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opening extract from

Brother in the Land

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published by

Penguin Books Ltd

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BEFORE

East is East and West is West, and maybe it was a difference of opinion or just a computer malfunction. Either way, it set off a chain of events that nobody but a madman could have wanted and which nobody, not even the madmen, could stop.

There were missiles.
Under the earth.
In the sky.
Beneath the waves.
Missiles with thermo-nuclear warheads, enough to kill everybody on earth.
Three times over.

And something set them off; sent them flying, West to East and East to West, crossing in the middle like cars on a cable-railway.

East and West, the sirens wailed. Emergency procedures began, hampered here and there by understandable panic. Helpful leaflets were distributed and roads sealed off. VIPs went to their bunkers and volunteers stood at their posts. Suddenly, nobody wanted to be an engine-driver anymore, or a model or a rock-star. Everybody wanted to be one thing: a survivor. But it was an overcrowded profession.

The missiles climbed their trajectory arcs, rolled over the top and came down, accelerating. Below, everyone was ready. The Frimleys had their shelter in the lounge. The Bukovskys favoured the cellar. A quick survey would have revealed no overwhelming preference, worldwide, for one part of the house over the others.

Down came the missiles. Some had just the one warhead, others had several, ranging from the compact, almost tactical warhead to the large, family size. Every town was to receive its own, individually-programmed warhead. Not one had been left out.

They struck, screaming in with pinpoint accuracy, bursting with blinding flashes, brighter than a thousand suns. Whole towns and city-centres vaporized instantly; while tarmac, trees and houses thirty miles from the explosions burst into flames. Fireballs, expanding in a second to several miles across, melted and devoured all matter that fell within their diameters. Blast-waves, travelling faster than sound, ripped through the suburbs. Houses disintegrated and vanished. So fierce were the flames that they devoured all the oxygen around them, suffocating those people who had sought refuge in deep shelters. Winds of a hundred-and-fifty miles an hour, rushing in to fill the vacuum, created fire-storms that howled through the streets, where temperatures in the thousands cooked the subterranean dead. The very earth heaved and shook as the warheads rained down, burst upon burst upon burst, and a terrible thunder rent the skies.

For an hour the warheads fell, then ceased. A great silence descended over the land. The Bukovskys had gone, and the Frimleys were no more. Through the silence, through the pall of smoke and dust that blackened the sky, trillions of deadly radioactive particles began to fall. They fell soundlessly, settling like an invisible snow on the devastated earth.

Incredibly, here and there, people had survived the bombardment. They lay stunned in the ruins, incapable of thought. Drifting on the wind, the particles sifted in upon them, landing unseen on clothing, skin and hair, so that most of these too would die, but slowly.

Most, but not all. There were those whose fate it was to wander this landscape of poisonous desolation. One of them was me.

ONE

It was a hot day in the summer holidays. People kept coming in the shop for ice-cream and lollies and coke. We lived in Skipley, behind the shop, open seven days a week and the bell drove you daft. I'd have gone off on the bike but Mum said I had to play with Ben.

You know what it's like playing with a kid of seven. They always want to play at being in the army or something. They get so wrapped up being a soldier that they yell stupid stuff at the tops of their voices so the grownups can hear. It's embarrassing.

Anyway, I played with him a bit in the back where Dad stacked the crates. It was all right at first but then he started wittering; so when Dad went off in the van, I gave him ten pence for a lolly. He ran inside and I got on the bike and left.

It didn't matter where I went, so long as I got away by myself. I had thought of going into Branford but there were too many people there, so I took the road that goes up over the moor. It's a hard pull and I was sweating like a pig when it flattened out. There's nothing to stop the sun up there and it beat down so you could hear it. The heat made the horizon shimmer and the road look wet. I kept pedalling till I was well away from Skipley, then got off and lay on my back in the needle-grass and looked for UFOs.

It was so quiet you could hear bees in the heather sounding

like a sawmill a long way off. The air smelt of peat and hot tar. The sweat on my shirt made my back cold while the sun burnt my knees through my jeans. Now and then a car went by. It sounds kind of sad now, bees and cars and heather, but that's how it was then.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew the sun was gone and half the sky had vanished behind these great black clouds. It was still hot, but with a different sort of heat; that close, threatening heat you get before a storm.

I didn't fancy being caught out here in a storm. They say lightning strikes the highest point, and there were no trees on the moor. As soon as I stood up, I'd be the highest point. I got up, grabbed the bike and began pedalling like mad towards home.

I nearly made it. The top of the last upward bit was in sight when there came a rumbling in the distance and the first big raindrops fell. Pennies from Heaven, my mum called them.

I might easily have gone on. I had only to top that little slope and I'd have free-wheeled all the way down into Skipley, and I'd have been dead, like everybody else. The reason I didn't was because I spotted the pillbox.

It was one of those concrete bunkers left over from the war, World War Two, not the last one. It was just beyond the ditch, on the edge of farmland, partly sunk into the ground and half-hidden in a clump of elder bushes.

I'd been in it before, years back when Dad brought Mum and me and Ben up for a picnic one day when Ben was a baby. I'd gone crouching into the musty dimness, half expecting to find a machine-gun or a skeleton or something. There'd been an empty bottle and the remains of a fire, and I'd played at shooting up passing cars through the narrow slot.

I couldn't crouch into it now. It had sunk a bit deeper and I was a lot taller and I had to get down on my hands and knees. I lugged the bike across the ditch, propped it against the pillbox and crawled in. The remains of the fire were still there, or perhaps it was another one. I didn't go right in, just far enough so I could watch the storm without getting wet. I used to like thunderstorms as long as I was somewhere safe.

As I crawled in there was this sudden gust of wind and a clap of thunder, and the rain really started coming down. It fell so hard you could feel the ground trembling under you. It poured off the top of the pillbox in a solid curtain. I sat looking out through it, hugging my knees and thinking how smart I'd been to get myself under cover.

Then I saw the flash. It was terrifically bright. I screwed up my eyes and jerked my head away. I thought the bunker had been struck: I expected the whole thing to split apart and fall on top of me.

Then the ground started shaking. It quivered so strongly and so fast that it was like sitting with your eyes closed in an express train. Bits started falling on my head; dust and that. I was choking. I rolled over and lay on my side with my arms wrapped round my head.

There was this sudden hot blast. It drove rain in through the doorway and spattered it on my arms and neck; warm rain. I opened my eyes. The pillbox was flooded with bright, dusty light which flickered and began to fade as I watched. My ear was pressed to the ground and I could hear rumbling way down, like dragons in a cave; receding, growing more faint as the dragons went deeper, till you couldn't hear them at all. The light dimmed and there was only silence, and a pinkish glow with dust in it.

Sometimes, I wish I'd stayed there. The dust would have covered me and I would have slipped away, to follow the dragons down into silence. There are worse things than dragons. I've seen them.

TWO

I lay there for a long time. The freak storm had passed over but it was still raining and I heard thunder now and then in the distance. The atmosphere was still oppressive and I wondered whether it might return, as storms sometimes do.

Presently though, the distant sounds ceased. I didn't fancy riding home in the rain but it showed no sign of easing off, so I sat up. My clothes were covered with dust and my head itched. I made a half-hearted attempt to knock some of it off, then crawled to the doorway.

It was then I saw the cloud, perched like an obscene mushroom on its crooked stem, and the glow from Branford. An icy flood from my guts went up my back and spread across my scalp. I knelt, moving my head slowly from side to side as my brain rejected what my eyes were seeing.

Beyond the near horizon lay a pulsating arc of orange light. It breathed in and out like a living thing, its glow reflected on the bellies of the clouds. It was twilight, and the pall of smoke made a darker stain against the grey.

A teacher brought this book to school once, Protect and Survive or some such title. It reckoned to tell what would happen if H-bombs fell on Britain. It was pretty horrible, but it didn't tell the half of it. Not the half. It had a lot in it: the burns and the blast and the radiation and all. But there was nothing about not knowing what's happened to you; how it leaves you

useless, so that you sit staring at the ground instead of looking for food or building a shelter or something. It had bits in about helping one another, only you don't do that. Not for a long time. Other people are shadows that pass you by, or enemies after your stuff. They didn't know that. None of us did. If we had, we wouldn't have done it.

Anyway, when I saw that cloud I knew what it was. I'd seen enough pictures and read enough articles. The papers and TV had been full of stuff about deteriorating relations and red-alerts and all that, only I hadn't taken much interest. It seemed to have been like that on and off, ever since I could remember. I mean, you get used to things and they roll off you. I don't recall anybody being particularly worried round our way. One minute everything was normal, and then it was gone.

I didn't know then what had happened in Skipley. Skipley's five miles from Branford and I could see that no bomb had dropped on it. I guess I thought everybody in Skipley would be okay, as I was myself, until the fallout came that is, I knew there'd be deaths then all right. I'd read about it. That's why I decided to stay in the pillbox. If I'd looked a bit more carefully I might have seen the smoke, but I didn't. I was half-daft with the shock, I suppose. I crawled right to the back of the pillbox and curled up in a corner among the tins and bottles and bits of paper and lay there, pretending everything was all right, till the screaming started.

THREE

It was dark when I heard it. I'd been asleep: God knows how. I guess it was my mind's way of denying reality. Anyway, I woke up suddenly and there was this awful noise; a sort of moaning, and a shuffling sound outside the bunker. I lay rigid, biting my lip, something was moving about out there, something big. I heard the rattle and scrape of branches and something heavy fell to the ground. I felt the impact and dug my nails into my palms, willing the thing to go away; willing it not to find the doorway. A low moan subsided into a wet, bubbly sound that went on and on.

I couldn't move. Something hideous was lying out there in the darkness; its face, if it had one, inches from my own. The hiss of its breath penetrated the concrete and I imagined I could smell it.

I lay, damply terrified, breathing quietly through my mouth. My eyes were open. Shoals of phantom lights floated across the blackness that pressed down on them. And as I lay listening I heard other sounds, fainter and farther away. Out there in the darkness people were screaming.

I saw a film once about Pompeii: people blundering through murky streets as the ash came down. It sounded like that.

Presently, I became aware that the thing outside had gone quiet. I listened intently but there was nothing, only the Pompeiian voices far off. Perhaps it's holding its breath, I

thought, listening for me. I held myself soundless for some time but the breathing never resumed and I told myself the thing had moved off. I felt my way to the doorway and peered out.

The glow from Branford had shrunk to a thin flush but now, against the backdrop of night, I saw that Skipley was burning. The rain had stopped and a cool breeze from the moor seemed to clear my mind. I felt a rush of what I can only call normal emotion.

My family. Mum and Dad and Ben. Here I was, skulking in my bunker while God knew what had become of them. They might be dead. Maybe some of the cries I had heard were theirs.

Stricken with fright and guilt, I scrambled from the pillbox and stood up. The bike had fallen over. I picked it up and began shoving it towards the ditch. I must get home; find them. We could go away; take the van and drive north to the lakes and mountains before the fallout got us.

The fallout. As I reached the ditch it started to drizzle and something I'd read; a phrase, flashed across my mind. Black rain. After they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima it rained, and the rain brought down all the radioactive dust from the atmosphere. Thousands of people from the outskirts of the city, who'd survived the actual explosion, got rained on by this stuff and died of radiation-sickness. Afterwards, the scientists called it black rain, because it ended up killing nearly as many people as the bomb itself.

I guess I panicked. It wasn't the cold drops hitting my face, so much as the name. Black rain. It was like something filthy was falling on me out of the sky and I couldn't even see it. Anyway, I dropped the bike and ran back doubled up trying to shield my head with my arms, as if that would do any good. Inside the bunker I used the front of my tee-shirt to scrub the stuff off my hair, face and neck. My arms were spattered too, so I tore the garment off and wiped them with it. Then I screwed it up and shoved it out through the slot. I was crazy.

After that I sat propped up in a corner with my bare back to the concrete. It was fantastically cold. I crossed my arms on my chest and held onto my shoulders and sat there waiting to get

sick. I had a fantasy that I'd die like this and that someday, centuries from now maybe, somebody would find my skeleton, still hugging itself trying to get warm.

Outside, the noises never stopped. Voices, and a bang now and then, like something exploding down in the town. Sometimes a voice would come quite close, but mostly they were far away. I know it sounds rotten but I tried not to hear. The rain was falling on them and there was nothing I could do.

I dozed a bit eventually, and came to with a start to find daylight filtering through the slot. Rain was hissing onto the concrete and a line of bright droplets hung from its upper lip, falling now and then in random sequence. I sat half-paralysed with cold, watching them, trying to see the deadly motes inside. Apart from the rain it was quiet now.

I was thirsty. I was hungry too, but it was the thirst that bothered me most. I was struck by the irony of the situation. Outside, the ground was sodden. Pools were forming in every hollow and the ditch was filling up. The clouds, the earth, and the air between were laden with water yet none of it was any use to me.

I remembered that poem about the Ancient Mariner, dying of thirst with an ocean all round him. Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink: something like that. It kept going round and round in my head as I watched the bright drips falling across the slot.

It was that which first made me understand the enormity of what had happened. Nuclear missiles had fallen on England, and if they'd fallen on England they must have fallen on a lot of other countries too. This rain, black rain, was falling now on each of them; falling into rivers and reservoirs, tanks and troughs; drifting down on sheep and cows and crops; seeping through the soil to contaminate wells and subterranean lakes.

Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink.

I had not felt ill on waking and, I suppose, had entertained subconscious thoughts of long-term survival. Now, with a parched throat and a tongue like a warm slug in my mouth, I thrust such notions aside. Everything needs water. A person can only live a few days without it. Now all the water was

contaminated. Whatever survivors there might be would bring about their own deaths as soon as they drank.

I wondered what it felt like to die of thirst. It hurt already, and the process had scarcely begun. Nevertheless, I felt I could never bring myself to drink black rain. It would be the same as swallowing poison. I'd read some stuff about radiation sickness and it sounded horrible. Dying of thirst couldn't possibly be as bad as that. I spent some time massaging a bit of warmth into my limbs, then lay down on my side to await the end.