Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Half a Man

Written by

Michael Morpurgo

Published by

Walker Books Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

For Eric Pearce, whose extraordinary courage inspired this story. One of the very last of McIndoe's "Guinea Pigs".

M. M.

For Paul, Anne, Kirsty and Lorna

G. O'C.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously. First published in Great Britain 2005 • This edition published 2014 by Walker Books Ltd, 87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ • 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 • Text © 2005, 2006 Michael Morpurgo • Illustrations © 2014 Gemma O'Callaghan • The right of Michael Morpurgo and Gemma O'Callaghan to be identified as author and illustrator respectively of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 • This book has been typeset in Bembo • Printed in China All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher. • British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library • ISBN 978-1-4063-5133-0 • www.walker.co.uk

HALF A MAN

MICHAEL MORPURGO

ILLUSTRATED BY GEMMA O'CALLAGHAN



WALKER BOOKS



WHEN I WAS VERY LITTLE, MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY AGO NOW, I USED TO HAVE NIGHTMARES. You don't forget nightmares. This one was always the same. It began with a face, a twisted, tortured face that screamed silently, a face without hair or eyebrows, a skull more than a face, a skull which was covered in puckered, scarred skin stretched over the cheekbones. It was Grandpa's face and he was staring at me out of his scream. And always the face was on fire, flames licking out of his ears and mouth.

I remember I always tried to force myself to wake

up, so that I wouldn't have to endure the rest of it. But I knew every time that the rest would follow however hard I tried to escape – that my nightmare would not release me, would not allow me to wake until the whole horrible tale had played itself out.

I saw a great ship ablaze on the ocean. There were men on fire jumping overboard as she went down, then swimming in a sea where the water burned and boiled around them. I saw Grandpa swimming towards a lifeboat, but it was packed with sailors and there was no room for Grandpa. He begged them to let him on, but they wouldn't. Behind him, the ship's bow lifted out of the sea, and the whole ship groaned like a wounded beast in her death throes. Then she went down, slipping slowly under the waves, gasping great gouts of steam in the last of her agony. A silence came over the burning sea. Grandpa was clinging to the lifeboat now, his elbows



hooked over the side. That was when I realized that I was in the lifeboat with the other sailors. He saw me looking down at him and reached out his hand for help. It was a hand with no fingers.

I would wake up then, shaking in my terror and knowing even now that my nightmare was not over. For my nightmare would always seem to happen just a day or two before Grandpa came to stay. It was a visit I always dreaded. He didn't come to see us in London very often, every couple of years at most, and usually at Christmas. Thinking about it now, I suppose this was part of the problem. There were perfectly good reasons why we





didn't and couldn't see more of him. He lived far away, on the Isles of Scilly, so it was a long way for him to come, and expensive too. Besides which, he hated big cities like London. I'm sure if I'd seen him more often, I'd have got used to him – used to his face and his hands and his silent, uncommunicative ways.

I don't blame my mother and father. I can see now why they were so tense before each visit. Being as taciturn and unsmiling as he was, Grandpa can't have been an easy guest. But, even so, they did make it a lot worse for me than they needed to. Just before Grandpa came there were always endless warnings, from Mother in particular (he was my grandpa on my mother's side), about how I mustn't upset him, how I mustn't leave my toys lying about on the sitting-room floor because



he didn't see very well and might trip over them, how I mustn't have the television on too much because Grandpa didn't like noise. But most of all they drummed into me again and again that whatever I did, I must not under any circumstances stare at him – that it was rude, that he hated people staring at him, particularly children.

I tried not to; I tried very hard. When he first arrived I would always try to force myself to look at something else. Once I remember it was a Christmas decoration, a red paper bell hanging just above his head in the front hall. Sometimes I would make myself look very deliberately at his waistcoat perhaps, or the gold watch chain he always wore. I'd fix my gaze on anything just as long as it was nowhere near the forbidden places, because I knew that once I started looking at his forbidden face or his forbidden hands I wouldn't be able to stop myself.

But every time, sooner or later, I'd do it; I'd sneak a crafty look. And very soon that look became a stare. I was never at all revolted by what I saw. If I had been, I could have looked away easily. I think I was more fascinated than anything else, and horrified too, because I'd been told something of what had happened to him in the war. I saw the suffering he had gone through in his deep blue eyes – eyes that hardly ever blinked, I noticed. Then I'd feel my mother's eyes boring into me, willing me to stop staring, or my father would kick me under the table. So I'd look at Grandpa's waistcoat – but I could only manage it for a while. I couldn't help myself. I had to look again at the forbidden places. He had three half-fingers on one hand and no fingers at all on the other. His top lip had almost completely disappeared and one of his ears was little more than a hole in his head.



As I grew up I'd often ask about how exactly it had happened. My mother and father never seemed to want to tell me much about it. They claimed they didn't know any more than they'd told me already – that Grandpa had been in the merchant navy in the Second World War, that his ship had been torpedoed in the Atlantic, and he'd been terribly burnt. He'd been adrift in a boat for days and days, they told me, before he'd been picked up. He'd spent the rest of the war in a special hospital.



Every time I looked at his face and hands the story seemed to want to tell itself again in my head. I so much wanted to know more. And I wanted to know more about my grandmother, too, but that was a story that made everyone even more tight-lipped. I knew she was called Annie, but I had never met her and no one ever talked about her. All anyone would ever say was that she had "gone away" a very long time ago, before I was born. I longed to ask Grandpa himself about his ship being torpedoed, about my grandmother too, but I never dared, not even when I was older and got to know him a lot better.





I must have been about twelve when I first went to see him on my own on the Scilly Isles for my summer holiday, and by then the nightmares had gone. That's not to say I wasn't still apprehensive in those first few days after I arrived. But I was always happy to be there, happy

just to get out of London. I'd go and stay with him in his cottage on Bryher – a tiny island, only about eighty people live there. He had no electricity, only a generator in a shed outside, which he'd switch off before he went to bed. The cottage wasn't much more than a shed, either.