

hello world

by
Murray Ewing

Published by Bookship, 2017.

ISBN 978-0-9934239-2-5

Copyright © Murray Ewing 2017.

Cover design by Murray Ewing.

Murray Ewing asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters, incidents and locations portrayed in the story are entirely imaginary. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events, organisations, companies and other bodies, is coincidental.

All rights reserved.

hello world



BOOKSHIP


```
10 PRINT "hello world"  
20 GOTO 10
```


Hi, Mum.

It's me, Tim.

I'm on the school roof. How are you?

I don't know if you keep up with these things, but it's 1984.

1984 is the year they used to think would be the future. You know, in that book, was it by Orson Welles, or H G Wells, or someone? (Can't think of anyone to ask but you. Dad doesn't read books, Joe only knows about motorbikes and heavy metal, and I only know about computers.) Now, of course, we know the future's going to be the year 2000. This time they named a comic after it, not a book. (2000A.D. with Tharg the Mighty!)

Most likely, we won't get there.

It's flat up here on the school roof. I don't want you thinking I'm clinging onto tiles or hanging off a gutter. It's flat, with puddles, and there's a manky old pair of football boots in one corner, and a hairy-looking tennis ball in the other, and apart from that it's just me and the world.

Oh, and a pigeon.

I'm going to tell you about Penny, but first I need to think about nuclear war for a bit. I quite often think about nuclear war. (I don't know, do you listen in?) I haven't been

thinking about it as much recently, though, so you could say I've got some catching up to do.

The thing about nuclear weapons is, they're not just big bad things that go bang. They do go bang, but they do it on such a massive scale they have all sorts of side-effects and complications. Some are as bad as the bang itself.

Say they dropped a one megaton bomb on London right now.

(No one's going to bother dropping a bomb on a little town like Eastead.)

There it is, hurtling down from the sky. All those people milling about in the streets below, minding their own business. Someone sees it and points. Others look up and see it too, but they can't do anything. It's too late. Faster and faster it falls, and then—

London is 29 miles away.

Lying here, looking at the sky, the first thing I'd know would be a shocking white flash, brighter than the sun at midday. I wouldn't be totally blinded (you'd have to be within ten miles of the blast for that), but I'd probably end up blinking some pretty serious purple blotches. I might get a bit sunburnt, too.

I wouldn't hear the bang that went with the flash straightaway. What would reach me next would be the Electro-Magnetic Pulse. This is a shockwave of pure electrical force that travels at 90% the speed of light. It sends a jolt of electricity through everything it can. TVs, hi-fi's, fridges, computers, and Patrick's dad's brand new home video recorder would all go fizz-whizz. Aeroplanes might have their controls zapped and come plunging to the ground. It would even electrify things that weren't electrical, like the metal pipes in the plumbing at home. Turn the taps on, you might get fried. Tzzd!

Up here, the only thing to feel the Electro-Magnetic Pulse would be my digital watch. (Which is a pity, because

I like my digital watch. It's got a calculator built in.) I don't know what would happen to it. It might go blank and never work again, or it might fast-forward to the year 2000, which would be sort of funny.

But who'd need to know the time after a nuclear war?

The bang would come a whole 2 minutes 53 seconds after the flash. (I worked that out on my calculator watch.) It would sound like a hundred thousand thunder claps going BOOM! all at once, and might make me deaf for a bit. In fact (I was told by Mr Brow, our Physics teacher), sound travels faster through solids and liquids than air, so I'd probably feel a rumble in the ground before I heard the bang, like a mini-earthquake.

That would be scary.

The blast itself would be scarier.

If I was one of those people in the streets right below it, or if I was within six miles of where it went off, I'd be gone in an instant. Vaporised, like a popsicle beamed into the heart of the sun. There might be a shadow burned into the ground where I'd been, but not much else. Not even a pair of smoking school shoes.

A little outside that, I might not get totally vaped, but I'd still be hurt as bad as if I'd stepped into a burning building. And there'd be a lot of burning buildings about. Cars would explode, so would petrol stations and gasometers. The blast would shatter every window for miles around, and fragments of glass would be flying about in super strong winds. You'd get cut to pieces if you weren't in some sort of shelter. If you were in some sort of shelter, it'd probably fall on you.

Here, it would be different. There'd be strong winds, which might be carrying some pretty dangerous debris, like bits of broken glass or the occasional radioactive sparrow. Telegraph poles and electrical cables might get blown down. I'd have to cling to the roof not to be swept off.

But the worst thing would be what happens after.

When things calmed down, I'd get up, and I'd see it. The mushroom cloud on the horizon. It would be ten miles high and ten miles wide, like a great grey tombstone.

It would be deadly radioactive.

And after that, there'd be snowfalls of radioactive ash, and when it rained, it would be black rain, full of radioactive dust. You wouldn't be able to see it, but radioactivity would be in the air, and it would get into the water, poisoning it. Soon, it would get into everything. The whole world would turn deadly dangerous. There'd be a nuclear winter, which is what happens when dust thrown into the air blocks out the sun for months or even years. Nothing would grow. We'd have no food once the tinned stuff ran out. Those of us who didn't die of radiation would starve, or just give up. Society would collapse. There'd be no electricity or gas, no telephones. Governments would be of no use. (Dad says they aren't any use now.) People would kill each other for food. Martial law would have to be brought in. We'd all be forced to work on special farms, harvesting the occasional glowing potato only to have it snatched off us by some bloke with a gun. Or, if we could, we'd retreat into our own little bunkers, safe from the world, but totally cut off from it. Till the radiation went away. Which might be, you know, a million years.

And of course they wouldn't just drop a single bomb on London. I read (in *The Radio Times*) that if they launched every nuclear missile in the world right now, it would kill, instantly, half the world's population.

(I don't know, does that include Wombles?)

One thing would be sure. Nothing in the world would ever be the same again.

Life would become nothing but a relentless, pointless struggle to survive.

Anyway, that's what I think about sometimes.

I was thirteen on June 12th. I first spoke to Penny on September 24th. Today is October 25th, and I may never see her, ever again. Even if there isn't a nuclear war.

But you'll be wanting to hear how things are at home.

Well, Dad's worse than ever, and Joe's getting more like him every day.

That's the back-of-a-postcard version.

But you'll want the long version, so—

Remember how Dad used to be when he got back from work each day? Snarly for ten minutes, grumpy for half an hour, then slowly simmering down to something a bit more likeable in time for dinner, like a mad scientist with the potion wearing off? And at weekends, he could even be a bit cheerful?

Well, he's like that now, only the ten minutes is an hour, the half an hour is till-nine-o'clock, the likeable is, at best, sitting there making grumpy comments in front of the TV, and the highlight of weekends is when he goes down the pub on a Sunday afternoon and stays there.

For a while he was worse than that.

I mean, at first all he did was sit around, not even going to work. His boss came by to say he understood and all, but... And still he sat around, so he got the sack.

It seemed he was like that for ages, but it was probably only four or five months.

Then I remember coming home from school one day to find Gramps — your dad, not Dad's — in the living room, talking to him. I was really surprised, because Gramps lives miles away, doesn't he? But now I come to think of it, he *had* phoned a few days before, and I'd answered because Dad never answers, and he'd asked how things were, and I'd said okay, but that he'd probably have to write letters in future because the phone was going to be cut off, and did he know how I could get a supply of 50p's for the gas meter because it was getting cold in the mornings and Joe and me were starting to feel the lack of hot water.

Gramps took us (me and Joe, not Dad) to the Happy Eater down the London Road (which was nice, because we'd had nothing but baked beans and tinned peas all week), and had a word with us about how he'd had a word with Dad. Then he took us home but Dad refused to let him back in the house, shouting at him and calling him names, saying he was trying to turn his own kids against him and things like that. So Gramps said goodbye to us, but to me (in a low voice) said that Dad shouting was at least better than Dad sitting around doing nothing.

And he was right, because shortly after that, Dad got a job again.

He's still got it. He works for Acme Printers off the High Street. (They really are called Acme, just like in the Road Runner cartoons.) Quite often he has to work late, and he has to work some Saturdays too, but he's better than he was before.

We don't see Gramps anymore though.

Now to Joe. Joe left school as soon as he could, and at the moment he's on a YTS.

YTS is a government thing. It stands for Youth Training Scheme. (I joke it means Joe is training to be a youth. Joe then hits me. I guess that's why they call it a punchline.)

Joe's training to be a post-room assistant. Of course, what he most wants to be is a Hell's Angel, but he's not old enough so they won't let him in.

Okay, that's another joke. What Joe really, really wants to be is a motorbike mechanic or something like that.

I just realised you wouldn't know about Joe's motorbike. It's odd to think, the last you knew, Joe was fourteen, and now he's seventeen. He's probably grown a foot taller, and a foot thinner, too. Standing there sometimes, he's like a rake with a stoop. If he doesn't shave, he gets this ghost of a Ming the Merciless moustache at the corners of his mouth, which he's always stroking, like he's trying to

encourage it to grow, or he's checking it hasn't blown away. That, or he's working on his next evil plot to make my life miserable.

Joe eats, sleeps, and breathes motorbikes. He buys motorbike magazines, listens to heavy metal music about motorbikes, wears his creaky leather biker jacket while we're eating dinner (and Dad doesn't say anything, because Dad wears his work overalls — honestly, sometimes I think every meal I eat tastes of motor oil and printer's ink). He has motorbike dreams. Every spare moment, he's out in the back garden, taking his bike apart and putting it together again, adjusting this or tweaking that, clanking spanners and swearing. Sometimes he even rides the silly thing.

What I should tell you about is how Joe got his motorbike, because that leads on to how I got my computer.

Last year, after ages of not hearing from him, Gramps phoned. He timed it just right, so Joe and me were home but Dad wasn't. I answered. (Joe heard the phone ringing, but shouted at me to answer it. That's how things are done at home. Dad's the brigadier who gives the orders, Joe's the sergeant major who passes them down — plus a few of his own — and I'm the troops. I get to carry the orders out.)

Anyway, Gramps asked how things were and I said okay, and he said, 'Is that okay as in the phone's going to be cut off tomorrow, or really okay?' So I said *really* okay. Then he told me what he wanted to do. He said he'd been thinking about this for a while, but as it was Joe's sixteenth birthday in a couple of weeks, he was going to use that as an excuse. He wanted to buy us a present each, Joe and me. He wanted it to be something really special. He said partly it was to make up for the fact that he hadn't been able to see us for our last couple of birthdays (since the whole shouting thing with Dad), but also he wanted to do it because we were both of us having to grow up without a mum (or 'mam', as he says), and it was the only thing he could think

of to try and make up for that. So he told me to really think about it, then asked me to put Joe on the line, so he could explain it to him.

Joe and me really thought about it. Gramps said not to think how much things cost, just what we wanted. Joe was back on the phone first, saying what he wanted was a motorbike. I went next and said I wanted a Sinclair ZX Spectrum 48k. (Which is actually a lot cheaper than a motorbike.) I spelled it out for him. We were both expecting Gramps to say he was hoping we'd pick something less expensive, but he didn't. What he said was he'd phone back tomorrow.

(I don't want you thinking, Mum, that by asking for a computer I was asking for a great big clunky machine as big as a room, all glowing valves and flashing lights and whirling spools of magnetic tape, the kind of thing baddies have in underground bases in James Bond films. What I'm talking about is a new thing called a home computer. It's also called a microcomputer, or micro for short. The ZX Spectrum is an excellent example of just how compact and neat all that old computing power has been made now we've got silicon chips instead of valves. It doesn't fill a room. It's about the size of a book, weighs half a kilo, and you couldn't take over the world with one if you loaded it into a cannon and shot it at people.)

The next day, Gramps phoned again. He spoke to Joe for a bit about what sort of motorbike he wanted. Joe knew exactly what he wanted, because he'd been drooling over biking magazines for months. He said, 'I don't want nothing foreign. No Kawasaki this or Yamaha that. I want a Honda SuperDream.'

I didn't hear what Gramps said, but Joe looked kind of surprised, or winded, and handed me the phone.

I looked at Joe, still trying to work out what his expression meant, while Gramps said he'd been looking into what

I wanted, and had talked to the computer salesman at Rumbelows. At this point my heart fell because I just knew he was going to say the 48k Spectrum was a bit expensive and more than I really needed, so he was going to get me the 16k version instead (which is cheaper, but miles worse). Or maybe he was going to get me an ancient ZX80, which comes as a kit, because I might enjoy putting it together! (I'd have preferred an abacus made of twigs.) But no, what he said next made me look, I know, exactly as Joe had when he'd handed me the phone.

Gramps said, 'I found out that the Spectrum itself isn't enough, and that you need a TV to go with it. So I'm going to get you one of those too. Just a small one, mind. And it's to be for your own use only. I'll not have Joe ferreting it off to his bedroom to watch late night horror films. And I'm getting what they call a printer, too. Seems those are important if you're to be using it for your schoolwork.'

Then Gramps told us we weren't to tell Dad. He was going to do that. By letter.

A week later, Joe had his motorbike and I had my Spectrum and Dad was in a right huff.

What an awkward time that was. Joe creeping out to the back garden, which is where he keeps his bike, too scared to start it and give it a good rev. Me creeping up to my room, which is where I keep my Spectrum, too scared to touch a key in case it beeped. Dad sitting in the living room, watching TV and smouldering like a just-landed meteorite.

He didn't say anything, though.

That's how things are, you see, Mum. None of us says anything. And I don't just mean about Joe's motorbike or my computer. I mean loads of things.

We don't mention you.

I don't know if I can explain it, but, after you weren't there anymore, it was just us three blokes, having to get on

with it on our own. And it was like we had to pretend it had always been like that, so it didn't seem something was missing, you know? And that spread to include everything. Because you were so much part of everything. Talking about anything makes it seem we're getting too close to mentioning you so, you know, we just don't. Even when Joe's mouth's going like a windsock in a gale, he's not saying anything. Most days, Dad barely grunts.

Back to my computer, though!

I love my ZX Spectrum.

There's nothing I like more than being up in my room, the door shut, the whole of the rest of the world *out there* and me *in here*, and I'm doing stuff on my computer.

It's my own little world-proof bunker.

Some of the time I play games. The best game in the world is Manic Miner. In it, you play Miner Willy, who's gone down a mine to mine some gold or something, but instead finds all these weird creatures, like giant penguins, mutant telephones, and man-eating toilets. Your job is to get through the mine before the air runs out, without being eaten. Thanks to some nifty programming, Manic Miner is the first ever game to have music while you play. It gets a bit annoying after a while, and for hours after, I can't get its bippy tune out of my head. But it's great all the same. Another game I like is The Pyramid, where you have to guide astro-explorer Ziggy from the top of a giant space pyramid to the bottom, zapping mutant eyeballs, killer trashcans, extraterrestrial tweezers and galactic strawberries to get the energy crystals you need to unlock the various chambers. I sort of like The Hobbit, too, which is an adventure game (which means it's about solving puzzles, not shooting aliens), but I've been stuck in the goblin dungeon for about a year now and it's very difficult to get out.

I don't just play games, I also write programs in BASIC. BASIC stands for Beginner's All-purpose Symbolic In-

struction Code, but it's not just for beginners. You can do some pretty advanced stuff with it. I'm learning Machine Code, too, which is what you need to know to do the *really* advanced stuff.

Like Joe does with bikes, I buy all the computer magazines I can, and watch all the TV programmes to do with computers, and talk about almost nothing but computers to Patrick at school (or I used to, but I'll explain more about that later, because I just realised you don't know anything about Patrick, either).

Computers are like this whole separate world, where everything makes sense. You know, they don't always do what you want them to at first, but you can always find out why, and solve it, and then they work.

And they're simple. I don't mean you can't do anything complicated with them, because you can, that's what they're for. What I mean is, I understand them.

That's what I mean.

I understand them.

Which is great because, really, I don't understand anything else.

Now to what I was going to tell you about.

Penny, who's this girl.

The thing is, it's complicated.

'If it seems complicated, go back to when it wasn't, and start from there.' That's what you always used to say, isn't it? Like the time I got Joe's Action Man stuck in the toilet. That *was* complicated.

In this case it means going back to the day Penny asked me her big dumb question.

Penny and me have been in the same class since I started secondary school (which is just over three years, now), but we'd never said anything to each other before she asked me her big dumb question, unless it was maybe 'Pass the potassium permanganate' or 'Did you know your Bunsen burner's gone out?' in Science. I don't talk much to girls, and girls don't talk much to me. Sorry, Mum, but I'm not exactly James Bond. (If it makes any difference, I don't talk much to the boys in class, either. They're like a separate species, into football instead of computers. And they're the dominant species, too.)

Anyway, I know exactly which day it was Penny asked me her big dumb question, because it was the day after they showed *Threads* on BBC2.

I shouldn't have watched *Threads*. Apart from the fact it started at 9:30 p.m. and went on till 11:25 p.m. and the next day was school, *Threads* was a serious drama about what happens to ordinary people in a nuclear war. It might have been shown to make politicians see what it would really be like if they started World War Three, but all it did for me was confirm everything I already knew about how awful it would be, and add loads of extra details I was going to have to remember whenever I thought about nuclear war in the future. (It was from *Threads* I learned about nuclear winter,

which is one of the worst things I've ever learned.)

I didn't sleep at all that night. Joe of course loved it, and even stuck the cover of that week's Radio Times, which shows a scene from *Threads*, on his bedroom door, so now I'm reminded of it every time I go upstairs.

But at least it means I remember the date. I first spoke to Penny on Monday the 24th of September.

It all started with me and Patrick walking home from school, discussing the future of computers. We were doing this partly because the last lesson of the day had been Computer Science, and Scruffy Clyde (sorry, *Mr Clyde*) had set us an essay on the future, and how computers would feature in it. But we were also doing it because, if you're into computers, you generally spend a lot of time thinking about how computers are going to be in the future. This is because computers, though they're great now (at least, to those of us who are into them like me and Patrick), are going to be absolutely mega in the future. So mega, in fact, that even people who aren't into computers are going to have to admit how great they are.

What will computers be like in the future?

They'll be miles more powerful for a start. They may be networked, too, over the telephone lines, though I can't see that being useful for much. I mean, one of the best things about computers is you're not being bothered by other people while you're using them, so why would you want to plug in a phone line? One thing we can be sure of is computers will use floppy discs instead of tapes for storage. Floppy discs are the future!

The biggest thing in the future of computers is artificial intelligence. This mostly means computers that can beat Gary Kasparov at chess. What computers have achieved at the moment is best described as artificial stupidity. They're stupid because they do exactly what you tell them to, even if it's totally pointless. If you say to a computer, 'Start with

zero, double it, and keep doing that till you reach minus one', it will do exactly that never-ending task forever. (Or at least till Dad tells you to turn that bloody thing off and go to bed.) Really, this is the whole point about computers. They're designed to do the boring stuff, leaving us to do the interesting stuff.

Like programming computers!

That's how I think it's going to be, anyway.

(If we don't all get zapped in a nuclear war.)

Patrick, as usual, had only one thing to say on the subject. 'It's obvious any future computers will be based on the BBC Model B, which is clearly superior to all other micros. I mean, we can't be using ZX Spectrums with their little rubber keyboards in the future, can we? We need serious machines.'

'And a computer named after a TV channel counts as a serious machine, does it?' I said. (The BBC Micro is named after the British Broadcasting Corporation. They helped develop it, and even use it sometimes for special effects on Doctor Who.)

'The BBC is a highly-respected commercial entity with specific computing needs.'

'Yeah, they needed a computer named after them.'

'The *best* computer,' Patrick said.

'The best computer in the world is the Cray X-MP,' I said. 'It costs fifteen million dollars. Or is the BBC Model B, at three hundred and ninety-nine pounds, suddenly better than that?'

'Best *micro*-computer,' Patrick said, eyes rolling as though I was being deliberately stupid.

Which I was. The Cray X-MP weighs more than five tons.

'The BBC Micro,' Patrick continued, 'has eight distinct graphics modes. How many has the Spectrum got? Four, is it? Two? No, wait, it's *one* isn't it?'

‘It only needs one,’ I said. ‘It’s good enough for everything.’

‘Eight graphics modes means you can balance functionality with memory usage, as required.’

‘Which you have to if you’ve only got 32k memory,’ I said. ‘Spectrum’s got 48k.’

‘Uh, 32k expandable by 64k. So that’s 96k, which is a *bit* more than 48. Hmm, even twice as much, I think? It also has a built-in assembly language interpreter, a far better implementation of both Standard *and* Extended BASIC, *four* sound channels...’

And then I give up listening and let him drone on. Patrick could drone for England.

You see, Mum, back when I didn’t have a computer, Patrick had a ZX Spectrum. That’s how I knew I wanted one. He was always telling me how great it was. As soon as I got mine, though, *his* disappeared into the attic, never to be used again, and his dad bought him a BBC Model B. And ever since, by some twisted process known only to the living brain that is Patrick Luffley, every conversation we’ve ever had on the way home from school (which is every day, because we always walk home together) manages to find its way round to the subject of why the BBC Model B (i.e., his computer) is so much better than the ZX Spectrum (i.e., mine).

The fact is, everything Patrick owns is better than anything I could ever own. He lives in a lovely house, which his mum (who practically worships him) keeps so clean and neat that any germs who even *think* of entering it die of despair. Specks of dust can’t land anywhere, because everything’s covered in a force-field of spray-on polish. His dad works in London for some big city company, and is always getting Patrick everything he wants. Not only has Patrick got a BBC Model B micro, he’s got a proper computer monitor, a dot matrix *and* a daisy wheel printer, a

floppy disc drive, a joystick, and a modem. Plus so much software, there's some games he owns that he's only played once!

None of this would be annoying if Patrick wasn't always reminding me of it.

When it comes down to it, me and Patrick are friends because we're the only two boys in our form (4PU) who are into computers. We sit next to each other in class, we spend break times together, we both go up to the computer room at lunchtime, and we walk home from school together. But if we talk about anything other than computers, I usually end up wondering if the two of us live on the same planet.

'...sub-procedures, the AUTO command, the RENUMBER command...'

He's still at it.

When we walk home from school, we of course get to Patrick's house first. Sometimes he invites me in for a SodaStream and an hour of watching him play his latest games. Sometimes I even get the honour of watching him program. (I love programming my ZX Spectrum, Mum, but there's nothing more boring than watching someone else do it. It's like being hungry and watching someone else eat.)

The thing is, he never lets me know if he's going to invite me in till we actually get to his house. Sometimes, when we've been in the middle of an involved discussion, I've followed him down his drive to his front door, only to have him look at me as if to say, 'What are you following me down my drive for? Your home's *that* way!'

So then I cross the London Road (yes, Mum, using the Green Cross Code) to Pritchard Lane, down that to King George Way, up that to Pritchard Gardens and our little council house, all the while lost in my own little world.

Usually.

But this Monday, there was Penny.

I hope you enjoyed reading this excerpt from **Hello World**.
To find out more, visit:

murrayewing.co.uk/helloworld/