

Children of the Resolution

The First Carl Grantham Novel

Gary William Murning

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***In memory of Geoff S.
Without whom there would
never have been a
Johnny Jameson.***

Prologue

During those daily visits to Carl Grantham, I learnt more about humanity than I ever thought possible—not in any way so well formed that I might readily articulate it. No. My time with him was subtler than that. Nonetheless, between his lines and sometimes on them, I found an understanding of what it was to be apart, to be within and absorbed... to be included and yet, as we all are, I suppose, ineffably alone.

I had been told by my friend Andrea that he might not be up to talking to me. He was still fairly weak and if he was feeling as down as he on occasion had been, the interview might well be over before it had even started. It had been a bad and unexpected bout of pneumonia, and this on top of his existing condition had apparently highlighted a vulnerability he'd thought he'd succeeded in side-stepping. I was therefore anxious about the welcome I might receive, hoping for the best but, as my mother had always taught me, expecting the worst.

It was a bright day in late April when I walked tentatively onto Ward Seventeen of the James Cook University Hospital, the watery but welcome sunlight filtering through the filthy fourth floor windows and lending a dubious cheer to the otherwise dreary surroundings. Andrea had told me that Carl Grantham could be found at the far end of the ward's main corridor, in a six-bedder with "a beautiful view of nothing worth mentioning", and so I strode purposefully past the nurses' station, crowded with gossiping nurses, wondering if I would be able to recognise him from the description Andrea had given me.

Thin and long, hair cropped short and greying. Handsome as a dying poet.

Carl Grantham sat in his bed, dressed in pyjamas and dressing gown (which didn't seem to come naturally to him, judging by the way he constantly fidgeted and rearranged them), staring out of the window at the sky, a forgotten book in his lap. I knew him immediately. It could have been no one else. Not usually so precise, Andrea had been bang on the

button. He was the only one in that room of coughing and farting men, most of them much older than Carl's forty-one years, that fit that description—fit it perfectly, if I'm honest.

I stood unnoticed in the doorway for a moment, composing myself. I was still worried about how this would go (knowing that the strength and validity of my dissertation depended on it) but not as worried as I had been. He didn't look the type to turn round and tell me to bugger off. Granted, he might ask me to leave, but he would do so politely, I was sure.

He turned and looked over at me as I approached, and I felt my shoulders drop—a soft sigh escaping as he smiled rather sadly at me, any worries I might have had quickly dissipating.

Holding out his hand as best he could, he said, with Stanley-like formality, "Marisa Donne, I presume. Andrea told me I should expect you. Please, sit down."

"'Educational reform'," he said, holding the words in his mouth like a boiled sweet. He spoke softly, his voice raspy and at times rather weak. "That covers a multitude of sins." That smile, again. Tired and somehow lost. "You have a particular area of interest?"

I nodded, glad of the opportunity to explain further. "I'm concerned more with the lessons that can be learned from looking back at past examples of educational reform, specifically reform as it applies to the integration of children with physical disabilities into mainstream schools."

Carl nodded. "Andrea mentioned that. And you think my childhood experiences might help you get a better picture of what worked and what didn't?"

It was difficult to be sure, but I thought he might be testing me. "I don't know," I said, truthfully. "I'd like to think it would—but for all I know, you might have sailed through school without taking anything relating to my area of interest away with you. I doubt that, of course, but it's possible."

He seemed to like my answer. He closed the book in his lap—*H.L. Mencken on Religion*—and looked out of the window, again. "I'm not sure how much help it'll be to you, but I'll be happy to share everything I know." He pointed at the thin notebook I'd brought with me. "That might not be enough."

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 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 in 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 that 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. It's a wonderful place. The name says it all. Sunnysvale 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 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.” 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 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 sick-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 this 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 more light than would have seemed possible on such a gloomy day.

Mrs. Attenborough and her knees seemed to be enjoying themselves 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 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, 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.
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 how to answer 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 really was 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 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, spotting my confused frown. "It's warm. I like being warm, don't you?"

~

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 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 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.”

~

Tommy wanted a duffel coat (“because they are warm”) and some marbles for 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 just about 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* be 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, 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.”

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 overhung 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 I 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."

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 really wasn't 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, 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 be having a much better time than she was. 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 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 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 genesis.”

“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... like... like *housse*, 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.

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. 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 is today 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 believed 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 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 are, 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."

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 only 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 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, clapping 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 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 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.”

Bigger, I thought (I'd learned that of our bus driver), the bloody bugging Martians have landed.

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 anymore 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.

"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 business, 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 that 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.

"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 better 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 about 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 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.

“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.

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 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?”

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 boys.”

~

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, 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 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 looked 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.

"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."

Bigger.

"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. Making up stuff like that. 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.

"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, Tommy sniffed indignantly.

"What?"

"Don't alter owt," he told me. "Whatever she makes us say, I still saw her."