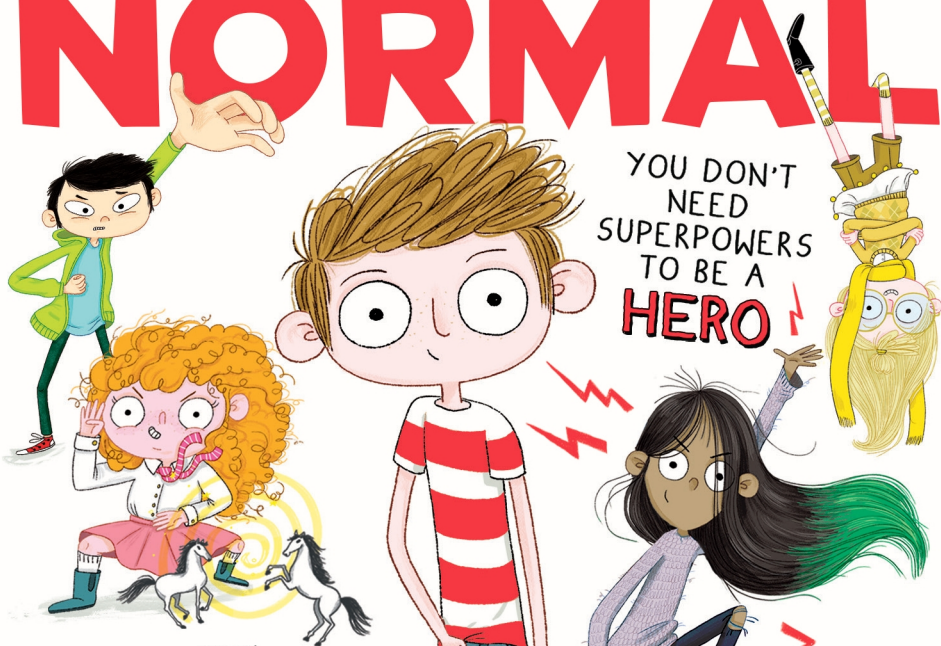


KID

NORMAL



ILLUSTRATED BY
ERICA SALCEDO

GREG JAMES

CHRIS SMITH

BLOOMSBURY



GREG JAMES is a familiar voice and face on radio and TV. He's the host of BBC Radio 1's award-winning Drivetime show and presents the UK's Official Chart every Friday. On screen, Greg has hosted a variety of shows, most recently seen fronting BBC Children in Need. He is also the face of BT Sport's cricket coverage and in 2016 raised over a million pounds for Sport Relief by completing five triathlons in five cities in five days. Greg has no superpowers. In his spare time he enjoys the idea of having hobbies. But in reality, he's made all of them into work.

CHRIS SMITH is an award-winning journalist and broadcaster who delivers the news to millions of people every day as the presenter of Newsbeat on BBC Radio 1. Chris enjoyed a previous, glittering, literary career as the winner of the H.E. Bates Short Story Competition 1981 (under tens category) with his tale 'Where Are the Brandy Snaps?'. Chris has no superpowers either, although he enjoys pretending his cat Mabel can fly by picking her up and running around.

KID NORMAL



**GREG & CHRIS
JAMES SMITH**

ILLUSTRATED BY
ERICA SALCEDO



BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

To LJ

– Chris

To Kid Normals everywhere.

Always say yes to an adventure

– Greg





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.

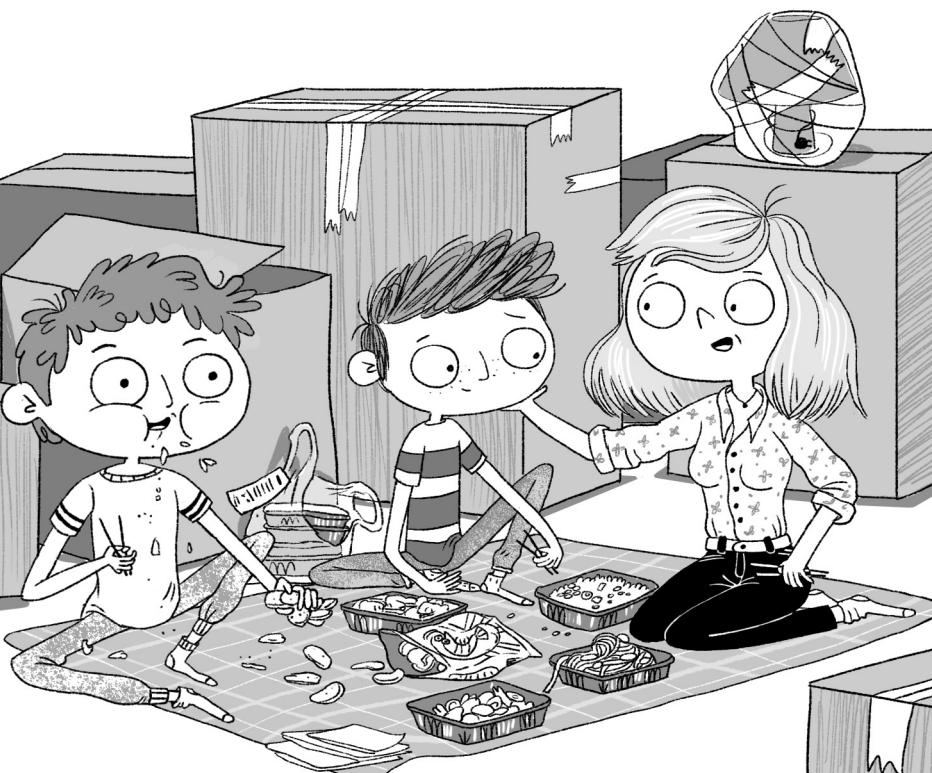
'Yes, I do,' spluttered Murph, cracker debris fountain-ing out of his mouth like the end of one of those big

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.

'Muuuuuum, 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:

THE SCHOOL

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.

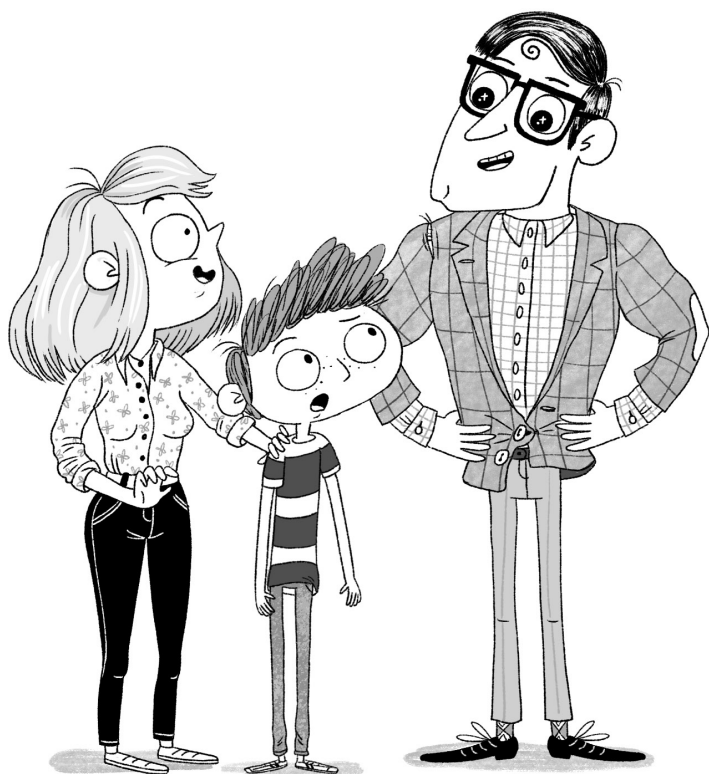
The man slowly turned around.

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.

'Yeeeeees,' 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.

3

Mumbarrassment

Murph had a tingling feeling in his stomach. It had started mid-morning on Saturday and had grown steadily throughout Saturday night. When he woke up on Sunday morning it felt like there was a fairly large collection of baby eels migrating through his insides. And by Sunday evening he couldn't sit still without feeling sick with worry, so he paced up and down in the new house's tiny garden.

His brother had been no help at all. When they had relayed the weird 'secret school' conversation to him, he'd found it hilarious.

'Ooh, do you have to get on a magical steam train at a hidden platform?' he'd hooted as he ran up the stairs after Murph, who was trying to escape to his room. 'Will you have to go to a special shop to choose a wand?'

'Shut up,' hissed Murph between gritted teeth,

closing the door on Andy's foot and trying to keep it shut with his shoulder.

A muffled cry of 'Hope you're not hiding an owl in there!' could be heard as Murph finally managed to lock his door and collapsed on to his bed.

Andy had enjoyed the joke right through the weekend. But now it was Monday morning, and Murph's mum had woken him up so early that he felt as if he should be shaking a few larks awake on his way down to breakfast. Andy was old enough to get the bus to college on his own, so he was still lolling in bed, listening to the radio.

Murph's sleepy stomach was in no mood for toast, and his sleepy hair was in no mood to be brushed, but nevertheless, by the time most of us are just about thinking of doing a really good morning wee, Murph was already being hustled towards the car.

You see, Murph was one of those kids who have to get dropped off ridiculously early. His mum's shift at the hospital started at nine o'clock, a long drive away across town. It had always been the same. For years now his weekdays had started with hanging around school

alone like a knowledge-hungry spectre.

Actually, Murph had come to quite enjoy seeing the inner workings of it all, before the kids came and broke the silence. He liked watching the milk get delivered; he enjoyed chatting to the cleaners; he liked seeing his teachers arrive in various states of readiness for school. It was like being backstage at a theatre before the curtain went up, the only difference being that once the play finally got going, there was no one to sell ice creams during the interval – or 'break', as they insisted on calling it.

Murph would have loved an ice cream at 11 a.m.

But we're getting distracted.

'Go on, then,' Murph's mum encouraged him as she pulled up outside The School. She leaned over and opened his door. 'Be brave!'

Murph gave her a resigned look, swung his bag over his shoulder and jumped out of the car.

As his mum drove off round the corner she beeped the car horn. This is classic mum embarrassment, or to use the technical term, *mumbarrassment*.

Other acts of mumbarrassment include:

- Kissing you goodbye in front of your friends
- Calling you by your baby nickname in front of your friends (Murph's was 'Honeyhugs'. When his mum had used it in public two schools ago, he'd actually been glad he was about to move house again)
- Telling you 'to 'stop showing off' in front of your friends
- Asking if you have a girlfriend/boyfriend in front of your friends
- Asking if you have a girlfriend/boyfriend in front of the girl/boy you want to be your girlfriend/boyfriend
- Singing loudly in public
- Cleaning your face by licking a finger
- Asking if you have a handkerchief, as if you were a **Victorian waif**

After what seemed to be the world's longest beep, Murph threw his mum a half smile, half 'please stop beeping' face, waved meekly and hefted his bag on to his shoulder to begin what was to become the single

most bizarre day of his life so far.

The school gates were open, but there didn't seem to be anybody around. Murph wandered across the yard and through the open front doors, calling out 'Hello?' in a tiny first-day-at-school voice. But there was no reply.

Just inside, Murph found a scratched wooden desk with an ancient-looking computer on top. He decided to settle down on the uncomfortable plastic chair behind the desk to wait for whatever happened next.

At Murph's last school there had always been plenty of activity as the first bell loomed closer. Parents chatting, kids rushing around, cars double-parking or getting chased off the zigzags by the unusually fierce lollipop man. But here everything seemed to be much quieter. He watched kids walking calmly across to the gates, and spotted a dad dropping his daughter off in a very sleek black car. Two much older boys sauntered past him, and he thought they must have smuggled a firework in, because there was a loud bang just as they rounded the corner.

'Nice Cape, Howard!' he heard one of them say, and they both laughed.

Neither of them was wearing a cape, but that still didn't make it funny as far as Murph was concerned.

The only thing that seemed different for a while was that everyone seemed to be heading into school rather quickly and quietly. It was all very organised, even without a lollipop operative, or 'lollipoperative', to keep things in order.

But as the start of the school day drew nearer, things did begin to cross the line into weird. In fact, they leaped way over the line and came closer to 'What the cheese and pickle salad is going on here?'

While he waited for someone to come and tell him what to do, Murph gazed out of the window. It was a grey, rainy day, but suddenly, a bright yellow figure underneath an umbrella appeared out of the low-hanging clouds and drifted rapidly down and out of sight behind one of the school buildings.

Murph couldn't believe his eyes. Was he tired? Was he hallucinating? Was he going mad?

Maybe it was a giant canary, he thought.

He quickly rationalised this idea away, remembering that giant canaries aren't a thing (but wishing briefly that

they were), and then tried to work out what had just happened. He had to find out what this lemon-coloured thing was.

He got up from his desk and dashed out, following the trajectory of the giant canary – or the thing that couldn't possibly be a giant canary, not least because of the umbrella. He turned to the left, traced the direction of the figure in the sky and raced towards the playing fields.

Next to a side door marked **Cloakroom**, he saw a yellow figure flicking water off its arms and doing that openy-shutty thing that has no name, which you use to make umbrellas dry.

In fact, let's give that thing a name right now. From a shortlist of three – **flofting**, **blatting** and **flumphing** – we have selected the word *flumphing* and we hope you like it.

The figure was *flumphing* an umbrella vigorously.

Murph approached at speed as the figure slipped into the cloakroom. Just as the door was closing, he twisted his body to try and slip inside unnoticed. But instead



he skidded on the wet floor, careered inside like an ice-skating rhino and collided with a wall of damp yellow.

As he scrambled to his feet, he was relieved – mostly – to find that the figure he'd seen flumpling the yellow umbrella wasn't a giant canary but a very normal-looking, bespectacled girl.

'Sorry! Hello! Urm, did you, fly ... sorry, canary ... boots ... massive bird, it's raining ...'

Murph was panicking. He wasn't great with girls at

the best of times, especially when they had, quite literally, just floated into his life.

'Hello, clumsy,' replied the girl, calmly taking off her glasses and doing that grown-up polishing thing on the end of her obviously yellow woollen scarf. 'I'm Mary. Who are you?'

Murph was so shocked that an apparently occasionally airborne girl was making conversation with him that he momentarily forgot his own name.

'Mar- ... Murph.'

'Well, Mar-Murph, lovely to meet you. Are you a first year too?'

This was the moment for a really world-class comeback.

'Yes,' Mar-Murph replied sheepishly.

'OK, well, help me off with this coat and I'll show you to our classroom,' commanded Mary.

Again, this seemed to Murph like a great cue for a devastatingly funny line. A real zinger.

'OK,' he said, helping umbrella canary girl gather up her belongings while approximately twenty-seven immediate questions buzzed unhelpfully round his head.

Murph picked out one of those questions as they zipped through the corridors. He thought he'd go for the big one first: 'Erm, Mary ... did you just come to school, you know ... through the, er, through the actual air?'

'Yep,' replied Mary, like it was the most normal thing in the world, 'but let's keep that between us two, shall we? I don't think I'm really supposed to. But it's quicker than walking, and I was late.'

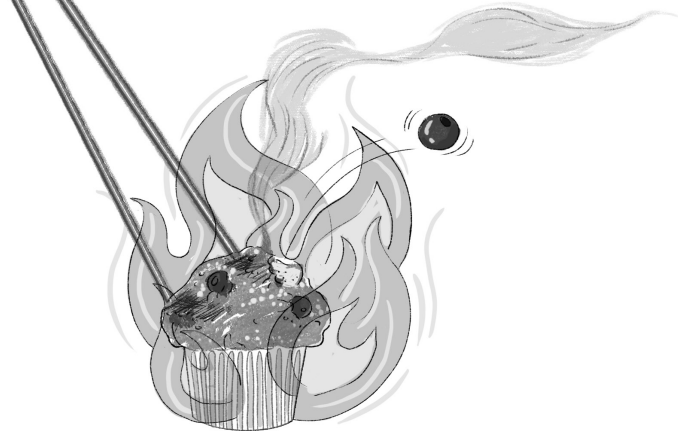
'OK, cool, just checking,' replied Murph breezily, trying desperately not to freak out. 'Also ...' Murph had another question. 'Are you called Mary because of Mary Poppins?'

'Who?' replied Mary, looking confused.

'Oh, nothing. Just thought, y'know, because of the umbrella sky thing ...' burred Murph.

'What *are* you burbling on about?' said Mary, raising her eyebrows at him so they rose over the rims of her glasses like two hairy blonde suns. 'Right, here we are. Follow me. This is Mr Flash's classroom.'

'Mr ... *Flash*?' Murph just had time to say before she bundled him through the door.



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