Flamingo Boy





Also by Michael Morpurgo

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For Alan, for Lorens,
and their mum and dad





With thanks to Anne-Sophie Deville who first introduced us to her flamingos and to the beauty and mystery of her beloved Camargue



CHAPTER 1

Someone Called Vincent

I read it in a book once, when I was a boy. I don't remember what book it was from, but the story I have never forgotten. An old traveller is sitting on the steps of his gypsy caravan, drinking a mug of tea in the sunshine. He's stopped for a while, right in the middle of a roundabout, his tethered piebald horse grazing the grass verge nearby.

A police car pulls up. "You can't stop here," the policeman says.

"Morning, son," says the traveller. "You want some tea? Got plenty to spare." The policeman is rather nonplussed by this. No one has called him "son" for a very long time, and he rather likes it.

"No time to stop for tea," he says. "Thanks all the same. Where are you going, you and your horse?"

"Not sure," says the traveller. "The old horse and me, we just follow the bend in the road, go wherever it takes us."

"Nice horse," the policeman says, his tone softening all the time.

"And where might you be off to, son, this fine day?" the old traveller asks him.

"Maybe I'll do what you do," replies the policeman. "Maybe I'll just follow the bend in the road. Sounds like a good idea." And off he goes, knowing full well he should have moved the old traveller on, but glad he hadn't.

I don't know why, but I have never forgotten that story. I am older these days, a lot older – over fifty now. And, when I think about it, I suppose that in my own way I was trying to do just what the old traveller had done, what that policeman said he would like to do. I was following the bend in the road. That's what I was setting out to do, in the summer of 1982, which was a long time ago now, but I remember it all, as if it were yesterday. It's another story I don't forget. You don't forget the stories and the people who change your life.

It began with a picture, a painting, two paintings really. In Art class at my primary school, Miss Weatherby – who was the best teacher I ever had – told us one day to "paint a story". So I painted a picture of that same old traveller sitting on the steps of his gypsy caravan, his piebald horse grazing the grass nearby, and there was a police car in the painting too. I gave it a title, wrote it at the top: "Following the Bend in the Road". Miss Weatherby said it was the best painting I had ever done – she said that a lot, but she meant it every time. I took it home. My mother also said it was brilliant, so brilliant that I should sign it, and she would hang it up on the wall in my bedroom, in pride of place, next to my boat picture.

Now, that other picture, the boat picture, is very important in the story, because my name is Vincent, Vincent Montague. Only my mother called me Vincent. My friends at school always called me "Monty", or "Vince", neither of which I have ever liked. I always liked to be known as Vincent. So, of course, I signed my picture "Vincent".

My mother had it framed – she liked it that much – and hung it, as she said she would, on the wall above my bed.

"There is only one place for this," I remember her saying, as she stood back, head on one side, and admired it. "It looks perfect up there, doesn't it? That's just where it belongs."

So there it was, my picture of the old traveller, hanging right beside my boat picture, the one that had always been there above my bed, that I had always loved: a painting of four boats on a beach, with the sea and sky behind. Strangely, it was also signed by "Vincent", which was, of course, I am sure, one of the reasons why I had always loved it so much. But I hadn't painted that one. Someone else had, someone else called Vincent.

My mother used to joke about it sometimes. "I like that boat picture, Vincent," she would laugh, "but I prefer yours." I loved her saying that, of course, but for years I never understood why it was that funny. I just thought she had a rather strange sense of humour, which was true. Anyway, both of these pictures became part of the landscape of my life as I grew up, from a carefree primary-school kid who loved cycling and camping, into a sixth-form student who loved poetry and dreaming – and



still camping – and was looking forward impatiently to whatever was coming next.

Gazing out of the window, which I so often did whilst I was supposed to be studying for my exams, down into the tiny walled garden of our suburban house in Watford, I might be absorbed for minutes on end watching a thrush cracking open a snail on the top of the wall. Everything and anything was more interesting to me than getting on with my work, even the washing line that was strung from the drainpipe on the garage across the garden to the weathervane on the shed, with pyjamas and shirts flapping in the wind; or perhaps my mother would be home after work, chatting over the wall to Mrs Donaldson next door, both of them out for a crafty smoke.

I was locked into interminable revision for my exams, dreading the day they would come, but longing to have them done and dusted, longing to have a life. I loved home, loved my mother, but I knew it was a small world I was living in, and I yearned to be gone, to be away from Watford, and off on my travels, to be following the bend in the road, like the old traveller in the story.



CHAPTER 2

My Near-death Experience

In these idling moments, which were many, I kept finding myself turning again and again to look at the two pictures above my bed. I was trying so hard not to become distracted, but I never tried hard enough. Sooner or later, I always found I could no longer resist the temptation. I had to look.

There they were, my small gypsy caravan painting, my best painting ever, according to Miss Weatherby – the story behind it still echoing in my mind – and beside it the other "Vincent" picture. This was a much larger one in a heavy wooden frame, of four boats drawn up on the beach, and four more out at sea beyond – fishing boats by the look of

them, but like no other boats I had ever seen. And both pictures painted by "Vincent". I am sure that my mother must have told me who this other Vincent was at some time or another in all these years; but, if she had, I hadn't been listening, or I wasn't interested, or I had long since forgotten.

It wasn't just the coincidence of the name that I loved. I loved the boat picture above any other paintings I had ever seen. They were graceful-looking boats, flamboyantly coloured, in reds and blues and yellows and greens like the gypsy caravan in my own painting. The empty beach behind them stretched away to the horizon, waves rolling up on to the sand, and a wide, wide sky above was filled with scudding clouds. One of the boats was called *Amitié* – I could see it quite clearly painted on the prow.

The truth is that if I had not been so busy procrastinating that day, during my revision, I might have never discovered what that word meant at all. It was all part of my dreamy disinclination to get on and revise. I decided to look it up. It was a French word apparently, which I thought it might be – though I had never come across it in my French lessons. It meant friendship or love. So I surmised these boats must

very likely have been drawn up on a French beach, but where, on what coast, I had no idea.

At about the same time as I was making this discovery, I happened to come across – in a second-hand bookstall in town – another painting signed by this Vincent, of sunflowers. It was on the cover of a book, and it was a picture I knew at once. The signature was definitely the same, the bright and vibrant colours of the painting instantly recognisable too. I was sure it had to be painted by the same Vincent who had signed my boat picture. I still don't know what took me so long to get around to making the connection. I have to say I felt rather ignorant and stupid, because this Vincent was, of course, rather famous; in fact, he was amongst the most famous artists the world has ever known. I bought the book for £1.50, took it home and read it from cover to cover.

Vincent van Gogh, a Dutch artist, had signed his pictures "Vincent", just as I had signed my gypsy caravan painting. I might have recognised his famous sunflower picture, but I had never before paid any attention to the signature, nor really taken on board who it was that had painted these amazing sunflowers. And I certainly did not know he had



painted fishing boats as well. But there it was on the wall above my bed, my boat picture, and painted by the famous Vincent van Gogh.

He had spent some time in the south of France, I discovered, towards the end of his life. Whilst living there, he had painted hundreds of pictures, some landscapes, some of the people who lived and worked there. A few of them – including mine – he had painted down by the sea, just a few miles from where he was living, in a town called Arles. It was in his room in Arles, in a state of deep depression, that he had cut off his own ear. Mental illness had forced him to spend time in a nearby hospital, but he never really recovered. In the end, he had been driven to suicide.

The more I read about him, the more I wanted to find out about him, to see as many of his pictures as I could, to go where he had gone, to stand on the beach where he had painted his boats. Such diversion and reveries, of course, did not help me to focus on revision for my Geography and English Literature exams, and even less on my Biology, which I especially loathed.

But it wasn't just my belated discovery of who this Vincent

was that made me want to go where he had gone, to find the beach where he had painted my picture of the fishing boats on the sand. There were other pictures from the book I particularly liked: one of a little bridge over a canal, and the one of a café bathed in yellow light in a cobbled street under a starry evening sky. I wanted to go to all these places, be where he had been. It wasn't because he was famous that made me want to go, and it wasn't just because we happened to share the same name either. It was because that boat picture of his above my bed very nearly killed me.

I was in my bedroom, at my desk by the window, pretending to be deep into my revision. Moments before, I had been lying on my bed, trying to summon up the willpower to get on with my work. I was only at my desk at all because I had heard my mother coming up the stairs and did not want her to catch me lazing about again. So there I was, hunched over my Biology textbook, looking as studious as I could, and waiting for the inevitable knock on my door. That was when it happened, my near-death experience. No crashing, no splintering of glass. The boat painting – I remind you, it was a large and very heavy picture – simply fell off

the wall and landed with a great thud on my pillow, exactly where my head had been less than a minute before.

One look behind the picture told me that the string had broken, and that same look told me something else I had never known. There was a piece of paper taped to the back of the frame, covered in faded writing. I picked the picture up, and carried it over to the light of the window so I could read it.

To little Vincent from his grandma and grandpa, on your first birthday, 27th January 1964.

A long time ago, we went to this beach in the Camargue region in the south of France, where Vincent van Gogh had gone when he painted this picture. The boats were not there, of course, but the beach and the sea and the sky were just as he painted them. It was windy that day, and you can almost feel the wind in his picture. We bought it at a local shop and had it hanging in our bedroom for years and years. It is our favourite picture in all the world. So we thought you might love it too, as much as we have. And, you never know, one day you might go to the Camargue, and stand on the beach

where we once stood, in the wind, where another Vincent, Vincent van Gogh, painted these lovely boats.

With our love always,

G and G

Had that picture not fallen off the wall, none of the rest of this story would have happened at all, a story that in the end would turn out to have very little to do with Vincent van Gogh. But without him and his boat painting that nearly killed me that day, and without Grandma and Grandpa I suppose, I would never have chosen to go on my travels, after my exams were over, down to the south of France where Vincent van Gogh had once gone.

I went on my wanderings by train and bus, and on foot, camping out, always following the bend in the road, a road that I hoped might lead me eventually down towards the sea, and maybe even to the beach where Vincent van Gogh had painted those fishing boats all those years before. It was a road that would take me instead into another world, into another time and another place altogether.



CHAPTER 3

The Long, Straight Road to Nowhere

So it was that I found myself that first summer of freedom wandering my way through the strange and mysterious landscape of the Camargue in the south of France, marvelling at the windswept wildness of the marshes around me, at the shallow pink lakes and the canals, at the ancient stone farmhouses, and, everywhere, flocks of flamingos. Every sighting of them lifted my spirits for, beautiful though this place was, it was desolate too and inhospitable, especially when the wind howled and roared, which it did sometimes for days on end. All I could do then was huddle in my tent, and hope against hope that it would not blow me away.

When at last the wind did die down, the mosquitoes would be there in their millions – every one of them, it seemed to me, homing in on my tent, seeking me out. Sleep was impossible. Cursing them, flailing at them, did not help – it made things worse if anything. I covered my face and neck and arms and hands with the insect repellent my mother had made me take in my rucksack, along with pills for just about every illness I might encounter on my travels. But, as it turned out, none of the medicines she had given me was of much help when I most needed it.

I don't know whether it was the water I had drunk that made me ill, or something I had eaten, or some kind of infection from the mosquito bites I had been scratching. I do know that one evening, walking down a long, straight road to nowhere, as it seemed to me, a causeway with pink lakes on both sides, and not a bend in sight, I began to feel strange, as if I were no longer part of myself. My head was full of a throbbing pain that weighed heavy on my forehead. I kept having bouts of dizziness that brought me near to losing my balance, to fainting. Sometimes it felt as if my legs were not my own, that they were

stumbling on by themselves, and not under my control at all.

I remember there were flamingos nearby, strolling languidly through the shallows, lifting their heads between feeding and peering at me quizzically as I passed by. The mosquitoes were gone and I was thankful for that, but then I felt the dreaded wind coming in again, in vicious gusts, trying to blow me off the causeway into the lake. I shouted at the wind to go away, and the flamingos took off in a flurry of beating wings and honking, leaving me alone on the road.

"Not you!" I cried to them. "I didn't mean you. Come back! Please come back!" But they did not. Now I had only the cruel wind for company.

I knew I needed help, but there was no one about, not a house in sight, and the road behind and ahead of me went on forever, as far as I could see, into the gathering gloom of the evening, daylight lingering now only in distant streaks of sunset. The lakes on either side of me were no longer pink but blood-red. But then, to my great relief, the flamingos returned. They came flying over my head, floating

in on wide black wings to land nearby, in their hundreds, honking happily at me, telling me, I thought, to keep going. So I did, somehow. They seemed to be walking along with me, through the shallows, escorting me, on either side of the road.

I marvelled at the elegance of these creatures, at the oddness of their balletic gait, and their absurd, outsize curved bills, at the incongruity of their startling pinkness. Their stick-like legs seemed to be wading backwards through the water, and yet, impossibly, they were moving forward. There was no logic to their knee joints. Their bills were fishing backwards too. How did they do that? They could stand one-legged in this wild wind and not fall over. They ran on water to take off and land. How did they do that?

My legs were giving way under me, becoming weaker now with every step. I knew they must collapse at any moment. My senses were reeling, my head swirling, my knees buckling. The flamingos nearby were looking at me in astonishment, honking to me, calling to me. I felt myself blacking out, falling, and there was nothing I could do about it.



There is a time between sleeping and waking when dreams are at their most intense and real, so much so that you cannot be sure that the dreamtime has ended or the waking has begun. Dream or not, there was an evening sky above me, and I was lying awkwardly, uncomfortably, on my back, on stony ground. A dog was snuffling at my ear. I was sure it was a dog, because it smelled like dog, and its nose was cold and wet on my ear. The honking of the flamingos echoed through my dream, calling me awake.

Gentle fingers were opening my eyelids, stroking my hair and touching my cheek. An urgent voice was calling to me, but not with any words I could understand. I was still desperately trying to remain cocooned in my dream, unable or unwilling to wake. I was being lifted then. I could hear grunting, heavy breathing, stumbling footsteps. I knew I was being carried, but whether this was all happening in my dream or not I still had no idea, and neither did I care.

I heard the howling of the wind, felt the cold of it on my cheek. Only then did I really begin to believe that I might be coming out of my dream. I felt strong arms around me. I *was* being carried. Whoever it was who had rescued