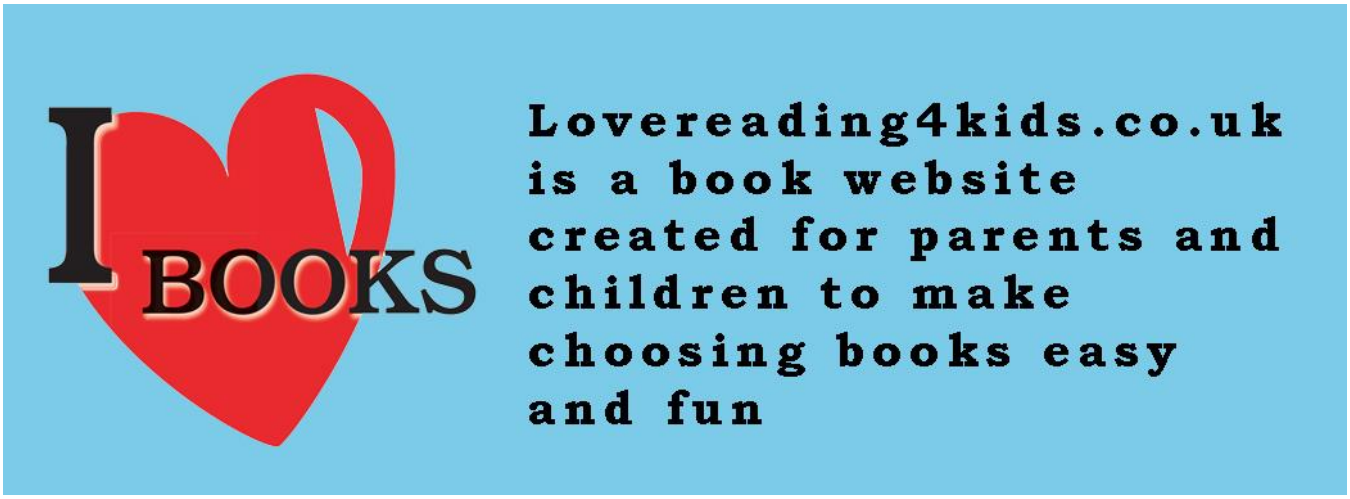


Opening extract from

928 Miles from Home

Written by

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To my husband, Mac.
As long as I'm with you,
I am home

‘Home is where one starts from.’
T. S. Eliot

EXT. NOTTINGHAM – DAY

July: the last day of term. A quiet road on a council house estate in St Ann's, Nottingham. A BOY dressed in school uniform, with a rucksack slung over his shoulders, turns the corner, coming into view. He saunters alone down the street and stops outside the new, red-brick Expressions community centre.

He notices the shutters of the centre are down and there is nobody around. He looks at the empty plastic wallet still fixed to the fancy railings.

All the entry forms for the screenwriting competition he was thinking about entering have now gone.

BOY

(*mutters to himself*)

Probably a posh kid from Mapperley Top will win it, anyway. Who cares?

He scowls and kicks the railings.

A sharp movement near the centre's large

refuse bins grabs his attention and he steps back to the edge of the pavement, craning his neck to see past the bins that are clustered there.

BOY

(*calls out*)

Hey! Who's there?

Nobody answers.

BOY

(*shouts*)

I know someone's been stealing from this building. I – I'll call the police.

The BOY's head whips round at the growl of a powerful engine and a loud, thumping bass beat.

The BOY looks up and down the road to see where it's coming from but the road is still free of cars.

He hears voices shouting over the music so he stands still and listens.

VOICE ONE

Just get in and let's go. He's in the building right now, nicking all the equipment. We need to get the stuff loaded in the car and go.

VOICE TWO

Is he in the centre now? Who is it, what's his name? (*Low voices and then laughing.*) No way! Is he the one who's smashed all the windows, too?

VOICE ONE

I'll tell you all about it later. In the car, let's go.

Slamming of doors shuts off the music. The road is quiet again.

Alarmed, the BOY steps back off the pavement and walks backwards a few steps, into the road. He cranes his neck to try and see round the slight bend.

A powerful engine suddenly revs, the screeching of tyres. The BOY sees a blur of black-and-silver metal hurtling towards him.

Instinctively, the BOY turns and throws himself towards the pavement, but it is too late.

The BOY cries out as his feet leave the floor and a searing pain envelops his legs and hips.

The sound of loud, thumping music fills his ears and he squeezes his eyes shut as a massive silver grille bears down on him, screeching to a halt just inches away and level with his face.

Everything goes black for a few seconds.

CUT TO:

The BOY opens his eyes. His cheek presses into the rough asphalt of the pavement. A tall shadow looms over him.

SHADOWY FIGURE'S VOICE
(*panicked whisper*)
Oh no . . . is he . . . what if he's dead?

VOICE TWO

(*urgent whisper*)

He's breathing. Look, his eyelids are flickering.

The BOY hears the sound of footsteps, and the two figures stand aside. Then a new figure appears.

The BOY opens his eyes slightly. His sight is blurred but he can see a new figure towering above him and a pair of training shoes close to his head. It's a big effort to keep his eyes open but the BOY squints and tries to focus on the tiny, glistening object on the shoe nearest to him. It's hopeless; he quickly loses focus again. Everything blurs.

NEW VOICE

(*hoarse whisper*)

Leave him.

VOICE TWO

(*concerned*)

But . . . we can't just leave him. What if –

VOICE THREE

(*forceful whisper*)

I said – leave him.

Feet scuffle close by. Car doors slam. An engine roars.

The BOY is alone.

He closes his eyes and everything goes black again.

END SCENE.

Journal Entry – July

Name: Calum Brooks
Age: 14

The school counsellor, Freya, has given me a brand-new notebook. It's one of those posh ones wrapped in cellophane.

Freya says I have to write in it every day, and that the most important thing to remember is to be completely honest, but the sort of thing I start thinking about is just stuff that nobody else would be interested in.

'Write whatever comes into your head and don't censor your feelings. If you want to write swear words or get mad and scrawl out a whole page, then that's OK,' Freya says in her soft Irish accent. 'It's your journal, Calum, so anything goes.'

Apparently, if she tells anybody else what we talk about, she'll be breaking some kind of counselling code and it could get her fired. 'I want you to know it's completely confidential,' she assures me again.

If the teachers were more laid-back like Freya, I might try a bit harder in class.

But I don't mind writing; in fact I really like it. And there's not much else to do now I'm stuck in this crummy flat with a broken leg.

Sometimes I make up scripts in my head, like I'm

writing a proper scene from a film. See, that's what I'd like to be: *a screenwriter*.

I know, I know. Despite what Sergei and Amelia say, it's a pretty stupid idea.

You don't see those sorts of vacancies down the jobcentre.

But I can't move and I'm bored out of my skull since the accident . . . so what have I got to lose?

Two Weeks Earlier



Mr Fox's room feels cold, and his booming voice echoes around the pale green, glossed walls so even though we're standing in a line, he seems to be all around us, all at once.

'You should all be ashamed of yourselves,' he says for the third time.

From where I'm standing at the end of the line, I can see the playing fields out of the small, paned window. The grass looks marshy and needs a cut. Some of the white markings on the pitch have worn away, leaving broken lines and fractured arcs that don't really mean anything any more.

Mr Fox is talking about integration and embracing change, and how this is 'the fabric our school has been built upon all these years'. Blah, blah, blah.

The wall in front of us is covered in dated black-and-white prints. Dusty frames containing old photographs of staff who must surely now be dead, and groups of smart young students who will now be old and grey.

I wonder briefly if in another fifty years, there will be boys who aren't even born yet, stood here in this very room getting a lecture like we are.

Mr Fox thumps the edge of his desk with his hand and glares at each of us in turn.

When he looks at me, I blink and scuff the toe of my shoe on the dark wiry carpet beneath my feet.

I can't say anything to Mr Fox in front of the others, but it's just not fair if *I* get excluded.

I just stood at the back of the group like I always do.

I didn't do any of the actual bullying.

We are stuck in Mr Fox's office for another twenty minutes trying to convince him of our innocence, but in the end, he issues all four of us with fixed-term exclusions.

I get kicked out for a day, Harry and Jack get two days each, and this time Linford is out for three days.

'I could have been harder on you all, but I've decided to be lenient on this occasion . . . on the proviso you sign up to see the school counsellor.' Mr Fox scowls. 'A warning. Next time you're in front of me – and there had better not be a next time – I'll be looking at permanent exclusions.'

He looks at Linford.

To be honest, I think Mr Fox is being really hard on us. I mean, the new lad was up on his feet in no time and once he stopped feeling dizzy, he just walked back to class. OK, he had a few bumps and bruises but nothing serious, not like when Linford kicked Karl Bingham so

hard in the leg he fell off the climbing wall and broke his ankle.

Dad is working down south until Thursday, so when Mr Fox's exclusion letter drops through the letterbox, I'll just rip it up. Dad will be blissfully unaware that I've been in trouble at school.

I suppose that's *one* advantage to him working away most of the week.

In all the good films, people live in exciting places – the posh areas of London or America. Places I've never been and probably never will go because we live *here*.

Our flat in Nottingham is in St Ann's; an area that's been classed as 'deprived' by the government. What they really mean is that it's a dump, a slum-hole and best avoided by your average, decent person. People sort of get stuck here and your dreams get stuck too. *Dreams of the Deprived*: sounds like a pretty miserable movie title, doesn't it?

The people who actually live here don't call it deprived. We call it home.

It might not look it, with its boarded-up pubs and dated housing, but St Ann's is an OK place to be and most of our neighbours are decent. Folks might not drive fancy cars and wear top designer gear round here, but they're 'salt of the earth', as Grandad used to say.

We've got our problems like everywhere else, but

those of us who've lived around here for a long time, well I suppose we sort of look out for each other.

Like last year, when Dad was working down south for ten days.

★

EXT. ST ANN'S – DAY

Council Estate, December. Freezing cold, snowing, no cars on road. Everything covered in a blanket of fresh snow. Silent.

Starving BOY walks down road in knee-deep snow and hammers on door of first-floor flat.

MRS BREWSTER
(*from inside flat*)
Who the flippin' hell is it?

BOY
It's me, Calum, from number five.

MRS BREWSTER opens door. Hair in rollers, floral headscarf, ash on her cigarette a centimetre long. Pokes head out and squints at the bright whiteness.

MRS BREWSTER

What ya standing there wi' ya gob wide open for?

BOY

Errm . . . the Happy Shopper has run out of milk and bread.

(Starving BOY neglects to mention Dad is away and money has run out.)

MRS BREWSTER

(*with a sympathetic smile*)

Just a sec.

Moments later, she reappears at door.

MRS BREWSTER

Here, tek these, mi duck.

She presses milk and half a loaf into starving BOY's hands.

MRS BREWSTER

Come back if you need owt else.

END SCENE.

★

You get the picture.

Living here, you're not likely to get invited round for a cup of Earl Grey and a cucumber sandwich too often, but people still care about each other.

My mum took off with another bloke eleven years ago when I was still at nursery school. I can't remember her at all, although I know Dad's got a few photos put away somewhere.

I think that might be something I could put in my journal that Freya would find interesting. Counsellors like that sort of thing.

I've not told anybody this, but I dream about Mum now and then. She's just a presence rather than a person. A clean scent like soap or wash powder, a softness on my cheek.

Sometimes I wake up crying, but I never remember her face.

There's no way I'm writing any of that down; it sounds like one of those reality-TV sob stories. I don't want Freya thinking I'm soft.

So, maybe I could write about Dad.

My dad leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to parenting, but he's raised me – well, more like dragged me up – all on his own since Mum left.

We stick together, me and my dad. So far, we've managed to get by.