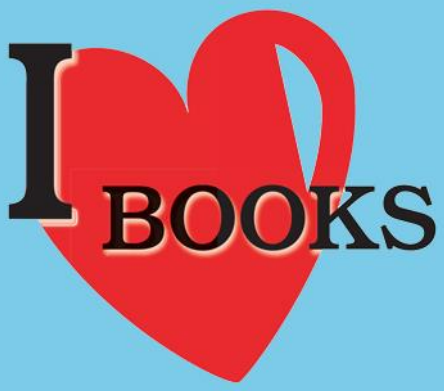


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Opening extract from

The War Next Door

Written by

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This book is dedicated to my friend, Matthew Williams, who spotted that the house had been stolen in the first place, and to my brother Bob, Milner by name, but never by nature.

P.E.

For Eve, Ian, Rowan & Gil

S.O.

1

Naughty, Naughty

Stealing is bad, kids.

Naughty.

Devious.

The sort of behaviour that is frowned upon with a tut-tut and a brow more wrinkled than a sun-kissed raisin.

But let's face it, some stealing is worse than others.

I mean, pinching a biscuit from the tin when your mum's back is turned is hardly the sort of thing that deserves ten years hard labour. And 'borrowing' a particularly hard answer from the smart kid next to you in a maths test doesn't mean you should be exiled to a mountain prison and made to break rocks with your own forehead.



That said, there are certain things you should never pinch, like someone's bum when they're not expecting it, and there are others



that you simply can't. I've never heard of anyone successfully shoplifting a rhinoceros by hiding it up their jumper, or making a whole country disappear using just the rubber on the end of their pencil.

I did once, though, hear about a house that was stolen.

Don't roll your eyes at me. It's a strange tale, but true. In fact, when it happened it almost started a war, a war like no other.

You see, this house was special. So special that this wasn't even the first time it had been stolen. And I don't mean burgled. Anyone can be unlucky enough to have their belongings nicked by a stinking rotter with a swag bag and a mask.

What I mean is that this house had been properly stolen, twice: the bricks, the door, the roof . . . everything!

Don't look at me like I'm a loon, and don't throw this book on the fire, either. I know it sounds weird, but I promise you it happened.

This is the story of how The House That Was Stolen was stolen.

So settle back, open your mind really wide, and let the battle begin . . .

2.

At Home with the Milners

It was a sunny morning on Storey Street.

Birds sang, badgers danced, and foxes picked the pockets of any dustbins left recklessly overflowing.

At Number 29, it was business as usual.

Coffee brewed, toast browned, while on the floor, two figures wrestled to the death. Well, not quite to the death, but with enough aggression to make a trip to the hospital highly likely.

'Submit!' the larger figure yelled, the sleeves of his crisp, white shirt rolled up to reveal arms the size of Russia.

From underneath this hulking, but impeccably dressed figure, came a defiant noise.

'Never!' it yelled happily, despite its mouth being pushed into the floor. 'You'll have to rip my arms out of the sockets before I give in!'

The larger figure laughed. 'Who'll clean my shoes if I do that?!'

Still he didn't let go, instead twisting the smaller figure's arm further behind his back, before demanding, 'SUBMIT!' again.

What happened next beggared belief, as somehow, despite being three times lighter, the smaller figure managed to push himself first onto his hands and knees, then into a crouch, until finally, with sweat pouring off his shaven skull, Masher Milner stood beside his dad, Maurice, snarling like a Rottweiler with a toothache. What a fearsome pair they were. The scariest, most cunning bad boys, not only on Storey Street, but in the whole of Seacross.

'I'll never submit!' Masher laughed, despite the effort and pain. 'So get used to it, Dad. The next person to give in will be you!'

Well, that sort of challenge was enough to kick Maurice and Masher Milner into a new level of warfare. Across the kitchen table they tumbled, scattering plates and cutlery, leaving buttery slices of toast stuck to the seats of their trousers.



Not that either of them noticed, or even cared. They were so caught up in their fight that they could've covered themselves in porridge and neither would've paused to lick their lips. Only the arrival of a third person in the kitchen brought them back to their senses, as the shrill shriek of a hearing aid threatened to shatter every glass they owned into a squillion pieces.

'Masher!! Maurice!! How many times do I have to tell you? If you want to fight, do it in the garden like the other wild animals. Your granddad would turn in his grave if he could see the mess in here.'

Tentatively, Masher lifted his head to look at the trail of devastation behind them, not to mention the craggy scowl of his grandmother, Lillian. She may have only stood four feet tall in her wrinkly-stockinged feet, but he knew better than to incur her wrath. Others had done so and disappeared. (Granddad included.)

She had every right to be irked. There was cream on the walls, orange juice on the windows, and unless Masher was mistaken, half a packet of Frosties stuck to the ceiling with marmalade. Modern art, it wasn't. Carnage, it was.

'Don't you be worrying, Ma,' Maurice said as he pushed himself up off the floor. 'Our Quentin will tidy it up, won't you,

son?' And he flicked a globule of strawberry jam, which landed on the boy's forehead.

Masher grimaced, and not just at the jam that was oozing into his eye. He hated it when his dad used his real name. He only did it to wind him up. Dad knew his true name wasn't Que— (He didn't even like saying it in his own head.)

His name was Masher.

It summed him up, physically and mentally. Mashing was what he did, to everyone and everything.

And he did it bloomin' well. Everyone said so, especially his teachers. So when Dad called him by that other abomination of a name, it made him want to scream.

What kind of parent gives their son such a woofer of a name anyway?

Well, let me tell you. Maurice was the worst kind of person, and not only because he was an estate agent.

OK, he did make his money selling rubbish houses that were held together with double-sided sticky tape, but that wasn't the worst thing about him.

No, what made him really smell of rotten chicken livers was the fact that he was also a snob.

A hoity-toity, nose in the air, looks-at-you-like-you're-dog-doo-on-his-polished-shoe snob.

He hated anyone with less money than him, and he didn't like rich people either. Because rich people had money that should really belong to him.

But not for long. Not if Maurice had it his way. He had plans, and all of them were more snobby than a traffic jam full of Rolls-Royces.

Reluctantly, Masher fell to his knees and began scraping Frosties into a pile, while his dad poured a steaming cup of tea.

'How many houses are you planning on selling today, Maurice?' Lillian asked.

'At least a couple,' Maurice bragged through a mouthful of toast.

'Two? Is that all? When your dear old dad had his grocer's shop he had to re-stock it fifteen times before lunch alone. '

Masher watched Dad roll his eyes and tried to remember how many times he'd heard his grandma say that. He'd run out of fingers and toes to count about seven years ago, and had run the batteries down on several calculators since.

Dad pushed himself to his feet and smiled thinly at his beloved, irritating mother.

'Now, now, my precious. I may only be selling two houses

today, but they happen to have seven bedrooms each. By the time the suckers sign on the dotted line, I'll be owed so much dosh the Bank of England will have to open a new money-printing factory. One they'll name after me. In fact, they'll have to take the Queen off the fifty-quid note and stick me on it instead!'

Masher chuckled to himself, imagining how it would feel to have his face on a note too. The ten-pound note to his dad's fifty. How great it would be to walk into a shop and buy himself a new pair of boots with steel toecaps, using cash with his own mush on it. Everyone would know just how rich and important his family was.



Just as his blissful daydream was gathering pace, Masher heard a familiar thud against the wall behind him. Then another. And another. Again and again.

Masher felt his temperature rise and his hands curl into fists. Across the kitchen, his dad was reacting the very same way. Only Grandma was oblivious, her hearing aid needing new batteries again.

'You are kidding me!' Masher grunted.

'At this time of the morning?' Dad replied.

Masher stormed out of the kitchen. 'Why don't you let me handle this?' he said over his shoulder.

By the time Milner Jnr reached the front door, he was primed, ready and in full-on Mashing mode. It was a sight scary enough to have the Incredible Hulk screaming for his teddy.

'Watch me, Dad,' he growled. 'Watch. Me. Mash!'