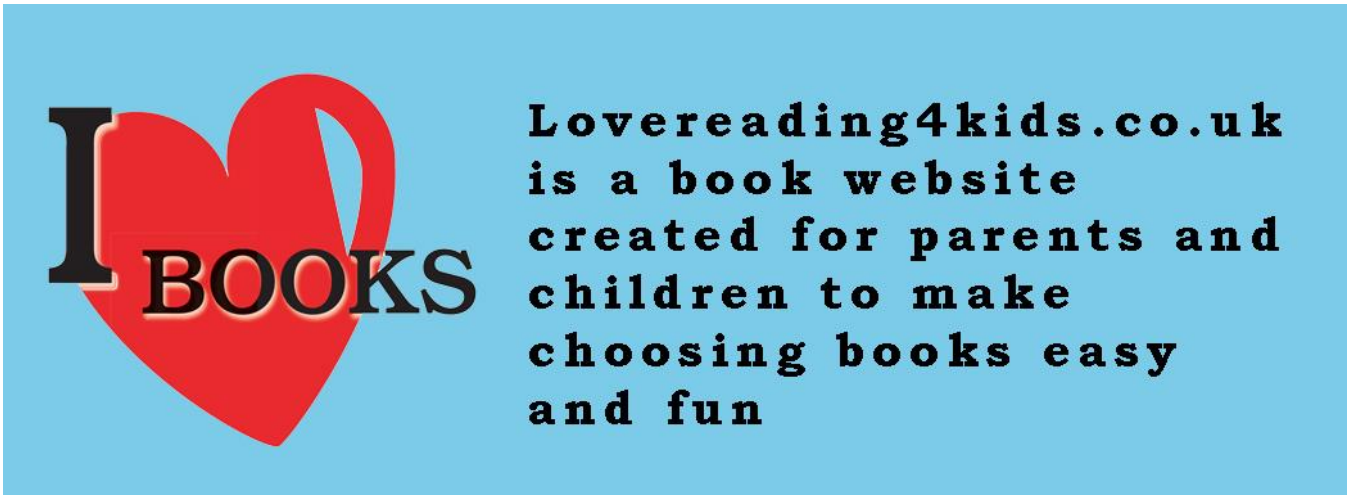

Opening extract from

The Kingdom by the Sea

Written by

Robert Westall

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For Miriam, who understood

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1

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THE KINGDOM BY THE SEA

ROBERT WESTALL



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

Author's Note:

This is a novel: not a geography book. I have taken a few liberties with my beloved Northumberland: most with the refuge towers at Lindisfarne.

Chapter One

He was an old hand at air raids now.

As the yell of the siren climbed the sky, he came smoothly out of his dreams. Not scared. Only his stomach clamped down tight for action, as his hands found his clothes laid ready in the dark. Hauled one jumper, then another, over his pyjamas. Thrust both stockinged feet together through his trousers and into his shoes. Then bent to tie his laces thoroughly. A loose lace had tripped him once, in the race to the shelter. He remembered the smashing blow as the ground hit his chin; the painful week after, not able to eat with a bitten tongue.

He grabbed his school raincoat off the door, pulling the

door wide at the same time. All done by feel; no need to put the light on. Lights were dangerous.

He passed Dulcie's door, heard Mam and Dulcie muttering to each other, Dulcie sleepy and cross, Mam sharp and urgent. Then he thundered downstairs, the crack of light from the kitchen door lighting up the edge of each stair-tread. Dad was sitting in his warden's uniform, hauling on his big black boots, his grey hair standing up vertically in a bunch, like a cock's comb. Without looking up, Dad said, "Bloody Hitler! Four bloody nights in a row!"

There was a strong smell of Dad's sweaty feet, and the fag he had burning in the ashtray. That was all Harry had time to notice; he had his own job; the two objects laid ready in the chair by the door. The big roll of blankets, wrapped in a groundsheet because the shelter was damp, done up with a big leather strap of Dad's. And Mam's precious attaché case with the flask of hot coffee and insurance policies and other important things, and the little bottle of brandy for emergencies. He heaved the blankets on to his back, picked up the case with one hand and reached to unlock the back door with the other.

"Mind that light," said Dad automatically. But Harry's hand was already reaching for the switch. He'd done it all a hundred times before.

He slammed the door behind him, held his breath and

listened. A single aircraft's engines, far out to sea. *Vroomah*, *vroomah*, *vroomah*. A Jerry. But nothing to worry about yet. Two guns fired, one after another. Two brilliant points of white, lighting up a black landscape of greenhouse, sweet-pea trellises and cucumber-frames. A rolling carpet of echoes. Still out to sea. Safe, then.

He ran down the long back garden, with his neck prickling and the blankets bouncing against his back comfortingly. As he passed the greenhouse the rabbits thumped their heels in alarm. There was a nice cold smell of dew and cabbages. Then he was in through the shelter door, shoving the damp, mould-stinking curtain aside.

He tossed the things on to Mam's bunk, found the tiny oil-lamp on the back girder, and lit it and watched the flame grow. Then he lit the candle under the pottery milk-cooler that kept the shelter warm. Then he undid the bundle and laid out the blankets on the right bunks and turned back to the shelter door, ready to take Dulcie from Mam. He should be hearing their footsteps any second now, the patter of Mam's shoes and the crunch of Dad's hobnailed boots. Dad always saw them safe in the shelter, before he went on duty. Mam would be nagging Dad – had he locked the back door against burglars? They always teased Mam about that; she must think burglars were bloody brave, burgling in the middle of air raids.

God, Mam and Dad were taking their time tonight. What was keeping them? That Jerry was getting closer. More guns were firing now. The garden, every detail of it, the bird-bath and the concrete rabbit, flashed black, white, black, white, black. There was a whispering in the air. Gun-shrapnel falling like rain… they shouldn't be out in *that*. Where were they? Where *were* they? Why weren't they tumbling through the shelter door, panting and laughing to be safe?

That Jerry was right overhead. *Vroomah. Vroomah. Vroomah.*

And then the other whistling. Rising to a scream. Bombs. Harry began to count. If you were still counting at ten, the bombs had missed you.

The last thing he remembered was saying "seven".

His back hurt and his neck hurt. His hands scrabbled, and scrabbled damp clay, that got under his fingernails. The smell told him he was still in the shelter, but lying on the damp floor. And a cautious, fearful voice, with a slight tremble in it, was calling out:

"Is anybody down there?"

Somebody pushed the curtain across the shelter door aside, and shone a torch on him. The person was wearing a warden's helmet, the white 'W' glimmering in the light of the torch. He thought at first it might be Dad. But it wasn't Dad. It had a big black moustache; it was a total stranger.

The stranger said, to somebody else behind him, "There's only one of them. A kid."

"Jesus Christ," said the somebody else. "Ask him where the rest are. There should be four in this shelter."

"Where's the rest, son? Where's your mam and dad?"

"In the… I don't know."

"D'you mean, still in the house, son?"

The voice behind muttered, "Christ, I hate this job." Then it said, with a sharp squeak of fear, "What's that?"

"What's *what*?"

"Something soft under me foot. Shine your light."

"'Sonly a rabbit. A dead rabbit."

"Thank God. Hey, son, can you hear me? Can you get up? Are you hurt?"

Why didn't the man come down and help him? What was he so *frightened* of?

Harry got up slowly. He hurt nearly all over, but not so badly that he couldn't move. The man gave him a hand and pulled him up out of the shelter. Harry peered up the garden. He could see quite well because the sky to the west was glowing pink.

There was no greenhouse left.

There was no house left. The houses to each side were still standing, though their windows had gone, and their slates were off.

"Where's our house?"

There was a silence. Then the man with the moustache said, "What's yer name, son?" Harry told him.

"And what was yer dad's name? And yer mam's?" He wrote it all down in a notebook, like the police did, when they caught you scrumping apples.

He gave them Dulcie's name too. He tried to be helpful. Then he said, "Where *are* they?" and began to run up the garden path.

The man grabbed him, quick and rough.

"You can't go up there, son. There's a gas leak. A bad gas leak. Pipe's fractured. It's dangerous. It's against the law to go up there."

"But my mam and dad're up there…"

"Nobody up there now, son. Come down to the Rest Centre. They'll tell you all about it at the Rest Centre."

Harry just let himself be led off across some more gardens. It was easy, because all the fences were blown flat. They went up the path of number five. The white faces of the Humphreys, who lived at number five, peered palely from the door of their shelter. They let him pass, without saying anything to him.

In the road, the wardens who were leading him met two other wardens.

"Any luck at number nine?"

"Just this lad…"

There was a long, long silence. Then one of the other wardens said, "We found the family from number seven. They were in the garden. The bomb caught them as they were running for the shelter…"

"They all right?"

"Broken arms and legs, I think. But they'll live. Got them away in the ambulance."

Harry frowned. The Simpsons lived at number seven. There was some fact he should be able to remember about the Simpsons. But he couldn't. It was all… mixed up.

"Come on, son. Rest Centre for you. Can you walk that far?"

Harry walked. He felt like screaming at them. Only that wouldn't be a very British thing to do. But something kept building up inside him; like the pressure in his model steam-engine.

Where *was* his steam-engine?

Where was Mam, who could cuddle him and make everything all right?

Where was Dad in his warden's uniform, who would sort everything out?

Next second, he had broken from their hands, and was running up another garden path like a terrified rabbit. He went through another gate, over the top of another

air-raid shelter, through a hedge that scratched him horribly… on, and on, and on.

He heard their voices calling him as he crouched in hiding. They seemed to call a long time. Then one of them said, "That wasn't very clever."

"It's the shock. Shock takes them funny ways. You can never tell how shock's going to take them."

"Hope he's not seriously hurt, poor little bleeder."

'Kid that can run like that…?"

And then their voices went away, leaving him alone.

So he came to his house, slowly, up his garden.

He found his three rabbits; they were all dead, though there wasn't a mark on them. Where the greenhouse had been was a tangle of wrecked tomato plants, that bled green, and gave off an overpowering smell of tomato.

The house was just a pile of bricks. Not a very high pile, because everything had fallen down into the old cellar.

There was a smell of gas; but the gas was burning. Seeping up through the bricks and burning in little blue points of flame, all in the cracks between the bricks. It looked like a burning slag-heap, and he knew why the wardens had given up hope and gone away.

He knew he must go away too. Before anybody else found him, began to ask him questions, and do things to

him. Because he felt like a bomb himself, and if anyone did anything to him, he would explode into a million pieces and nobody would ever be able to put him back together again.

Especially, he mustn't be given to Cousin Elsie. Cousin Elsie, who would clutch his head to her enormous bosom, and sob and call him "poor bairn" and tell everybody who came all about it, over and over and over again. He'd seen her do that when Cousin Tommy died of diphtheria. Cousin Elsie was more awful than death itself.

No, he would go away. Where nobody knew him. Where nobody would make a fuss. Just quietly go away.

Having made his mind up, he felt able to keep moving. There were useful things to do. The blankets in the shelter to bundle up and take with him. The attaché case. All proper, as Mam and Dad would have wanted it.

It seemed to take him a long time to get the blankets bundled up exactly right and as he wanted them.

In the faint light before dawn, he even managed to find Dad's spade and bury his three rabbits. They had been his friends; he didn't want anybody finding them and making a meal of them. He even found some wooden seed markers, and wrote the rabbits' names on them, and stuck them in for tombstones.

Then he went, cutting across the long stretch of gardens and out into Brimble Road, where hardly anybody knew him.

He looked dirty, tear-stained, and exactly like a refugee. His face was so still and empty, nobody, even Cousin Elsie, would have recognised him.

He felt… he felt like a bird flying very high, far from the world and getting further away all the time. Like those gulls who soar on summer thermals and then find they cannot get down to earth again, but must wait till the sun sets, and the land cools, and the terrible strength of the upward thermal releases them to land exhausted. Only he could not imagine *ever* coming to earth again, ever. Back to where everything was just as it always had been, and you did things without thinking about them.

He supposed he would just walk till he died. It seemed the most sensible thing to do.