

AN EAGLE  
IN THE SNOW

A black and white illustration of a bald eagle in flight, positioned between the words 'EAGLE' and 'SNOW'. The eagle is shown from a side profile, with its wings spread wide, flying towards the right. The eagle's head is white, and its body and wings are dark. The overall composition is minimalist, with the eagle and text centered on a plain white background.





Also by Michael Morpurgo

*Listen to the Moon*

*A Medal for Leroy*

*Little Manfred*

*An Elephant in the Garden*

*Shadow*

*Kaspar – Prince of Cats*

*Running Wild*

*The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips*

*Private Peaceful*

*Alone on a Wide, Wide Sea*

*Born to Run*

*Sparrow*

*Outlaw*

# michael morpurgo

## AN EAGLE IN THE SNOW

An illustration of a bald eagle in flight, wings spread wide, positioned between the words 'EAGLE' and 'SNOW'.

ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL FOREMAN



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**T**his book is dedicated to Private Henry Tandey VC.

And this is why. Many of my stories have come from the lives of others, from truths, written or remembered, this one perhaps more than any other. Certainly had I not discovered, through Michael Foreman, the extraordinary story of the life and death of Walter Tull, the first black officer to serve in the British Army, I should never have

written *A Medal for Leroy*. Had I not met an old soldier from the First World War who had been to that war with horses, in the cavalry, I should not have written *War Horse*. Had I not come across, in a museum in Ypres, an official letter from the army to the mother of a soldier at the front in that same war, informing her that her son had been shot at dawn for cowardice, I should never have told my story of *Private Peaceful*. It was a medal commemorating the sinking of the *Lusitania* by torpedo in 1915 with terrible loss of life, over a thousand souls, that compelled me to think of writing the story of a survivor, which I

did in *Listen to the Moon*.

I write fiction, but fiction with roots in history, in the people who made our history, who fought and often died in our wars. They were real people who lived and had their being in another time, often living and suffering through great and terrible dangers, facing these with unimaginable courage. My challenge as a story maker has been to imagine that courage, to live out in my mind's eye, so far as I can, how it must have been for them.

So when I was told by Dominic Crossley-Holland, history producer at the BBC, about the extraordinary life and times of

Henry Tandey, the most decorated Private soldier of the First World War, I wanted to explore why he did what he did. This I have done, not by writing his biography. That had been done already. Rather I wanted to make his life the basis of a fictional story that takes his story beyond his story, and tries to explore the nature of courage, and the dilemma we might face when we discover that doing the right thing turns out to be the worst thing we have ever done.

Because the life of Henry Tandey is so closely associated with this story, I thought it right to include the history so far as it is

known, of his actual life. This you will find  
in the postscript at the end of the book.

Michael Morpurgo

16<sup>th</sup> February 2015





## PART ONE

THE 11.50 TO LONDON

# 1

**T**he train was still in the station, and I was wondering if we'd ever get going. I was with my ma. I was tired. My arm was hurting and itching at the same time, inside the plaster. I remember she was already at her knitting, her knitting needles tick-tacking away, automatically, effortlessly. Whenever she sat down, Ma



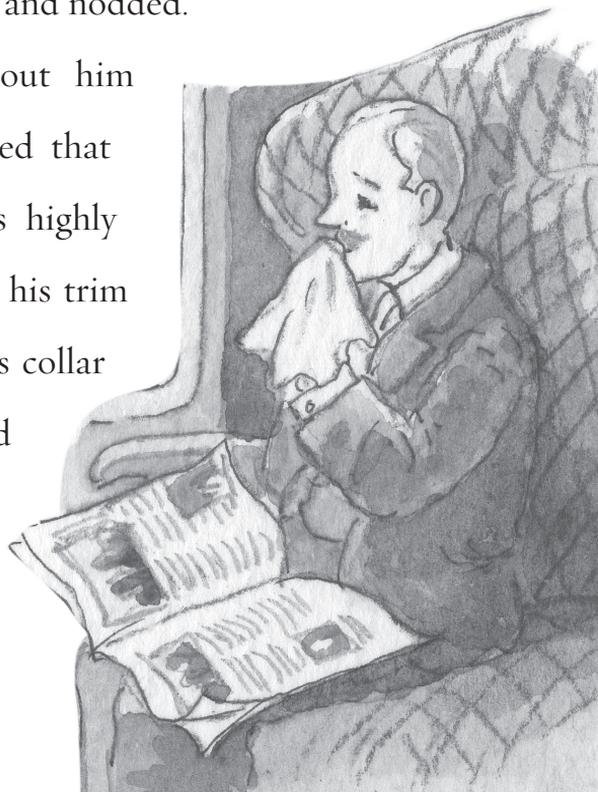
would always be knitting. Socks for Dad, this time.

“This train’s late leaving,” Ma said. “Wonder what’s up? That clock on the platform says it’s well past twelve already. Still, not hardly surprising, I suppose, under the circumstances.” Then she said something that surprised me. “If I drop off to sleep, Barney,” she told me, “just you keep your eye on that suitcase, d’you hear? All we got in this world is up there in that luggage rack, and I don’t want no one pinching it.”

I was just thinking that was quite a strange thing to say, because there was no one else in the carriage except the two of us, when the door opened and a man got in, slamming

the door behind him. He never said a word to us, hardly even acknowledged we were there, but took off his hat, put it up on the rack beside our suitcase, and then settled himself into the seat opposite. He looked at his watch and opened up his paper, his face disappearing behind it for a while. He had to put it down to blow his nose, which was when he caught me staring at him, and nodded.

Everything about him was neat, I noticed that at once, from his highly polished shoes, to his trim moustache and his collar and tie. I decided right away that



he didn't look like the sort of man who would pinch Ma's suitcase. There was also something about him that I thought I recognised; I had the feeling I might have seen him before. Maybe I hadn't. Maybe it was just because he seemed about the same age as Grandpa, with the same searching look in his eye.

But this stranger was neat, and there was nothing neat about my grandpa. My grandpa was a scarecrow, with his hair always tousled – what there was of it – his hands and face grimy from delivering his coal, and that was after he had washed. This stranger had clean hands, and clean nails too, as well looked after as the rest of him.

“Hope I pass inspection, son,” he said,



eyeing me meaningfully.

Ma nudged me, and apologised for my rudeness, before she turned on me. “How many times have I told you not to stare at people, Barney? Say sorry to the gentleman now.”

“Don’t you worry, missus,” he said. “Boys will be boys. I was one once myself, a while ago now, but I was.” Then, after a moment or two, he went on: “S’cuse me, missus, but this is the London train, isn’t it? The 11.50, right?”

“Hope so,” said Ma, nudging me again because I was still staring. I couldn’t help myself. The Station Master came past our window then, waving his green flag, blowing his whistle, his cheeks puffed out so that his





face looked entirely round, like a pink balloon, I thought. Then we were off, the train chuffing itself, wearily, reluctantly, into slow motion.

“Bout time,” said Ma.

“Do you mind if I let in a bit of air, missus?” the stranger asked. “I like a bit of air.”

“Help yourself,” Ma told him. “It’s free.”

He got up, let the window down a couple of notches on the leather strap, and then sat down. He caught my eye again, but this time he smiled at me. So I smiled back.

“Nine, are you?” he asked me.



Ma answered for me. “Ten. He’s a little small for his age. But he’s growing fast now. He should be too. He eats for England. Don’t know where he puts it.”

She was talking about me much as Grandpa might talk about the marrows in his allotment, on and on, but with the same pride and joy, so I didn’t mind too much.

The train was gathering speed now, getting into its stride, sounding happier. *Diddle-dee da, diddle-dee da, diddle-dee dee, diddle-dee da.* I loved that sound, loved that rhythm. Nothing more was said for some time. The stranger went back to reading his paper, and I looked out of the window at the rows of bombed-out streets we were passing, and I thought of Grandpa’s



marrows and his allotment shed, that had been blasted to pieces in the same air raid a couple of nights before. I remembered how he had stood there looking down at the crater where once his vegetables had been growing, all in tidy rows, his cabbages and his leeks and his parsnips. Grandpa's allotment was the only thing tidy about him. That allotment had been his life.

“I'll dig it again, Barney,” he'd said, his eyes filling with anger, “you see if I won't. We'll have all the carrots and onions and tatties we need. The beggars who done this, I won't let them win.” He brushed away the tears with the back of his hand, and they were fierce tears. “You know something, Barney,” he



went on, “it’s funny: all through the last war, in the trenches, I never hated ’em. They were just Fritzis, fighting like we were. But now it’s different. They done what they done to Coventry, my place, my city, my people. I hate ’em, and for what they done to my allotment I hate ’em too. They got no right.” He took my hand, and held it tight. He’d done that often enough before when I was upset. Now it was him that was upset, and I was squeezing his hand, I was doing the comforting.

But when it came to Big Black Jack, there was no comforting him.

All night during the air raid we’d been down in the shelter in Mulberry Road clutching one another, all of us knowing the



next bomb might be the one to get us. You tried not to listen for the next one, but you did. With every bomb that fell you tried to believe it was the last one. But it never was. Grandpa had been the rock Ma and I had clung to, his arms firm and strong around us, holding us tight, and singing his songs, his voice hoarse and loud above all the whimpering and the crying and screaming, and louder still when the bombs were coming closer, when the ground was shaking, when the shelter was full of dust.

When at last the All Clear siren sounded and the terror was over and we came up out of the shelter – how many hours we were down there I do not know – we found the world



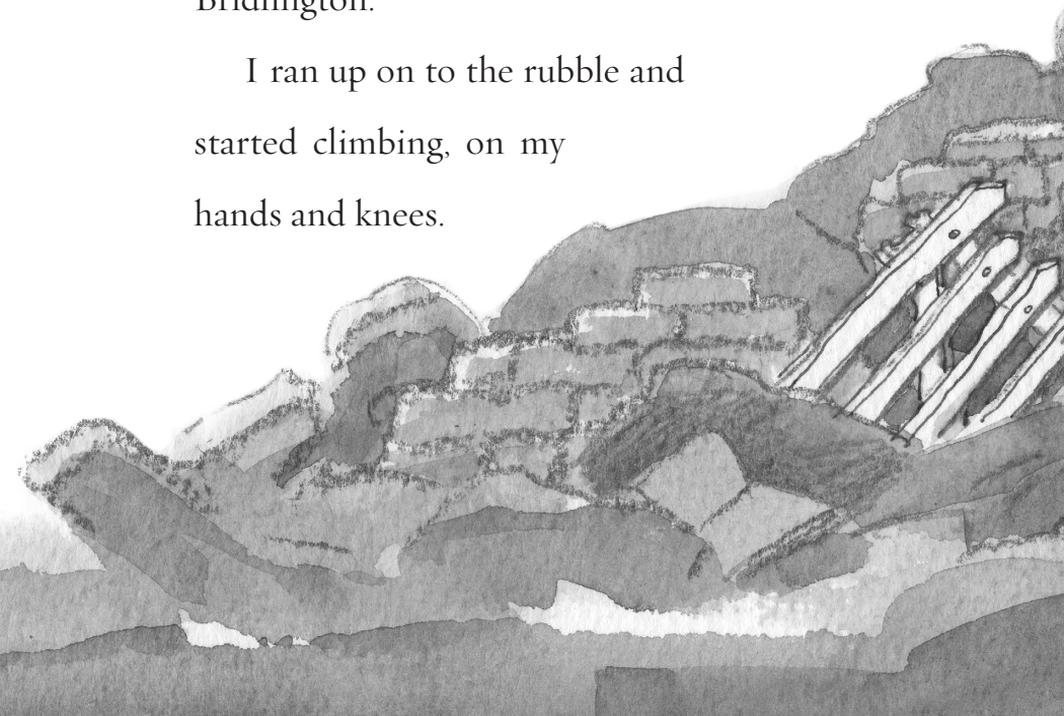
about us a place of rubble and ruin, hot with fires that were still smouldering everywhere. Mulberry Road, what was left of it, was filled with choking acrid smoke that hung like a fog around us and above us. There was no good air to breathe, no sky to see.

Hoping against hope, we made our way home, to our house at the end of the road. But we had no house. We had no home. And it wasn't just our place that was gone. The whole street was unrecognisable, simply not there. Only the lamppost was left, the one outside where our house had been, the one that shone into my window at night-times. Friends and neighbours were there, a policeman and an air-raid warden, all clambering over the



rubble, scrabbling and searching. Ma said she would stay and see if there was anything that could be recovered. She told Grandpa to take me away. She was upset, crying, and I could tell she didn't want me with her. But my train set was in there somewhere, under all the ruins, and my red London bus I'd got for Christmas and all the tin soldiers on my shelf, my special cockle-shell too from the beach at Bridlington.

I ran up on to the rubble and started climbing, on my hands and knees.





I was going to look. I was going to find them. I had to. But the air-raid warden caught me by the arm, holding me back, and then, despite all my protests, he was carrying me down again to Ma. “My bus,” I cried, “my soldiers, my things.”

“It’s too dangerous, Barney,” she said, shaking my shoulders to make me listen. “Just go with Grandpa. Do as you’re told, please, Barney. I’ll find what I can, I promise.”

So Grandpa took me off to his allotment, just to find out if it was all right, he said. But I knew really that it was because Ma didn’t want me there around all those crying people. Mrs McIntyre was sitting on the pavement, outside her shop, her stockings



in tatters, her legs bleeding. She was staring into space, fingering her rosary beads, her lips moving in silent prayer. Mr McIntyre was there somewhere but no one could find him.

It wasn't far from the allotment to the field where Grandpa kept Big Black Jack, our old carthorse, and Grandpa's soul-mate since Grandma died – mine too, come to that. Big Black Jack was the horse Grandpa worked with and talked to all day and every day, as they delivered coal all around the city, and I'd go with him sometimes, after school and at weekends. I couldn't carry the sacks of coal – they were too heavy. My job was to fold the empty sacks for Grandpa, and



pile them neatly in the back of the cart, and to make sure Big Black Jack always had corn in his sack, and water enough to drink. So Big Black Jack and me, we were best mates.

At first, everything seemed just as it should be: the rickety old shed still standing, and the water bucket by the door full of water, the hay net hanging limp and empty. But there was no sign of Big Black Jack.

Then we saw the smashed fence. He'd got free – not surprising, with all that bombing. “He's took off somewhere,” Grandpa said. “He'll be fine. That horse can look after hisself. He'll be fine. He's done it before. He'll be back. He'll find his way home, always does.”



But I knew even as he was saying it that he was just telling himself, hoping it was true, but fearing the worst.