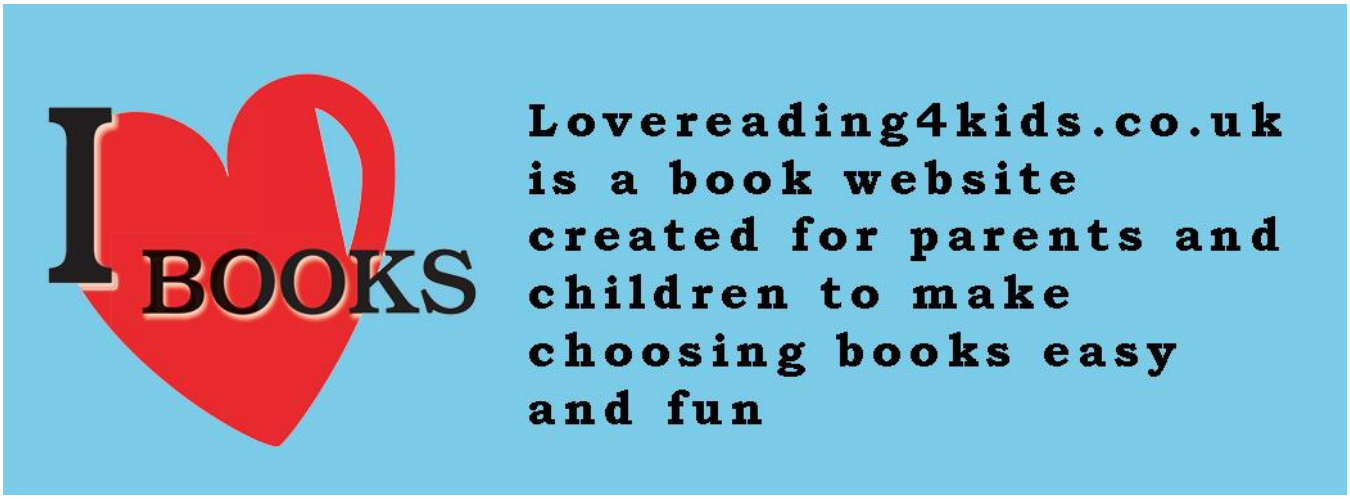


Opening extract from

Kid Normal

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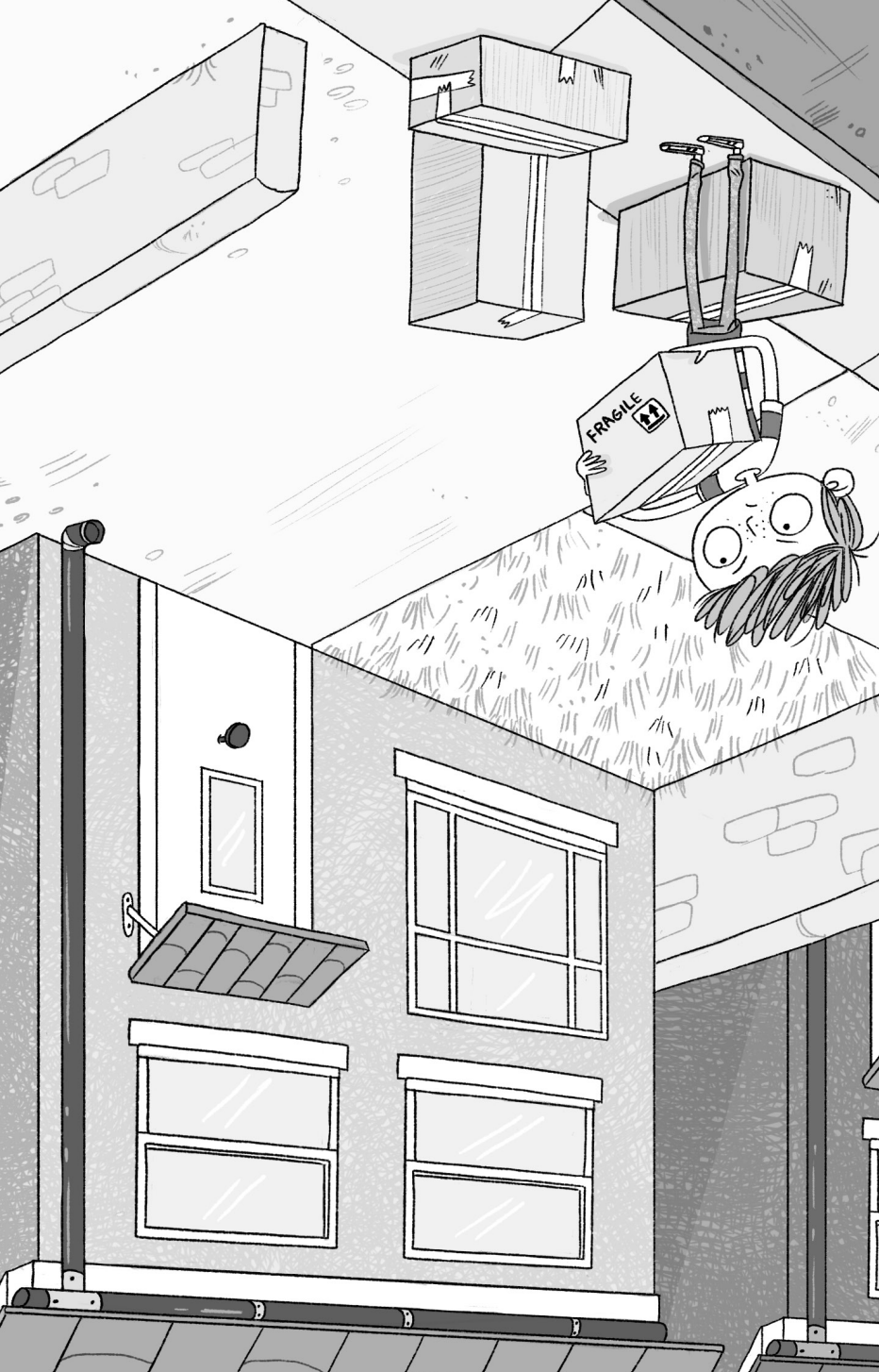
– Chris

To Kid Normals everywhere.

Always say yes to an adventure

– Greg




FRAGILE

1

The New House

Murph hated the new house more than he could remember hating anything, ever. A light wind, such as you often find at the beginning of a story, tousled his shaggy brown hair as he stood looking up at it. He was trying to work out, with all the power of his just-eleven-year-old brain, why it made him feel so incredibly rotten.

The problem with the new house was … it was just so *new.* When Murph was smaller he'd lived in a much older house, with interesting wooden stairs that led to an interestingly dingy attic full of interesting boxes, and there was a garden with interesting trees to climb and interesting dens to build. It had been the sort of house adventures happen in – although, to be fair, they never actually had. But the *potential* was there.

Now there was no chance those adventures would

ever happen. Four years ago, Murph, his mum and his brother had left that house behind when his mum's job had forced them all to move to a new town. That had been bad enough. But, just a year later, they'd had to move again. And then again. Then again. So here he was, a third of his lifetime away from the rambling old rooms he'd loved so much, staring at yet another new house and wishing someone would blow it up or set fire to it. Which, in fact, they would. But he didn't know that just yet.

Even if Murph had known that the new house would be a smoking ruin within a few short months, it wouldn't have cheered him up very much. Underneath a brownish drizzly evening sky that matched his mood perfectly, he heaved cardboard boxes into the box-like house and dumped them in the echoing hall, which was painted a pale shade of green almost exactly matching the colour of cat sick.

Murph's new bedroom was painted a different but equally horrible green colour, like an avocado that had gone out of fashion. It was a prime candidate for the Most Depressing Room in the Rubbish New House Award, and it was up against some stiff competition. It had nothing

in it except a mattress on the floor and a set of white drawers. Had it been daytime, the curtain-less window would have offered a view of the oily canal at the back of the house, and a brick wall on the other side. Murph was glad it was dark.

With a sigh, he unzipped his bag and started to unpack, bunging jeans and T-shirts into the drawers more or less at random. Eventually he came to the last four items in the bag, but instead of putting them away, Murph laid them out on the bare mattress and sat down cross-legged on the floor to look at them.

They were four grey shirts – the shirts he'd worn on his last day at his last four schools. The first was covered with signatures in felt tip: it had been a tradition there that if someone was leaving, everyone got to write a farewell message.

We'll miss you, buddy, from Max
Stay in touch, superstar! Sam
Don't leave us, Mighty Murph! Lucas

There were other signatures and messages too, covering most of the grey material with cheerful, multi-coloured letters.

Don't leave us!

But he'd had to leave – all because of his mum's job. And he'd meant to stay in touch – but he'd been busy that following year, making new friends to replace the ones he'd had to abandon.

He picked up the second shirt and read the names of those new friends. Not so many names on this second shirt, but still some kind words.

Can't believe you're moving after just a year! Love, Pia

Murph! We'll miss you. Come back soon, mate. Tom

Shirt number three had only a couple of names written in biro as a last-minute thought; he'd wanted some kind of memory to cling on to.

The fourth shirt was clean and unmarked.

Murph folded the shirts back up and piled them into the bottom drawer of the white cabinet.

He'd made no friends in the last year. He'd been convinced, and rightly so, that one day soon his mum would break it to him over dinner that they were going to have to move again. Other people had become like TV

programmes to Murph. There was no point getting too involved, because you never knew when someone was going to come along and change the channel.

As you'll know if you've ever moved house, the First Night Takeaway is a very important ritual. And like every family that's ever moved into a new home, Murph, his brother, Andy, and his mum sat down to eat takeaway that night with a weird feeling that they were in someone else's home, and someone really needed to turn up the heating.

They ate out of the silver foil containers because his mum couldn't find the box with the plates in. Murph knew exactly which one it was, but he was too busy stopping his older brother stealing his prawn crackers.

'Those are mine, you big lump!' he shouted as Andy reached across like a greedy octopus and pulled out a greasy fistful.

'You don't need a whole bag to yourself, Smurph Face!' the big sixteen-year-old lump replied.

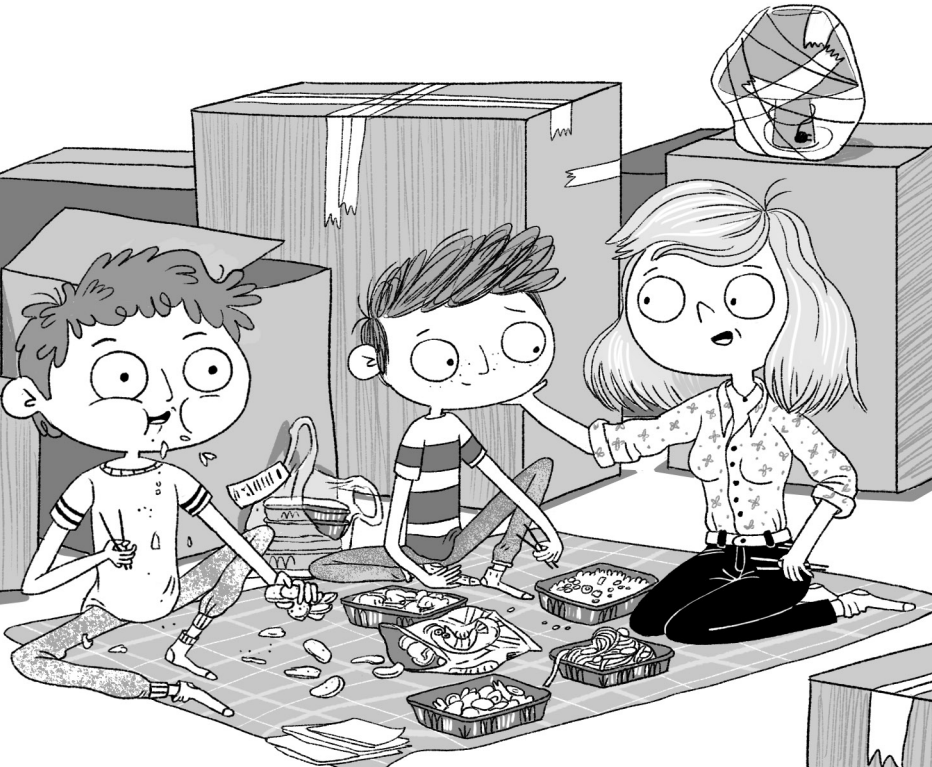
'Yes, I do,' spluttered Murph, cracker debris fountaining out of his mouth like the end of one of those big

impressive fireworks, only prawn-scented. 'And don't call me Smurph Face. You know I don't like it.'

'Sorry, Smurph Face,' said Andy proudly, with the air of someone who'd just said something incredibly clever.

'Come on, you two,' sighed their mum. 'Andy, don't call your brother Smurph Face. And, Smurph Face, share your prawn crackers.'

'MUM!' shouted Smurph Fa– sorry – *Murph*. The others chuckled, and he reluctantly joined in: 'You're ganging up on me. As if it wasn't bad enough getting



dragged to nowheresville to live in a shoebox. I am not a shoe!'

His mum put a comforting hand on his cheek. 'I know you're not a shoe. And I know you didn't want to move again.' Murph watched as she tilted her head back, apparently to fend off a couple of mum-style tears. She didn't want to come and live here either, he thought to himself.

'I know it's going to take a while to settle in,' Murph's mum told them both, 'but just you wait, boys. You'll have a great time in the end, I promise. We're going to make the best of things here. It's going to be …' She paused, searching for the right word, and though Murph didn't realise it at the time, she found the perfect one. 'It's going to be … *super*.'

2

A Misunderstanding

There were a lot of things Murph and his family didn't know about the new town. But the most important thing they didn't know was where Murph was going to go to school. His mum had tried to sort it out before they arrived, but everywhere seemed to be full, and as the hot days of August drew on, she became more and more obsessed with finding him a place.

She spent all evening on her laptop, chatting to other parents and trying to get tips. She even started accosting random mums and dads in the town and asking them where their children went to school, and whether any of their friends were thinking of emigrating. Murph was mortified. Andy, who was five years older, had a place at a local college and thought it was hilarious. 'Maybe you can teach yourself at home,' he teased him.

'We'll get you a few books and you can set a timer telling you when you can take a break.'

Murph didn't think that was funny at the time – and he thought it was even less funny when August rolled round into September and Andy went off to college. 'Still no school for you, little bro, sorry,' he said, ruffling Murph's hair as he headed out the door.

It was just about the worst week so far. Murph tagged after his mum as she went for meetings at every secondary school in town. Curious faces watched him as he tailed her past packed classrooms and into the offices of different head teachers. He sat quietly and, as instructed, tried to look unusually clever. But every time the answer was the same: they would just have to wait.

Then, a few days into this head-meltingly depressing process, Murph and his mum were on their way home from the shops. The streets were fairly empty; most people were inside having their tea. A woman and a boy only a little older than Murph turned out of a dingy-looking side street not far ahead, and they overheard her saying, 'So, how was school?'

Murph's mum, whose ears had developed a bat-like ability to home in on any word connected to education, sped up, gripping Murph's hand tightly.

'Muuuuum, let go!' he pleaded. But looking up at her face he realised there was no point arguing – this was Mum on a mission.

By the time they'd crossed the road, the other boy and his mother had already climbed into a car. For a moment Murph was worried his mum was going to spread-eagle herself on the bonnet to try and stop them leaving. But instead, she turned into the side road they'd come out of, still dragging Murph along behind her like a low-quality kite.

If the street had looked dingy from a distance, close up it was positively murky. A few cars were parked on the scrubby grass verge, and the gardens in front of many of the grubby terraced houses were so scruffy, it looked like the wheelie bins were actually there to smarten them up a bit.

But about halfway down the street was a large school. They knew it was a school because, apart from the railings and familiar-looking classroom buildings on

the other side of the front yard, there was a metal sign over the gates that simply read:



A man was in front of it with his back to them, locking the gates.

Murph actually heard a loud clicking sound as his mum gritted her teeth with determination and began to cross the road.

'Smarten yourself up,' she hissed at him so fiercely that he actually did try and iron the front of his T-shirt with his hands. Then she changed her tone completely and fluted 'Excuse me!' in a voice that would have put even an unusually posh duchess to shame.

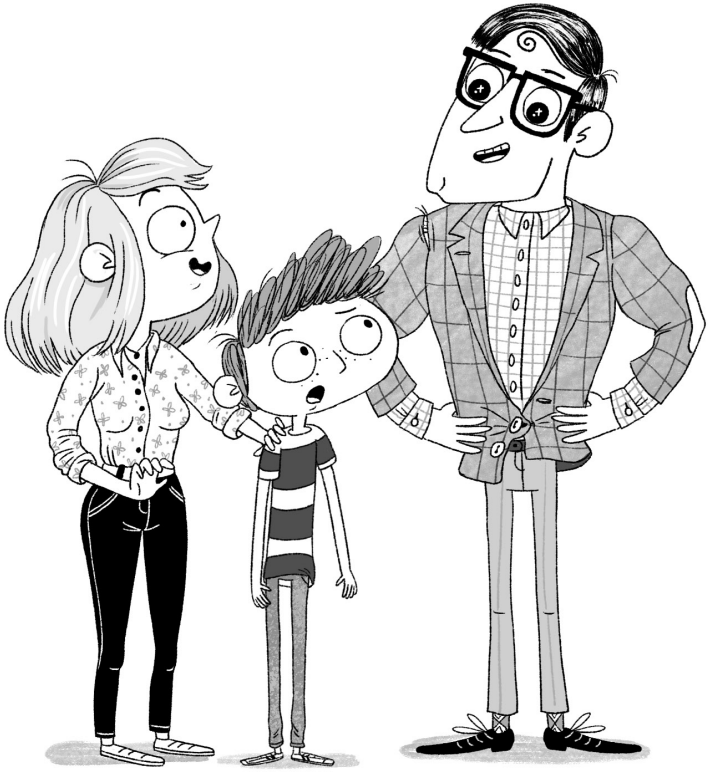
The man slowly turned around.

Murph's mum had started to say 'Excuse me' again, but it turned into a kind of throat-clearing noise on the way out.

He didn't look like a normal sort of teacher. He had very dark, shiny slicked-down hair with one large curl plastered in the middle of his forehead. He was wearing

a shabby-looking tweed jacket, but above the elbow patches his arms bulged with muscle. Behind thick-rimmed black glasses his eyes were bright blue. His jaw was so chiselled it looked like it had been carved out of wood.

'Can I help you with something, ma'am?' asked the strange sort of teacher.



Murph's mum finally recovered her voice and asked, 'This is a school, isn't it?'

The man looked very much as if he'd like to say no, but then glanced up at the sign over his head.

'Yeeeees,' he replied very slowly and not very encouragingly.

'Oh, wonderful! You see, we've just moved here and I'm having terrible difficulty finding a school for my son,' she began, draping an arm around Murph, 'and –'

The man cut her off.

'I'm terribly sorry, ma'am; we're not going to be able to help you here. We're … we're not accepting applications from the …' – he seemed to be searching for the right word – 'from the … the … we're not accepting *any* children at the moment. I'm so sorry.'

There followed a moment of silence, and Murph was sure his mum was about to give up. But suddenly she grabbed the teacher by his upper arm. She needed both hands to do it.

'Please,' she breathed, '*please* see what you can do. Murph's such a capable boy – he needs somewhere like your wonderful school to take him in.'

'I'm sorry,' said the man again, gently extracting his huge bicep from her grasp. 'Good evening to you.' And he began to walk away.

'He's a boy with so much potential!' shouted Murph's mum after him. 'With your help he could really … you could really help him *fly*!'

The man stopped dead, and turned around.

'Fly?' he asked in a low voice.

'Yes, *fly*. I really think that at the right school he … he could,' she finished rather lamely.

'So, you've just moved to the area. And your son is … *capable*, you say?' continued the man in a low voice.

Murph's mum nodded enthusiastically.

'And is Murph, ah, *flying* already?' he asked, dropping his voice still further and glancing up and down the road.

'Oh yes, he's been doing ever so well,' she replied, also lowering her voice to match his. 'He really wouldn't let you down.'

'He's actually flying?' the man whispered.

The questioning was getting a little weird now, as well as difficult to hear. Murph was busily occupying himself with how he could get the ground to open up and

swallow him. He'd seen some of his test results and it was a bit of a stretch to describe his performance so far as flying.

But his mum seemed to scent victory. 'He is, he really is.'

'Mr Drench, would you come over here for a moment?' called the man softly, and another, smaller figure Murph hadn't noticed before came scurrying across the road. He was shorter and thinner than the other teacher, and had keen, darting eyes behind round glasses.

'Flying already, is he?' he asked in a nasal voice as he walked up to them, although Murph wondered how on earth he could have possibly heard them talking.

'This is my sideki– er, that is to say – my assistant, Mr Drench,' explained the first man. 'He'll take your details.' He turned to Murph and held out a hand. When Murph took it, it felt like his own hand was being slowly crushed by tractor wheels. 'Murph, we'll see you on Monday. I look forward to seeing how you get on with that flying.' He swished round as if he was wearing a cape, but then swished back again: 'And obviously don't, er, *tell* anyone about The School, will you?'

'What, we can't tell anyone? Because it's a secret school?' Murph's mum laughed at her own joke.

The two men looked confused for a moment, and then, nervously, the hugely muscled man began to laugh as well. 'Haha, yes, of course I don't need to tell you. Silly of me.'

The smaller man looked between them in confusion as they continued chuckling. Murph just smiled nervously and wished he was invisible.

Murph's mum and the unusual teacher laughed for slightly longer than necessary. Then an awkward silence fell.

'So, is it secret, then?' she asked with a nervous grin.

'Oh yes,' replied the man, swirling round once again. 'Until Monday, then,' he called over his shoulder as he marched away.

Murph and his mum caught each other's eye in total bemusement. Then she shrugged and turned to Mr Drench, who had pulled a selection of forms from one of his pockets.