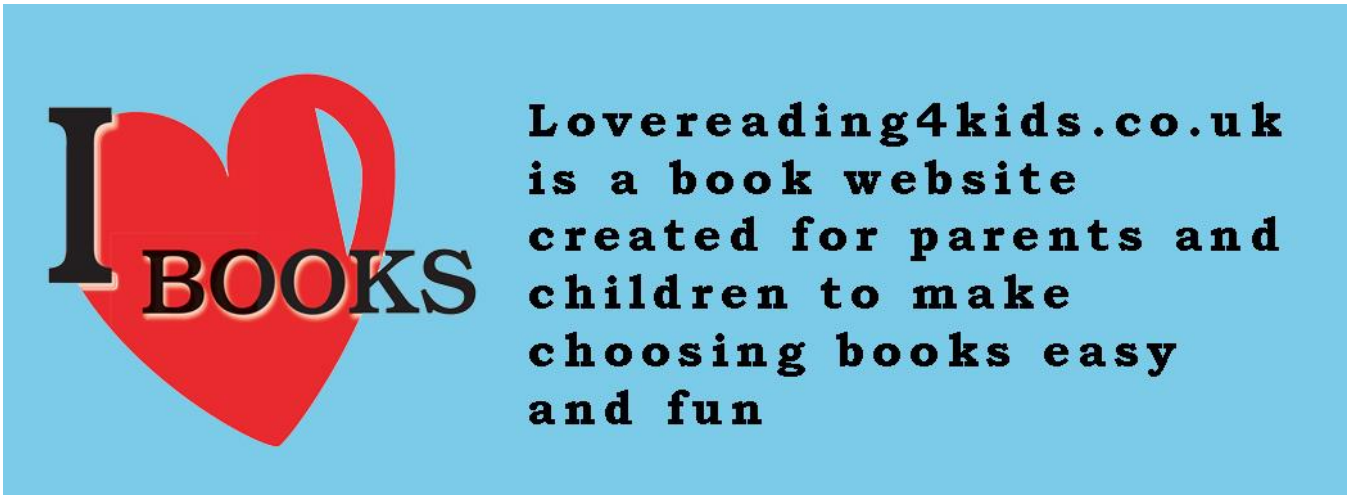


Opening extract from

The Bombs That Brought Us Together

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1
Under the Covers

It was hard to remain silent. I tried. I really did, but my breathing kept getting louder as I gasped for clean air. My body was trembling, adding noise to the silence. Mum pulled me closer to her, holding tight. Dad cuddled us both. Three spoons under one duvet. With the summer heat and us huddled together the smell wasn't amusing. I shifted about.

'Shhh,' Dad whispered. 'Try not to make a sound.'

Mum kissed the back of my neck. Her wheezing chest blew out little puffs of air on to my head. 'It's OK, Charlie, everything's going to be all right,' she said.

'Promise?' I said.

'Promise,' Mum said.

'Shhh,' Dad said again, firmer, like an annoyed school-teacher.

'Mum, I'm really scared.'

'I know you are, sweetheart, I know you are.' Mum squeezed my bones.

'We're all scared, Charlie,' Dad said. 'But we need to hold it together. It'll be over soon.'

Dad was scared, which increased my own terror levels. Dads aren't meant to get scared. Dads protect. Dads make things better. But I guess there are some things in life even dads can't affect. Bombs, for one.

The first pangs of nerves had begun as soon as the newsreader on the television stared out at us: *We expect this criminal act to be catastrophic for some of our residents.* The poor guy had looked stricken.

In Little Town, where I live, people know that something dreadful might happen to them one day; they realise that our Regime has infuriated some other Government, and that Government – specifically, the one over the border in Old Country – don't like how certain things are done here: the way of life, the beliefs, the strangleholding … They think it's all wrong, undemocratic. Inhumane. Pot and kettle springs to mind! Let's call a spade a spade: Old Country's Government thinks Little Town is just plain bad. Funny thing is we've heard that things over there aren't much better (they don't exactly welcome people speaking out either), but no one really knows for sure, because no one ventures across the border. Ever! In school everyone is told

that many moons ago Little Town belonged to Old Country and that it was inevitable that they'd come knocking – or bombing – to demand it back. But who knows for sure? What we do know, however, is that *our* Regime isn't liked, even by us.

I know Little Town isn't exactly a barrel of laughs, and we did expect some repercussions for various disagreements, but not this. Never this.

We were under that duvet for a whole twenty minutes before the first explosion. It was far away yet made my entire insides bounce. Mum's body tensed. I heard Dad's teeth grind together.

There was another crack; it seemed closer. A third quickly followed. It *was* closer. BOOM! The house rattled. I heard screams and cries from outside. Curfew breakers? People who hadn't seen the news? Who hadn't heeded the warnings?

These bombs sounded like a fireworks and thunder combination; human squeals echoed, cries became howls. Another bomb.

Then another.

And another.

'I don't want to die. I don't want to die.' I turned to face my parents. No duvet could save us. What was Dad thinking when he said, *Well, I suppose we best do something about these bloody bombs then?* Why didn't he have a bunker or a shelter? What good was a duvet?

'I'm not ready to die,' I cried.

'We're not going to die, Charlie.' Dad's voice sounded unconvincing, wavering a bit. I fought for air. Mum wheezed. Here we were, the Law family, waiting for the ceiling to cave in on us. Waiting for the great leap into the unknown. These bombs that had brought the Law family together were about to blast us apart.

I glanced at my watch. Six minutes of relentless bombing.

A declaration of war? No army as such existed in Little Town – just some Rascals running around in military boots – so what was the point?

It's funny the things you think about when you're frozen with fear. I kept hoping that our shed wouldn't be damaged. I had big plans for that shed. But the main thing, I suppose, was at least we weren't dead.

Well, not yet anyway.

2
Our Education

In school when we're being told all this stuff about Old Country my mind wanders a touch. Now, I'm not usually a mind-wanderer but sometimes, just sometimes, I think about schools over there in Old Country. I wonder if pupils there are being educated about Little Town.

No doubt.

THINGS WE ARE TAUGHT ABOUT OLD COUNTRY

- They have buckets of money.
- Their army has tanks, wagons, helicopters, flying bombers, a trillion guns and loads of soldiers.
- Boys AND girls have to do Old Country Service in the army.
- Old Country Government wear silly military gear.

- You can't exactly vote for who you want this Government to be.
- It's not easy to enter or exit Old Country.
- Everything is big over there. EVERYTHING.
- If people don't conform, well …
- They despise all things Little Town.
- They despise me.

THINGS I IMAGINE ARE BEING TAUGHT ABOUT LITTLE TOWN

- Little Town is filthy.
- They are totally and completely skint.
- People can't wander the streets willy-nilly.
- It's hard to find jobs in Little Town.
- Their society is full of murky, backhanded, dirty, double-dealing thugs.
- Little Town's Regime couldn't run a raffle in a three-man tent.
- A bunch of raggle-taggle Rascals run the place.
- If people speak out, well …
- Little Towners despise all things Old Country.
- There will not be a Little Town much longer.

Once I told my history teacher that I wouldn't mind spending a few days in an Old Country school – like, for a sociology spying mission – just to try and *understand*

the similarities and differences, sir.

'There are no similarities, Law,' he said, eyes bulging and steam seeping out of his nostrils. 'None at all!'

I guess not!

3
The Rules

It breaks my heart to see what's happened to this place. Before the bombs came Mum would say this at least once a week, no joking. Sometimes three times. When I came home from school without any homework to do, she'd say it. When I had to walk three miles to the only chemist in Little Town who sold her asthma inhaler, she'd say it. When I returned from the shops with an incomplete list of supplies, she'd say it. I got used to hearing this phrase.

Dad directed his annoyance towards the newspapers and television, scoffing and mocking all the stories of the day. This was *so far removed from the balanced, non-prejudiced news* that he wrote *back in the day* when he was *taking chances, being brave, standing up for honesty and transparency.* It was funny seeing Dad shout at rival newspapers.

'You know you can get an inhaler any day of the week in Old Country,' I informed Mum one time, as she had only three puff days remaining until I had to go and get her another. Dad flipped his lid, flashing his eyes above his paper and locking them on me.

'Does that school of yours not teach you anything, son?' I didn't want to rhyme off what we actually learnt in school so I let him go off on one of his flips. 'Old Country is out of bounds for us; you need papers to go over the border, a passport, a specific reason. We don't have any of those things, so why bloody mention it?'

'But I was just –'

'OK, Charlie?' Dad dropped his paper to his knees. 'Are we clear about that?'

'Crystal,' I said.

Dad could be very sensitive about the political situation. He wanted nothing more than for everyone to come and go as they pleased, to live in perfect harmony and all that. But at the same time he didn't want to attract trouble; he wanted to do his job without any hassles. That's why he kept his mouth shut.

Another time I mentioned to Mum that I'd heard about a place in Little Town where we could get quality supplies any day of the week. A bit like a warehouse where, if you knew the right people – or password, I don't know – you'd get in. I'd heard on the QT that if you paid a little bit more than

shop prices you could get your hands on just about anything. Even inhalers. If you knew any of the top brass who ran these places then even better. I actually thought Mum would've been happy with this news. Shows what I know!

'I can get all the details at school, from Norman, if you want,' I told her. Some people at school knew the score; they had their ears to the ground. Norman would definitely spill the beans if you got him talking.

When Mum gets angry her breathing becomes heavier, like she's trying to suck in huge volumes of air so her tirade can be more powerful.

'Now, you listen to me, Charlie Law, and listen good: if I ever catch you going to any of those places it'll be school, home, room, bed for you for the next year.'

'But I was just –'

'Are we clear about that?'

'Crystal.'

I was certain that Dad knew about these warehouses because I'd heard him mutter things behind his newspaper like, *An embarrassment to call themselves officials* AND *Who voted for this lot, eh?* AND *Bloody shower of gangsters if you ask me* AND *Who do they think they actually represent? Not me, that's who!*

It did seem a bit unfair that people living in Old Country could get whatever they wanted whenever they wanted and we couldn't. I bet teenagers over there didn't have to wait

ages until their parents saved enough money to buy them a new pair of swanky trainers or a denim jacket or books. I bet teenagers over there sneaked out to late nightclubs and maybe, just maybe, they did get to stay out after dark without feeling terrified. I'm betting, of course, but truth is I didn't know for sure.

Whenever I got them all worried, Mum and Dad sat me down to tell me (once again) the dos and don'ts of Little Town. As I got older more stuff was added to the list. After the whole thing about getting inhalers from Old Country and black-market warehouses in Little Town, we had one major parental powwow. Afterwards I formulated and constructed my own list and stuck it on the inside of one of my books.

CHARLIE LAW'S TEN LAWS OF LITTLE TOWN

1. Respect the dark curfew. No going out after dark in groups of three or more, unless you can prove that you are with family members. *(Easy to get around: walk somewhere separately)*
2. No ball games in public places. *(Parks … I know)*
3. No pets. *(One word: disease)*
4. No boozing in the streets. *(House boozing OK, though)*
5. No shouting in the streets. *(Not even in jest = public order crime)*
6. No giving cheek to the lawmakers. *(Unless you want a clout around the lughole)*

7. No dodging school unless you have one of the verified illnesses on the list or you've been asked to carry out lawmaker work. *(Only a sudden limb amputation would've prevented me from attending school, and even then it would depend which limb)*
8. No tomfoolery in public places. *(Which I took to mean, don't enjoy yourself … ever!)*
9. NO STEALING. *(A biggie!)*
10. Instruction to beat ALL instructions: never draw attention to yourself, and WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T GET CAUGHT.

4
A Perfect Union

The beginning of that summer, before the bombs came, was utterly dull. For teenagers, the summer holidays in Little Town equalled mind-melting boredom. They do in most places, I suppose.

– *Hey, what do you want to do tonight?*
– *Nothing.*
– *Brilliant, let's do nothing then.*
– *Excellent.*
– *Cool.*
– *Shall we contact the others?*
– *Don't care.*
– *Excellent.*
– *Cool.*

But as I was about to turn fifteen, my chops got rattled good and hard, BOOM! Everything and everyone changed. And not always for the better.

Pav and his family arrived a few weeks before the bombs came. How unlucky is that? All the way to Little Town for a new life, a new start, and this happens to them. Bad luck just seems to follow some people around. They moved into our block, on the same floor as us, directly across in fact. Dad quickly got in there and spoke to them, getting all their vital stats.

Main stat: they came from Old Country.

Old Country!

I know, right?

Pav was around the same age as me and due to attend my school after the summer holidays. By all accounts (well, Dad's) his father was some sort of mega mind back in Old Country, but in Little Town he would be cleaning floors and walls in our run-down hospital. His mother also had a big-brain job back where they came from, but now she was going to be cooking, shopping and mending clothes at home. The same as my mum. Pav had an older sister who chose not to come to Little Town. No reason why; maybe she's one of those independent girls who knows her own mind.

Dad said that the whole family looked as if they needed a good scrub and some fine grub inside them.

'There's not a pick on that boy,' he always said about Pav.

My first meeting with Pav was like no other *first meeting* I'd ever had. For starters he didn't speak the lingo. Well, he did, but in a funny sort of way. Whoever taught him it badly needed to re-hit the books themselves.

Mum called me from our shared backyard (which nobody ever used for social or fun things). Usually Mum would pop her head out of the window, open her lungs and scream her instructions, but this time she actually came all the way down to the back door. Trying to make an impression, wanting to be seen as all posh and uncommon.

'Charlie,' Mum said.

'What?'

'Could you come here, please?'

'I haven't done anything.'

'I know you haven't. Just come here.' Her tone eased my fear. I de-tensed my shoulders.

'But I'm doing stuff,' I said. By *stuff* I meant I was nose deep in a book, taking breaks to occasionally look at bees nibbling on flowers. I'm not sure everyone would've agreed that reading and nature-watching constituted *doing stuff*. Fact: some folk didn't like people who read. Thankfully Mum and Dad were OK about it.

'Come here, I've someone I want you to meet,' Mum said.

For a moment I thought that Erin F was going to appear

from behind Mum like a vision of beauty exiting melted ice. We could have looked at the bees together.

– I'm here for you, Charlie.
– Erin F!
– I want you to be the one, Charlie.
– You'll only break my heart, Erin F.
– I won't, promise.

If only.

'Who?' I asked.

'Just come here and see, Charlie.'

I put my book inside my trousers in the same way cowboys do with their guns. If anyone gives me shit I'm going to *read* their arses into next week. C*ome any closer, punk, and I swear I'll open this beast up on page thirty-four and spray these words right into your gut*.

I walked towards Mum.

'OK, I'm here,' I said, standing ten paces in front of her.

'Come on, he's here,' Mum said, turning around, gesturing to whoever was hidden behind her. Then he slowly appeared.

Head first.

Army-short hair.

Fair.

His T-shirt and shorts arrangement drowned him; the clothes made his bare legs seem like two scrawny twigs. My

index finger and thumb would've definitely fitted round his ankles, in case I wanted to try. A genuine stickman. His eyes were the colour of the sky. Now, I'd never seen a rabbit in the headlights as we didn't have a car but the look on his face was how I'd imagined a frightened rabbit to look. A hearty fish and chips wouldn't have gone amiss on his bones. Or some lemons. He neither smiled nor growled.

'Charlie, this is Pavel. He's our new neighbour.' Mum put her two hands on Pavel's shoulders, as only a mum would.

I advanced five paces. Halfway.

'Hi, Pavel. I'm Charlie. Charlie Law.' I extended my hand.

Mum pushed him towards me with a little encouraging shove. He had no choice other than to place his hand inside mine. I was careful not to squeeze too hard in case I crushed his twig fingers. Our shake went up and down three times.

'Pavel Duda I is,' he said.

'Pleased to meet you, Pavel Duda,' I said.

'Please to meet, yes.'

'Pavel? That's not a Little Town name, is it?' I asked him.

'No Little Town name.'

'Old Country, right?' My voice sounded high pitched. I felt embarrassed by it. Perhaps not everyone in Old Country hated us. I knew that some Old Country folk were being kicked out or leaving because they didn't agree with their own Government, but still.

'Yes, I from Old Country.' Pavel nodded his head.

'I'll leave you two boys to get to know each other then,' Mum said.

Before I could say NO! PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME WITH HIM she'd made a beeline back up the stairs. Escaped.

We looked at each other. Sussing? I don't know. All I do know is that it was awkward. One minute I'm lost in bees and books and the next I'm standing in Awkward Town with a stranger from Old Country. An Old Country escapee? Refugee? Little Town never fails to surprise.

Did I mention his eyes were really blue? If my eyes were as blue as Pavel's maybe Erin F would have been all over me like a tramp on a sandwich.

MENTAL MEMO: DO NOT INTRODUCE PAVEL TO ERIN F IN CASE SHE WANTS TO DIVE RIGHT INTO THOSE BABY BLUE BLINDERS HERSELF.

'How long have you been in Little Town?' I asked.

Pavel counted on his fingers.

'Two hours we arrive since.'

'Why come here?' I said. This was a genuine question because I was deadly interested why Old Country people wanted to decamp here. HERE! Maybe they wanted to stand shoulder to shoulder with us against rotten Regimes? Maybe

they felt they could somehow be freer here, have an opinion that was safe to voice? If only they knew the half of it. It wasn't as if we had a load of cool amenities or tourist hotspots. We did have a couple of bookshops, a not-so-inviting park and a shopping street where you could get your hands on last year's fashions, if you had the funds. By the look of Pavel I didn't think he was into fashion. Or books.

'Why Little Town?' I asked again.

'Parents make come choice.'

'Parents, eh?'

'Old Country no good for parents any longer more.'

'Why?'

'Too much of shit.'

'Was it, like, dangerous?'

'For parents dangerous. Every night scared.'

'So you couldn't, like, go to the flicks or anything?'

'What flicks?'

'Sorry, it means cinema.'

'No. No cinema go for us.'

'So that's the reason why you came to Little Town? Because Old Country was too dangerous.'

'This is reason, yes.'

'That's terrible, Pavel. I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Please call to me Pav. Pavel I no like. Pav much better.'

'Pav's good for me.'

'And your name one more?'

'Charlie,' I said. 'Charlie Law.'

'I hear not this name before.'

'It's old.'

'Is typical Little Town name, yes?'

'It was my grandfather's name,' I said.

'He dead?'

'A long time ago.'

'Shot?'

'No.'

'Prison?'

'No.'

'Torture?'

'No,' I said with a tiny sneer.

From what Pav was asking it seemed as if Old Country was utter Bandit Country. *We're heading the same way as that place*, Dad would mutter from time to time, but I never considered that Little Town would ever get that bad.

'Grandfather live in no gun time?' Pav asked.

'A long time ago, yes,' I said.

'The luck man. Maybe we make the big fook-you time machine and go back,' Pav said, laughing massively from his gaunt belly.

I laughed too.

Our first.

'Who taught you to swear in the lingo?' I didn't correct his mispronunciation.

'First words we learn.'

I showed Pav around the backyard and told him the best times of the day to see bees, which cats enjoyed it when you chi chi chied them. He let me hear all the swear words he'd learnt in the lingo. Impressive enough. If only he'd put the same learning effort into grammar foundations and sentence construction, then he'd have been on to a winner.

Pav liked bees and cats. He liked the flowers as well. Insects. Animals. Plants. Three things in common, not a bad start. I didn't want to push my luck and talk about books; my gut feeling was that he wasn't much of a reader.

'So how old are you, Pav?'

'I have fourteen years.'

'Same as me.'

'I will fifteen years after summer.'

'Same as me again.'

'Ah, yes?'

'So that means you will be attending my school then?'

'School near station?'

'That's the one.'

'I no like school.'

'Don't worry, Pav, I'll look after you. Anyway, we still have loads of the summer to go before we think about school.'

The idea of getting in some decent work experience and helping Pav with the lingo popped into my head. He would need a helping hand in case he made a complete arse of

himself at school. And for reasons that baffled Mum and Dad, I wanted to be a teacher when I left school.

We saw four different species of bee that afternoon. My record was three. Was Pav my four-leaf clover? Sadly we didn't discuss books, but Pav told me some of the reasons why he and his family came to Little Town.