possible with kids who don't all have disabilities—because I'm sure I don't need to tell you, you're really no different to the kids in Overfields or Almsby, now, are you?”

I wasn't sure. I hadn't met any of them.

“Or if you are,” she went on, seeming to spot a mistake, “you still have so much in common that it doesn't really matter.”

Mrs. Shires was nothing like Mr. Johnson. When she got to the end of her little speech, she didn't sit back, looking all pleased with herself. She looked at each and every one of us in turn, just to make sure we'd fully grasped what she'd been saying, before positioning herself to continue.

“Resolution School,” she said softly, leaning forward. “Does anyone know what ‘resolution’ means?” There was no way I was going to raise my hand or volunteer anything for this one—and if she thought I was, she had another bloody

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thing coming. She could try putting me on the spot again, if she wished, but I would simply sit there, mum, lips tight as a duck's bum.

Blessedly, she seemed to know better than to pick on me a second time. When no one spoke up, she merely smiled and settled back in her chair. "Okay," she said, "the word 'resolution' is a good one for our school. It means to have determination—to decide to do something and really go for it. Captain Cook, a local lad, as I'm sure you all already know and someone we'll be learning more about over the coming weeks, Captain Cook had a ship called the Resolution—originally a North Sea collier called *Marquis of Granby*. Cook said that it was the fittest for service he had ever seen. And that's what our school is going to be. The fittest for our service we have seen. We'll serve it well and it will serve us well. We'll be determined. Determined to succeed and determined to make the most of it we can. That's *our* resolution."

No doubt about it, this really was going to be an adventure. Everything was in place and all we had to do was cast off and pray that the wind was with us. The sea would be choppy, at times, but we'd ride it out and all would be well.

Johnny looked up at me and sniffed derisively. I doubted he'd have agreed with me.

Break time was the biggest shock. Nothing could prepare me for what was awaiting us outside when the bell rang and we were granted, albeit temporarily, a kind of freedom.

There were almost as many kids on the playground as there were poppies on the field. Kids of all sizes and ages—some in sort of smart-looking uniforms, others, younger, in ordinary clothes like us. Patrick wheeled me out—Johnny not far behind with a boy from our class called Peter Holmes who seemed to walk and talk in slow-

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motion (Patrick would later tell me that Peter had been hit by a car when he was little and damaged his brain.) It was overwhelming, and the four of us simply stopped and stared—not knowing quite what we should do next.

“There’s a lot of them,” Peter Holmes drawled. I wouldn’t have minded betting he could do a bloody brill John Wayne impersonation. “Can we go back in?”

“Why?” Patrick said.

“They might not be nice to us.”

“Course they will. And if they aren’t, Johnny can tell ’em where to go, right, mate?”

“Only if yer-you promise to go with them.”

Nice one. I was really beginning to like Johnny *a lot*, but it was hard to imagine ever being his *actual* friend. I didn’t think he wanted friends, because friends probably weren’t very cool, but I was still determined to give it a try.

Patrick, who must have known Johnny before coming here, I thought, laughed and said, “I know you don’t mean it.”

“I do so mer-mean it.”

“I think he does,” Peter droned, looking more uncomfortable than ever.

“I mean it ler-ler-like I’ve never meant owt before,” Johnny said, before glowering at me. “And I der-don’t know what you think you’re looking at, teacher’s per-per-pet.”

“I’m... I’m looking at you.” It was the best I could come up with at such short notice. I was determined not to let him intimidate me, but it wasn’t easy. He was such grumpy looking bugger.

“Well don’t.”

“Why?”

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“Because I said so.”

“And what if I do?”

“You’ll find out.”

“I’m scared.”

“You sher-sher-should be.”

“Sher-sher-should I?”

This was the first time I ever took the Mickey out of Johnny’s stammer, and as it turned out, it would also be the last.

Turning the colour of a Strawberry Mivi ice cream, he pointed to a distant, deserted spot of playground. “Meet me there, after lunch,” he said.

“Why?” I thought I knew.

“We’ll ser-settle this,” he said, so grandly that it had to be something he’d heard on telly. “We’ll settle this with our fer-fer-fer-fists.”

A fight, I thought. And on my first day, too.

The promise of fisticuffs with Johnny at lunchtime could have seriously overshadowed that morning’s break. It played on my mind somewhat, it must be said—my never having had a fight before and not really knowing how such things worked. Did we both pick seconds like they did in duels in films and stuff, or would it be more primitive than that? Such considerations could certainly have spoiled what was turning into an utterly fascinating morning, but they didn’t. I thought about it, looked at all the *girls* collecting around me, and cast it ably to the back of my mind.

They were from Overfields, mainly, but there was also a few younger girls from Almsby among them—their uniforms looking far more interesting than those of the Almsby boys who were wandering around the playground. The air buzzed with

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questions and I, ever the little gentleman and wearing my most charmingest smile, did my level best to answer them—breathing in deeply and then not, because whilst most of them smelt quite nice, one didn't. This particular rotten apple (which I managed to narrow down to one of two) whiffed like she'd let off half an hour ago and forgotten to leave it behind. She (whichever one she was) made me think of that kid in the Charlie Brown cartoons—the one with the smelly cloud that followed him about everywhere. Only in this case, the cloud was invisible.

“Do you know Mrs. Shires?” one pretty girl with a slight overbite and fashionably short hair said. Her name was Angela, she told me, getting rid of Patrick and pushing me around the playground herself.

“She's my teacher,” I answered—wondering if it was going to be like this every day. Looking round, I did a quick head count; by my estimation, and whilst it ebbed and flowed a bit, there were about six girls tagging along with us.

“She used to be my teacher, too!”

Later that day, when Mrs. Shires ribbed me about all the girls she'd seen me with at playtime, I would put on my gravest face and make her laugh by saying, “They only like me for my brains.”

“Don't knock it,” she would tell me. “A few brains go a long way, take it from me.”

Well, I thought, she would say that, wouldn't she?

~

I really didn't know Carl. Suddenly quite solemn and introspective, I got the feeling that we'd only so far scraped the surface and that no matter how long I knew him, there would always be things he wouldn't share. He was deeply private, that much I'd already discovered, and any attempt to delve into his present was largely greeted with

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a swift change of subject. Not that this was any real concern of mine. I didn't want to pry, but merely wished to understand just how much of the story he was telling me he might be holding back. Was this everything, or were there hidden layers of complexity that he would always suppress? When he told me about the curious girls that had hovered around him on the school playground, was there a deeper subtext that I was missing and which he would never expand upon? I could see the growing psychology behind the young Carl (for example, I found it difficult to imagine him ever being attracted to a girl who wasn't able-bodied), but I was sure my assessment was superficial and tainted by expectation.

"You were popular with the girls," I said, smiling and trying to bring him back out of himself.

Carl looked up at me. It almost seemed as if he'd forgotten I was there.

"At school. You were popular with the girls."

"For a while," he said. "Yes, I suppose I was. I was a slick little sod in my flares and with my hair down past my ears."

"You had *hair*?"

"As difficult as it is to believe, yes, I had hair. I had hair and flares and my most charmingest smile and all these people telling me that I could achieve anything I set my mind on achieving. So being popular with the girls was to be expected. That's the way the 'new frontier optimism' said it would be. We—some of us, at least—thought that anything was possible."

"And the optimism was misplaced?"

"Isn't it always?"