FALLOUT

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For David Dean

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SUMMER 1980

It was only meant to be a small explosion. Not exactly a nuclear bomb. Mr Mayfield can't take a joke, that's his problem.

He said I did it because I'm bad. He said I did it for attention, but why would I do that? I get enough attention. People are always watching me; in the street, at school, down the shops. That's what happens when you're a Pritchard.

I did it for a laugh. Because it was funny to see

Mr Mayfield go that special shade of red he keeps for his top-level fury. And I did it to get a round of applause from the whole class. Well, almost the whole class; the swots were horrified. And terrified.

Suppose that's why I'm suspended. Because of the terror.

Or because the broken glass flew everywhere and *could have seriously injured someone* (key words: could have).

Or that *science equipment is expensive*.

Or that I *spoil things for my fellow pupils who really want to learn*.

I head home to face the music, but Mam and Dad won't care about the suspension, just about the money to replace the broken equipment. Because to them I really am bad.

Which is just how they want me.

That stupid peace protest is still on the corner, outside the council building. Look at them – waving their banners and chanting. At least they aren't singing today. Swaying to the chorus of 'Give Peace a Chance'

over and over isn't going to make one speck of difference if some maniac presses the button.

BOOM!

Nuclear war. Everything and everyone gone.

But, yeah, wave a placard, shout some slogans, have a sing-song; see how far that gets you. We're not even *at war*. Not really, not like with invasions and tanks and prisoners. This is a *Cold War*, which, as far as I can tell, means world leaders make threats about pushing their nuclear buttons, but no one will. They just want us to *think* they will. And this lot have fallen for it.

Most of the protesters are the same old locals, but there's a couple of new faces. That's not unusual. They travel around, some of these people. Dad says they're a bunch of freeloading hippies who wouldn't know hard work if it bit them on the – Oh!

There's that floppy-fringe girl from the year above me at school. The one who moved here last year. Why's *she* not in lessons?

'Take a leaflet, son.' One of the new men holds out a piece of paper. He wouldn't do that if he knew me.

It says: *Refuse Cruise*. They mean cruise missiles, not sailing about on a big boat. I take it with a smile. I stand back to scan all the placards, then scrunch the flyer into a ball, toss it into the air and kick it – it smacks right into the middle of *BAN THE BOMB*.

Score!

The protesters look shocked, but calm. The girl scowls at me from under her fringe, but that's as aggro as they get. What I don't understand is, if they care so much, why don't they get angry?

Pacifism is weird.