





THE BOMBS
THAT
BROUGHT
US
TOGETHER









Carnegie shortlisted author of When Mr Dog Bites

BRIAN CONAGHAN



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## l Under the Covers

It was hard to remain silent. I tried. I really did, but my breathing kept getting louder as I gasped for clean air. My body was trembling, adding noise to the silence. Mum pulled me closer to her, holding tight. Dad cuddled us both. Three spoons under one duvet. With the summer heat and us huddled together the smell wasn't amusing. I shifted about.

'Shhh,' Dad whispered. 'Try not to make a sound.'

Mum kissed the back of my neck. Her wheezing chest blew out little puffs of air on to my head. 'It's OK, Charlie, everything's going to be all right,' she said.

'Promise?' I said.

'Promise,' Mum said.

'Shhh,' Dad said again, firmer, like an annoyed school-teacher.

'Mum, I'm really scared.'

'I know you are, sweetheart, I know you are.' Mum squeezed my bones.

'We're all scared, Charlie,' Dad said. 'But we need to hold it together. It'll be over soon.'

Dad was scared, which increased my own terror levels. Dads aren't meant to get scared. Dads protect. Dads make things better. But I guess there are some things in life even dads can't affect. Bombs, for one.

The first pangs of nerves had begun as soon as the news-reader on the television stared out at us: We expect this criminal act to be catastrophic for some of our residents. The poor guy had looked stricken.

In Little Town, where I live, people know that something dreadful might happen to them one day; they realise that our Regime has infuriated some other Government, and that Government – specifically, the one over the border in Old Country – don't like how certain things are done here: the way of life, the beliefs, the strangleholding ... They think it's all wrong, undemocratic. Inhumane. Pot and kettle springs to mind! Let's call a spade a spade: Old Country's Government thinks Little Town is just plain bad. Funny thing is we've heard that things over there aren't much better (they don't exactly welcome people speaking out either), but no one really knows for sure, because no one ventures across the border. Ever! In school everyone is told

that many moons ago Little Town belonged to Old Country and that it was inevitable that they'd come knocking – or bombing – to demand it back. But who knows for sure? What we do know, however, is that *our* Regime isn't liked, even by us.

I know Little Town isn't exactly a barrel of laughs, and we did expect some repercussions for various disagreements, but not this. Never this.

We were under that duvet for a whole twenty minutes before the first explosion. It was far away yet made my entire insides bounce. Mum's body tensed. I heard Dad's teeth grind together.

There was another crack; it seemed closer. A third quickly followed. It was closer. BOOM! The house rattled. I heard screams and cries from outside. Curfew breakers? People who hadn't seen the news? Who hadn't heeded the warnings?

These bombs sounded like a fireworks and thunder combination; human squeals echoed, cries became howls. Another bomb.

Then another.

And another.

'I don't want to die. I don't want to die.' I turned to face my parents. No duvet could save us. What was Dad thinking when he said, *Well, I suppose we best do something about these bloody bombs then*? Why didn't he have a bunker or a shelter? What good was a duvet? 'I'm not ready to die,' I cried.

'We're not going to die, Charlie.' Dad's voice sounded unconvincing, wavering a bit. I fought for air. Mum wheezed. Here we were, the Law family, waiting for the ceiling to cave in on us. Waiting for the great leap into the unknown. These bombs that had brought the Law family together were about to blast us apart.

I glanced at my watch. Six minutes of relentless bombing. A declaration of war? No army as such existed in Little Town – just some Rascals running around in military boots – so what was the point?

It's funny the things you think about when you're frozen with fear. I kept hoping that our shed wouldn't be damaged. I had big plans for that shed. But the main thing, I suppose, was at least we weren't dead.

Well, not yet anyway.

### 2 Our Education

In school when we're being told all this stuff about Old Country my mind wanders a touch. Now, I'm not usually a mind-wanderer but sometimes, just sometimes, I think about schools over there in Old Country. I wonder if pupils there are being educated about Little Town.

No doubt.

#### THINGS WE ARE TAUGHT ABOUT OLD COUNTRY

- They have buckets of money.
- Their army has tanks, wagons, helicopters, flying bombers, a trillion guns and loads of soldiers.
- Boys AND girls have to do Old Country Service in the army.
- Old Country Government wear silly military gear.

- You can't exactly vote for who you want this Government to be.
- It's not easy to enter or exit Old Country.
- Everything is big over there. EVERYTHING.
- If people don't conform, well ...
- They despise all things Little Town.
- They despise me.

### THINGS I IMAGINE ARE BEING TAUGHT ABOUT LITTLE TOWN

- Little Town is filthy.
- They are totally and completely skint.
- People can't wander the streets willy-nilly.
- It's hard to find jobs in Little Town.
- Their society is full of murky, backhanded, dirty, double-dealing thugs.
- Little Town's Regime couldn't run a raffle in a threeman tent.
- A bunch of raggle-taggle Rascals run the place.
- If people speak out, well ...
- Little Towners despise all things Old Country.
- There will not be a Little Town much longer.

Once I told my history teacher that I wouldn't mind spending a few days in an Old Country school – like, for a sociology spying mission – just to try and *understand* 

the similarities and differences, sir.

'There are no similarities, Law,' he said, eyes bulging and steam seeping out of his nostrils. 'None at all!'

I guess not!

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#### 3 The Rules

It breaks my heart to see what's happened to this place. Before the bombs came Mum would say this at least once a week, no joking. Sometimes three times. When I came home from school without any homework to do, she'd say it. When I had to walk three miles to the only chemist in Little Town who sold her asthma inhaler, she'd say it. When I returned from the shops with an incomplete list of supplies, she'd say it. I got used to hearing this phrase.

Dad directed his annoyance towards the newspapers and television, scoffing and mocking all the stories of the day. This was so far removed from the balanced, non-prejudiced news that he wrote back in the day when he was taking chances, being brave, standing up for honesty and transparency. It was funny seeing Dad shout at rival newspapers.

'You know you can get an inhaler any day of the week in Old Country,' I informed Mum one time, as she had only three puff days remaining until I had to go and get her another. Dad flipped his lid, flashing his eyes above his paper and locking them on me.

'Does that school of yours not teach you anything, son?' I didn't want to rhyme off what we actually learnt in school so I let him go off on one of his flips. 'Old Country is out of bounds for us; you need papers to go over the border, a passport, a specific reason. We don't have any of those things, so why bloody mention it?'

'But I was just -'

'OK, Charlie?' Dad dropped his paper to his knees. 'Are we clear about that?'

'Crystal,' I said.

Dad could be very sensitive about the political situation. He wanted nothing more than for everyone to come and go as they pleased, to live in perfect harmony and all that. But at the same time he didn't want to attract trouble; he wanted to do his job without any hassles. That's why he kept his mouth shut.

Another time I mentioned to Mum that I'd heard about a place in Little Town where we could get quality supplies any day of the week. A bit like a warehouse where, if you knew the right people – or password, I don't know – you'd get in. I'd heard on the QT that if you paid a little bit more than

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shop prices you could get your hands on just about anything. Even inhalers. If you knew any of the top brass who ran these places then even better. I actually thought Mum would've been happy with this news. Shows what I know!

'I can get all the details at school, from Norman, if you want,' I told her. Some people at school knew the score; they had their ears to the ground. Norman would definitely spill the beans if you got him talking.

When Mum gets angry her breathing becomes heavier, like she's trying to suck in huge volumes of air so her tirade can be more powerful.

'Now, you listen to me, Charlie Law, and listen good: if I ever catch you going to any of those places it'll be school, home, room, bed for you for the next year.'

'But I was just -'

'Are we clear about that?'

'Crystal.'

I was certain that Dad knew about these warehouses because I'd heard him mutter things behind his newspaper like, An embarrassment to call themselves officials AND Who voted for this lot, eh? AND Bloody shower of gangsters if you ask me AND Who do they think they actually represent? Not me, that's who!

It did seem a bit unfair that people living in Old Country could get whatever they wanted whenever they wanted and we couldn't. I bet teenagers over there didn't have to wait ages until their parents saved enough money to buy them a new pair of swanky trainers or a denim jacket or books. I bet teenagers over there sneaked out to late nightclubs and maybe, just maybe, they did get to stay out after dark without feeling terrified. I'm betting, of course, but truth is I didn't know for sure.

Whenever I got them all worried, Mum and Dad sat me down to tell me (once again) the dos and don'ts of Little Town. As I got older more stuff was added to the list. After the whole thing about getting inhalers from Old Country and black-market warehouses in Little Town, we had one major parental powwow. Afterwards I formulated and constructed my own list and stuck it on the inside of one of my books.

#### CHARLIE LAW'S TEN LAWS OF LITTLE TOWN

- 1. Respect the dark curfew. No going out after dark in groups of three or more, unless you can prove that you are with family members. (Easy to get around: walk somewhere separately)
- 2. No ball games in public places. (Parks ... I know)
- 3. No pets. (One word: disease)
- 4. No boozing in the streets. (House boozing OK, though)
- 5. No shouting in the streets. (*Not even in jest = public order crime*)
- 6. No giving cheek to the lawmakers. (Unless you want a clout around the lughole)

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- 7. No dodging school unless you have one of the verified illnesses on the list or you've been asked to carry out lawmaker work. (Only a sudden limb amputation would've prevented me from attending school, and even then it would depend which limb)
- 8. No tomfoolery in public places. (Which I took to mean, don't enjoy yourself ... ever!)
- 9. NO STEALING. (A biggie!)
- 10. Instruction to beat ALL instructions: never draw attention to yourself, and WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T GET CAUGHT.

#### 4

#### A Perfect Union

The beginning of that summer, before the bombs came, was utterly dull. For teenagers, the summer holidays in Little Town equalled mind-melting boredom. They do in most places, I suppose.

- Hey, what do you want to do tonight?
- Nothing.
- Brilliant, let's do nothing then.
- Excellent.
- Cool.
- Shall we contact the others?
- Don't care.
- Excellent.
- Cool.

But as I was about to turn fifteen, my chops got rattled good and hard, BOOM! Everything and everyone changed. And not always for the better.

Pav and his family arrived a few weeks before the bombs came. How unlucky is that? All the way to Little Town for a new life, a new start, and this happens to them. Bad luck just seems to follow some people around. They moved into our block, on the same floor as us, directly across in fact. Dad quickly got in there and spoke to them, getting all their vital stats.

Main stat: they came from Old Country.

Old Country!

I know, right?

Pav was around the same age as me and due to attend my school after the summer holidays. By all accounts (well, Dad's) his father was some sort of mega mind back in Old Country, but in Little Town he would be cleaning floors and walls in our run-down hospital. His mother also had a big-brain job back where they came from, but now she was going to be cooking, shopping and mending clothes at home. The same as my mum. Pav had an older sister who chose not to come to Little Town. No reason why; maybe she's one of those independent girls who knows her own mind.

Dad said that the whole family looked as if they needed a good scrub and some fine grub inside them.

'There's not a pick on that boy,' he always said about Pav.

My first meeting with Pav was like no other *first meeting* I'd ever had. For starters he didn't speak the lingo. Well, he did, but in a funny sort of way. Whoever taught him it badly needed to re-hit the books themselves.

Mum called me from our shared backyard (which nobody ever used for social or fun things). Usually Mum would pop her head out of the window, open her lungs and scream her instructions, but this time she actually came all the way down to the back door. Trying to make an impression, wanting to be seen as all posh and uncommon.

'Charlie,' Mum said.

'What?'

'Could you come here, please?'

'I haven't done anything.'

'I know you haven't. Just come here.' Her tone eased my fear. I de-tensed my shoulders.

'But I'm doing stuff,' I said. By *stuff* I meant I was nose deep in a book, taking breaks to occasionally look at bees nibbling on flowers. I'm not sure everyone would've agreed that reading and nature-watching constituted *doing stuff*. Fact: some folk didn't like people who read. Thankfully Mum and Dad were OK about it.

'Come here, I've someone I want you to meet,' Mum said.

For a moment I thought that Erin F was going to appear

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from behind Mum like a vision of beauty exiting melted ice. We could have looked at the bees together.

- I'm here for you, Charlie.
- Erin F!
- I want you to be the one, Charlie.
- You'll only break my heart, Erin F.
- *I won't, promise.*

If only.

'Who?' I asked.

'Just come here and see, Charlie.'

I put my book inside my trousers in the same way cowboys do with their guns. If anyone gives me shit I'm going to read their arses into next week. Come any closer, punk, and I swear I'll open this beast up on page thirty-four and spray these words right into your gut.

I walked towards Mum.

'OK, I'm here,' I said, standing ten paces in front of her.

'Come on, he's here,' Mum said, turning around, gesturing to whoever was hidden behind her. Then he slowly appeared.

Head first.

Army-short hair.

Fair.

His T-shirt and shorts arrangement drowned him; the clothes made his bare legs seem like two scrawny twigs. My

index finger and thumb would've definitely fitted round his ankles, in case I wanted to try. A genuine stickman. His eyes were the colour of the sky. Now, I'd never seen a rabbit in the headlights as we didn't have a car but the look on his face was how I'd imagined a frightened rabbit to look. A hearty fish and chips wouldn't have gone amiss on his bones. Or some lemons. He neither smiled nor growled.

'Charlie, this is Pavel. He's our new neighbour.' Mum put her two hands on Pavel's shoulders, as only a mum would.

I advanced five paces. Halfway.

'Hi, Pavel. I'm Charlie. Charlie Law.' I extended my hand.

Mum pushed him towards me with a little encouraging shove. He had no choice other than to place his hand inside mine. I was careful not to squeeze too hard in case I crushed his twig fingers. Our shake went up and down three times.

'Pavel Duda I is,' he said.

'Pleased to meet you, Pavel Duda,' I said.

'Please to meet, yes.'

'Pavel? That's not a Little Town name, is it?' I asked him.

'No Little Town name.'

'Old Country, right?' My voice sounded high pitched. I felt embarrassed by it. Perhaps not everyone in Old Country hated us. I knew that some Old Country folk were being kicked out or leaving because they didn't agree with their own Government, but still.

'Yes, I from Old Country.' Pavel nodded his head.

'I'll leave you two boys to get to know each other then,' Mum said.

Before I could say NO! PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME WITH HIM she'd made a beeline back up the stairs. Escaped.

We looked at each other. Sussing? I don't know. All I do know is that it was awkward. One minute I'm lost in bees and books and the next I'm standing in Awkward Town with a stranger from Old Country. An Old Country escapee? Refugee? Little Town never fails to surprise.

Did I mention his eyes were really blue? If my eyes were as blue as Pavel's maybe Erin F would have been all over me like a tramp on a sandwich.

MENTAL MEMO: DO NOT INTRODUCE PAVEL TO ERIN F IN CASE SHE WANTS TO DIVE RIGHT INTO THOSE BABY BLUE BLINDERS HERSELF.

'How long have you been in Little Town?' I asked.

Pavel counted on his fingers.

'Two hours we arrive since.'

'Why come here?' I said. This was a genuine question because I was deadly interested why Old Country people wanted to decamp here. HERE! Maybe they wanted to stand shoulder to shoulder with us against rotten Regimes? Maybe they felt they could somehow be freer here, have an opinion that was safe to voice? If only they knew the half of it. It wasn't as if we had a load of cool amenities or tourist hotspots. We did have a couple of bookshops, a not-so-inviting park and a shopping street where you could get your hands on last year's fashions, if you had the funds. By the look of Pavel I didn't think he was into fashion. Or books.

'Why Little Town?' I asked again.

'Parents make come choice.'

'Parents, eh?'

'Old Country no good for parents any longer more.'

'Why?'

'Too much of shit.'

'Was it, like, dangerous?'

'For parents dangerous. Every night scared.'

'So you couldn't, like, go to the flicks or anything?'

'What flicks?'

'Sorry, it means cinema.'

'No. No cinema go for us.'

'So that's the reason why you came to Little Town? Because Old Country was too dangerous.'

'This is reason, yes.'

'That's terrible, Pavel. I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Please call to me Pav. Pavel I no like. Pav much better.'

'Pav's good for me.'

'And your name one more?'

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'Charlie,' I said. 'Charlie Law.'
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'I hear not this name before.'

'It's old.'

'Is typical Little Town name, yes?'

'It was my grandfather's name,' I said.

'He dead?'

'A long time ago.'

'Shot?'

'No.'

'Prison?'

'No.'

'Torture?'

'No,' I said with a tiny sneer.

From what Pav was asking it seemed as if Old Country was utter Bandit Country. We're heading the same way as that place, Dad would mutter from time to time, but I never considered that Little Town would ever get that bad.

'Grandfather live in no gun time?' Pav asked.

'A long time ago, yes,' I said.

'The luck man. Maybe we make the big fook-you time machine and go back,' Pav said, laughing massively from his gaunt belly.

I laughed too.

Our first.

'Who taught you to swear in the lingo?' I didn't correct his mispronunciation.

'First words we learn.'

I showed Pav around the backyard and told him the best times of the day to see bees, which cats enjoyed it when you chi chi chied them. He let me hear all the swear words he'd learnt in the lingo. Impressive enough. If only he'd put the same learning effort into grammar foundations and sentence construction, then he'd have been on to a winner.

Pav liked bees and cats. He liked the flowers as well. Insects. Animals. Plants. Three things in common, not a bad start. I didn't want to push my luck and talk about books; my gut feeling was that he wasn't much of a reader.

'So how old are you, Pav?'

'I have fourteen years.'

'Same as me.'

'I will fifteen years after summer.'

'Same as me again.'

'Ah, yes?'

'So that means you will be attending my school then?'

'School near station?'

'That's the one.'

'I no like school.'

'Don't worry, Pav, I'll look after you. Anyway, we still have loads of the summer to go before we think about school.'

The idea of getting in some decent work experience and helping Pav with the lingo popped into my head. He would need a helping hand in case he made a complete arse of

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himself at school. And for reasons that baffled Mum and Dad, I wanted to be a teacher when I left school.

We saw four different species of bee that afternoon. My record was three. Was Pav my four-leaf clover? Sadly we didn't discuss books, but Pav told me some of the reasons why he and his family came to Little Town.

#### 5 Shed

There was a rickety old shed at the bottom of our shared backyard. Nobody ever used it, so me and Pav decided that it would be perfect as our sanctuary place. Our boom-boom room. Our lad pad. Pav wanted it to be called THE DEN, that special place where fellas can chat about the ladies, football and Governments.

'Did you have a girlfriend in Old Country, Pav?'

'Don't like girl.'

'Really?'

'I no like.'

'Look, it's OK with me if you eat your soup with a fork. I'm down with that.' Pav looked confused. 'I mean, if you prefer boy hugs it's OK. I couldn't give two hoots, but you have to know that I'm a self-confessed ladies' man,' I said.

'No. No. No. No,' Pav said, waving his arms around. 'I like the girl and the lady and the woman. I NOT kiss the boy.'

'OK, Pav,' I said. 'But it's totally fine if you -'

'I like the girl, Charlie!' he said.

'OK,' I said.

I wanted the shed to become a type of classroom, a backyard school kind of place. Somewhere I could practise my teaching skills and get Pav's lingo up to scratch before school started.

A small table and two chairs would definitely fit inside the shed, at a push a third chair. There weren't any other kids my age on our block, and my friends from school weren't in the habit of dropping by because of the patrols and the curfew, but who knows, maybe if Erin F could get away from looking after her poor mum for a few hours, she'd want to come shedside for some chat and chill of an occasion? I think Erin F needs some quality R & R. Some time just for her. So, a guest chair was an absolute must.

Problem Number One: I didn't have a clue where to get my mitts on a table and chairs. It's not like they were just lying around in the streets any longer beside bags of old manky clothes and stinking mattresses. When I was a little kid in Little Town you could easily go around and ask your neighbours or family friends if they were lobbing out any old rubbish or unwanted furniture. People don't open their door any more to random knocks.

'Do you have any extra chairs in your house, Pav?' I asked ... You never know.

'One chair have we. And one big chair.'

'Big chair?'

'Long.' Pav extended his hands to show me what he meant.

'A sofa, you mean?'

'Sofa, yes. One chair and sofa.'

'It's important that we get our hands on some chairs if we want our shed to be comfortable.'

'We need to be the thief?' Pav said.

He clearly hadn't learnt the rules of Little Town yet. 'No. No stealing,' I said.

'No?'

'No, we'll just have to keep a close eye on the street in case anyone is throwing away old chairs. Ask people in the know.'

'I peel my eyes,' Pav said.

'It's keep your eyes peeled, Pav. But good effort.'

For someone so scraggy, Pav was strong. An Old Country ox. When we cleared the shed to make our den, Pav lugged these weighty metal poles and heavy pieces of wood out on his own. He didn't want any help either; he dived right into the work, chopping through the task like a machete through honey, heaping stuff on to his bony shoulder before piling it all up directly behind the new den. I was no lugger, but my supervisory role was vital just the same. I was

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more than happy to be the brains and logistics guy of the operation.

Once the place was fully cleared we stood at the doorway gazing at the empty shell we'd created. What Pav had created. A blank canvas of possibilities. I high-fived Pav, who reached up to meet my hand. Slap! His pits were sweaty and pungent. Humming in fact. I tried not to breathe through my nose too much, as the mix of Pav's body ming and stale shed was eyewatering stuff.

'We need lock,' Pav said.

'First thing we need to do, Pav, is keep this door open and let some air circulate.'

'Best idea for to get smell out. I agree, Charlie.'

'It's a shame there's no electricity.'

'No worry. We use fire and battery.'

'You mean candles?'

'Yes, fire candles.'

'I can probably get my hands on some candles,' I said.

Every house had stashes of candles for when the electricity was clicked off. I always thought that owning a small candle shop in Little Town would bring me untold riches, but standing in a candle shop day after day would've melted my mind.

'Must first get lock to thief stop,' Pav said.

'We don't have anything worth stealing yet.'

'When stuff come thief will too.'

'Not necessarily, Pav.'

'In Old Country you know what they do to thief?' Pav said, all serious and tense.

'I've heard rumours, but I'm not sure if they're true or not.'
'It true, Charlie. It true.'

'So they actually do ... do ... that ... then?' I turned my right hand into an axe or a butcher's knife and made a chopping motion on my left wrist. Bringing the hack down twice.

'It true. I see happen.'

'Really?'

'They come to school, bring teacher outside and do this.' Pav did the same chopping motion as I had.

My mouth was wide and circular.

'What did the teacher do?' I asked.

'They say he money thief.'

'Bugger me,' I said, which made Pav laugh. I'm not big into the swearing game, but whenever I swore Pav found it hilarious. This conversation badly needed a swear word. 'And was he guilty?'

Pav shrugged his shoulders.

I was going to say another swear, but I said it inside instead, only much harder this time. A real bad one. A belter of a swear word. One that Mum and Dad would have skelped me for if I ever said it out loud.

'And his hand? Did they just leave it lying there on the ground?'

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'They bag hand.'

'Was there lots of blood?'

'Like splashing pool.'

'And your teacher, Pav, what happened to him?'

He shrugged his shoulders again.

'God, and I thought here was bad.'

'What happen to Little Town thief?' Pav asked.

'Depends who catches you. If it's the Regime you'll go to prison or get a huge fine. But if any of the Rascal gang members nab you, well, you might lose a kneecap or they'll force you to work for them. Not sure what's worse.'

'Fook saking,' Pav said.

'So, best not to steal anything.'

'I think yes I agree.'

'Not even as much as a grain of sand,' I said, sounding as if I was warning Pav, educating him on Little Town rules. Someone had to.

'Why thief want sand, Charlie?'

'No, Pav, it's an expression ...'

'Ah, I yank your chain. I yank good.'

Pav's thin belly and skeleton shoulders bobbed up and down with all his giggling.

It was time to explain to Pav the rules of Little Town. We sat at the doorway and I carefully went through Charlie Law's Ten Laws of Little Town for him.

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'Norman, this is Pav,' I said.

'All right, Pav,' Norman said.

'Pav, this is Norman.'

'Please to meet,' said Pav.

Pav came closer and extended his hand. Norman took it.

'You the friend good of Charlie?' Pav said.

Norman looked at me.

'Pav and his family just moved here from Old Country,' I said.

'Old Country?' Norman said. His eyes opened further, forcing his eyebrows to shift skywards.

'So they don't speak the lingo too well,' I said.

'Oh, OK,' Norman said. 'I dig that.'

'Not yet anyway,' I said. 'I'm going to teach the life out of him before we go back to school.'

'Oh, brilliant! Can I come? Can I? Can I? Please?' Norman's mocking tone made me want to rip out his tongue. He didn't mean it of course; he liked playing the joker, as he did all the time in school, in the street, at home, everywhere. Norman liked to call himself a man about town, which meant he knew stuff that we didn't. Stuff in the subterranean, my friend, stuff in the subterranean. He knew some of Little Town's Rascals, who could get their hands on things ordinary people couldn't; these men did the dirty work, got down to the nitty-gritty, took the flack but were given the slack. Norman wasn't as stupid as many people thought, oh no; a proper clever devil,

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in fact. He just couldn't be bothered with school. He always knew things that most of us struggled with, stuff like history and religion and philosophy, just didn't go on about it much. Norman got all his information from books, which meant that he couldn't have been the scallywag Dad thought he was. But the fact that Norman happened to know some proper bona-fide scallywags who lived in Little Town was exactly the reason I wanted to speak to him. That's why I'd invited him to our pre-shed meeting.

But if I'd known what this would all lead to, I'd have never have got involved with Norman.

'So, Old Country, eh? Is it as mental as everyone says it is?' Norman asked Pav.

'It very bad place.'

'Did those bastards chase you out?' Norman probed.

'We come Little Town for bester life,' Pav said. I didn't want to tell Norman too much about why Pav and his family were in Little Town; it wasn't my place to open my trap about the family secrets. Anyway, Pav had told me as a trusted friend and, as a trusted friend, I will take whatever secrets are told to me to the grave. I knew Pav wouldn't have said anything to Norman.

'What? You came here for a better life?' Norman said.

'Yes.'

'Jesus! Was this the only place you could have come to?' Norman asked.

'Only place we get papers for. Only place Dad get job.'

'What does the old fella do?'

Pav looked at me.

'Norman wants to know what your father does here for work, Pav?' I said.

'He work at hospital,' Pav said to Norman.

'Is he a doctor?' Norman said, as if impressed.

'He floor and wall clean,' Pav said.

'Shit. All the way to this shit town to do some shit job in a shit hospital. Cleaning people's shit all day. No thanks.'

'He no floor clean in Old Country.'

'Pav's dad had a good job there,' I said to Norman.

'Let me guess, Pav. Your old man worked in a shirt and tie job in Old Country?' Norman was practically in his face. Kissing distance.

'He was scientist,' Pav proudly said. 'He working for big company, but we must to come Little Town when Government –'

'Gave them permission to go,' I said, stopping Pav in his tracks.

'So, Charlie, you wanted to show me something?' Norman said without taking his eyes off Pav.

'I did; it's down at the end of the garden.'

Pav went first and I led Norman to the bottom of the backyard. I opened the door and we all looked inside the empty shed. Norman entered; standing bang in the middle, he did a three-sixty. I sort of knew what he'd say.

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'What's this ming heap, Charlie?'

I should have been a betting man.

'It is *now*, Norman, but it won't always be; that's why I wanted to talk to you,' I said.

'Talk. I'm listening.'

'Well, as you can see, it's bare. Barren.'

'You mean it's got sweet FA in it?'

'Exactly.'

'So where do I fit in?'

'We need three chairs.'

'Three chairs?'

'And a lock.'

'Three chairs and a lock?'

'And maybe a table.'

Norman stopped craning his neck around; he fixed on me.

'Do I look like a furniture shop to you, Charlie?'

'Oh, come on, Norman, you know some people who can get this stuff no bother.'

'Oh, do I now?'

'We both know you do.'

'And what people would that be then?'

'Well, there's those ... those ... erm ... subterranean people.' I felt that it wasn't the time to mention The Big Man at this stage. I didn't want to scare Norman away.

He paused.

'Do you have any dosh?'

'No one has any dosh, Norman. You know that.' That wasn't quite true; some of those Rascals had plenty of dosh. They were rolling in it. 'It's just a tiny problem.'

'I wouldn't say that. I'd say it's a massive problem,' Norman said.

'I was thinking of negotiating some manual labour or an I-scratch-your-back-you-scratch-mine type of arrangement.'

'Not really how things are done these days, Charlie.'

'Come on, Norman, is there nothing you can do? Not even with your contacts?'

'Please, Norman,' Pav said.

Norman looked at Pav. I could see his face soften. At least I think it did.

'What's in it for me?' Norman said.

'Well, for starters you can come around here anytime you want; it can be a three-way den instead of just for me and Pav.'

'But I don't live near this block, Charlie.'

'We won't say anything.'

'But if the Regime catch me in another block when it's dark, I'm buggered. You know that.'

'They won't.'

'Want a bet?'

And he was right: he *would have* been buggered and I couldn't say for sure that he'd be OK and that they wouldn't catch him. They haven't been here for ages, but that's not to say the night beat aren't due a mooch around here soon.

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An idea came to me.

'I'll do all your homework for a month?'

This was like my sucker punch. My up-the-sleeve ace. Norman's brain was spinning in his head.

'Until Christmas,' Norman said.

'For two months,' I said.

'Until Christmas, or nothing,' he said.

'OK, until Christmas.' My head was twisting at my rubbish negotiating skills.

'Right, I'll see what I can do,' Norman said.

'Fantastic time,' Pav said.

'I can't promise anything,' Norman said.

'Three chairs, a big lock, a table and some candles,' I said.

'You didn't say anything about candles.'

'Ah, just throw them in as a goodwill gesture, Norman.'

'You're a chancer, Charlie, do you know that?' Norman said.

'Where will you get the stuff?' I asked.

'There are a few possibilities. Leave it with me.'

I sucked some air in and puffed out my chest.

'Are you going to try The Big Man?' I said nervously.

Just by uttering the words I knew I'd crossed the line.

Norman's eyes tightened, as did his whole body.

'Ssssshhhhh, for Christ's sake,' Norman said, indicating to Pav.

'Sorry.' I looked around for any eavesdroppers. 'Pav's OK. He knows zilcho.' Obviously I didn't know The Big Man personally, I'd only heard about him; everyone in Little Town had heard of The Big Man. He was like the king of the Rascals. The Grand Mafioso. The one whom everyone feared. The rumour was that The Big Man had some of Little Town's Regime firmly by the gonads. Norman's parents used to live in the same block as The Big Man before he became THE BIG MAN so that's why he knew him. I think his dad and The Big Man were pals back in the day. Or he used to do some pick-up work for him. Whatever. They knew each other.

'Don't ask me about The Big Man, Charlie. OK?' 'Got it.'

'No, I'm serious about this. Don't mention him. The Big Man talks about us, not the other way round, OK?'

'OK.'

'Right, let's leave it at that then.'

'When will we hear from you?' I said.

'I'll let you know as soon as,' Norman said, before saying his goodbyes. He left us without shaking hands. We all had to do hand punches instead. He must have seen people doing it on television.

'Charlie?' Pav said.

'Yes.'

'What is Big Man?'

'You don't want to know, Pav. You don't want to know.'

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