opening extract from

Dear Mr Morpingo

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How Nothing Nearly Happened

It was 1944 and the Second World War was still raging. Hitler's doodlebugs – rocket-propelled bombs like small planes with no pilots – were dropping out of the sky over southern England. For safety's sake, the infant Michael Morpurgo – though he wasn't called Morpurgo then – and his older brother Peter had been taken by their mother away from the London area to stay with a distant relation up North.

This relation was a vicar, so Michael, Peter and his mother shared the rectory with the vicar's family. It was raining, but Michael's mother firmly believed that all babies needed fresh air, every day, rain or shine. She wrapped little Michael up warm, snuggled him down in his pram and parked him safely at the back of the garage out of sight behind the vicar's car. Michael was sleeping peacefully when the vicar came out, jumped in his car and drove off. That would have been fine except, somehow, Michael's pram had got

hooked onto the back bumper. Michael and the pram went jolting faster and faster down the drive behind the accelerating car.

Luckily, the pram couldn't keep pace with the car and it came adrift, tipping Michael out onto the drive. He had a few bruises – but he was alive. But if the pram had *not* come adrift, if the vicar with the pram still hooked on behind had got as far as a busy main road, if Michael had landed on the sharp stones of a rockery, he would never have been able to write his books or to read and tell and talk about stories to audiences all over Britain as the Children's Laureate. And thousands of children from city primary schools would never have been able to spend a week on a farm milking cows, mucking out pigs, digging ditches – and listening to Michael tell his stories.

Nothing nearly happened. It was as close as that.

This exciting start to life seems right for the author of such stories as *War Horse*, *Kensuke's Kingdom* and *Private Peaceful*. However, Michael did not grow up in the way you might expect someone who has written almost 100 books (he's lost count) to grow up. He was lucky as a small child – he had plenty of poems and stories read to him. But as he grew older, he did not read every book he could get his hands on; neither did he fill up exercise books with his own amazing stories while he was still at primary school. There *were* a lot of books around at home, but he didn't like most

of them. In fact, he was almost afraid of them. He certainly did not enjoy writing. He was, he says, 'the typical reluctant reader and reluctant writer'. There may have been no computer games to play when he was a boy, but Michael could always find plenty of things to do to avoid reading a book.

It wasn't until he'd left school that Michael came to love reading. And not long after he came to love reading, he discovered, with the help of some children he was teaching, that he also loved telling stories and then, only a little later, writing stories. He has been telling and writing stories ever since.

This book tells Michael's story. It also answers the question every audience asks Michael: 'Where do you get your ideas from?' There is a chapter about how Michael gets started when he is writing a story, how he makes his characters come alive, how he gives them voices and how he keeps you wanting to turn the next page, impatient to find out what happens next – in fact, about how he writes. You'll read about a friendship which changed Michael's life, about the CDs he would take with him if he were stranded on a desert island, about what he'd like to write in the future, about ... but that's probably enough to be going on with.

It took Michael many years to discover the person he wanted to be: a storyteller, a writer in close touch with the young readers he writes for, excited by the

places he explores and the people he meets on his travels, excited by the journeys he makes in his mind. He and his wife Clare had a long search to make before they found somewhere they felt they belonged, where they could find their roots. When at last they did, Michael says, 'I could be comfortable in my own skin.'

This book begins with that search.

Somewhere to Belong

Beards, Nonsense, Mozart and Uncles

When Michael looks back on his childhood and his early adult life, he feels he never belonged anywhere; he had no roots.

He was born in 1943 in St Alban's in Hertfordshire. After his adventure in the flying pram in Northumberland, Michael and his family returned to Hertfordshire in the summer of 1945 at the end of the war. They lived with his mother's parents at Radlett, about fifteen miles north of London. Michael's father was still serving in the Army in Baghdad and, although the war was over, he was not released from duty for many months.

Grandfather Emile Cammaerts was Belgian and in his youth in Brussels he had been a well-known poet. At the beginning of the First World War, one of his poems became famous as a patriotic rallying call to his countrymen and women, urging them to resist the occupying German Army. The poem was set to

music by the English composer Edward Elgar and performed at a concert in London to support Belgian refugees who had fled to England. More than half a century later, Michael read his grandfather's poem, accompanied by Elgar's music, at a concert in Ypres, the site of an important First World War battle in Belgium close to the French border. Michael's grandmother was English, but when she was establishing a reputation as a young opera singer in Europe, Emile Cammaerts had heard her perform. The poet fell for the opera singer, they married and moved to England. Michael's grandfather somehow left the fiery young poet behind in Belgium; he became a

Michael's grandparents, 1964.

very English, tweed-suited gentleman and a professor at London University.

What young Michael liked especially about his grandfather was his flaming red beard. Grandfather was very fond of the Victorian writer Edward Lear. He read his grandson such poems as 'The Owl and the Pussycat' and 'The Dong with the Luminous Nose', but the one Michael enjoyed most as he sat on his grandfather's knee was this limerick:

There was an Old Man with a beard,
Who said, 'It is just as I feared! –
  Two Owls and a Hen,
  Four Larks and a Wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!'

Michael's fingers could not resist reaching up to explore that luxurious red beard, no doubt checking for nests.

Grandmother was not so easy to get to know as Grandfather. Michael felt that even his own mother was a little afraid of her. Not because she was fierce or bad-tempered. Quite the opposite. She was unbelievably *good*; you could never imagine her doing anything wrong. She always wore long, flowing, old-fashioned dresses and, says Michael, 'As her grandson, I thought she was the woman God would have married.'

Michael's mother and his grandmother frequently read poems and stories to the boys. They were wonderful readers, for both were professionally trained stage performers. Even now, when Michael reads Rudyard Kipling's 'The Elephant's Child' or 'The Cat that Walked by Himself' from *Just So Stories*, he can hear the rhythms of his mother's voice. If you read 'The Elephant's Child' aloud, Michael thinks, you can almost *taste* the music and joy of the language:

> Then Kolokolo Bird said, with a mournful cry, 'Go to the banks of the great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees ...'

Since that great grey-green, greasy river flows in and out of the story several times, young Michael joined in with his mother whenever it appeared. He also loved the fun and excitement of the tug-of-war between the Crocodile and the Elephant's Child, whose trunk is being painfully used as the rope. Since Michael's mother was an actress, she was no doubt especially good at the Elephant Child's strangled cry of 'Led go! You are hurtig be!' as his nose, caught in the Crocodile's teeth, is stretched longer and longer.

Then there were the nonsense poems of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* to enjoy together. They read

Michael, right, with brother Peter, 1948.

'Jabberwocky' ('Twas brillig and the slithy toves/Did gyre and gimble in the wabe') which Alice finds printed back-to-front in a Looking Glass book. Michael probably thought, as Alice did in the story, 'it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't exactly know what they are!' Michael enjoyed the music of the language of the poems and stories. And there always seemed to be music playing on the gramophone at Radlett – frequently Mozart, no doubt the choice of his opera singer grandmother. Michael writes his stories now with music echoing around the house; very often it will be a Mozart CD in the player.

Playing with the rhythm of words became a part of his childhood. It was about this time, his mother later

told him, that she overheard him rocking on his bed, chanting to himself, 'Zanzibar! Zanzibar! Marzipan! Zanzibar!' Like most successful authors, Michael never wastes a good memory. Fifty years later, a child chants those same words in his story, *The Wreck of the Zanzibar*.

From his grandparents' house in Radlett, Michael moved in 1946 to live in a flat in Philbeach Gardens, near Earl's Court in south-west London. Some of Michael's aunts were frequent visitors to Radlett and Philbeach Gardens with their young children. Their husbands, like Michael's father, were still away serving in the Armed Forces. Although Michael had never met them, he was also very aware of two uncles who had fought in the war. They were often the subject of conversations between the adults at home. Indeed, he saw his Uncle Peter in his RAF uniform every day, there on the mantelpiece in a silver photograph frame. Peter Cammaerts had been a navigator in a bomber, plotting its route night after night across the North Sea to Germany to drop its deadly load on the weapon factories and cities of the enemy. When his plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire and his pilot killed, Uncle Peter took the controls to keep the aircraft flying while the other members of the crew drifted down to safety in their parachutes. Time ran out for Uncle Peter; he could not escape before the bomber crashed and he died in the wreckage.

Michael did not get to know his other uncle, Francis Cammaerts, until many years after the war, but he did know that Uncle Francis had done something very important, very secret and very dangerous. At the outbreak of war in 1939, Francis had registered as a pacifist, since he did not believe in killing under any circumstances. When his brother Peter had been killed, Francis had decided that he too must now join up for military service. At first, he worked as a medical orderly; but with his Belgian background, Francis spoke perfect French and that was a rare and valuable skill. After training, he was parachuted into France and became a leader with the French Resistance, making life as difficult as possible for the occupying German Army. The men of the Maquis, as the Resistance fighters were called, often lived rough in the forests and caves of the mountains, making quick hit-and-run raids and blowing up railway lines or bridges. They also helped escaping refugees and airmen to avoid capture on their way to neutral Spain.

Years later, Francis' work became better known, though he himself preferred not to talk about it. When he was a Headmaster of a boys' secondary school in the 1950s, his pupils and their teachers knew nothing of his war record. Then, one evening, Francis was the subject of the well-known television programme, 'This Is Your Life'. Francis was tricked

into coming to the studio where friends and colleagues, including some of his old comrades from the Maquis, were waiting to celebrate his wartime achievements. When Francis walked into the school hall to take morning assembly the next day, all the boys went wild, cheering their new and rather embarrassed hero.

Then there was another regular visitor, a Spitfire pilot who had survived the Battle of Britain. To a small boy at the end of the war, meeting a Spitfire pilot was as exciting as meeting David Beckham or Thierry Henry would be to a football fanatic today. Every time Michael's hero came to the house he was told he must not stare, because the pilot's face had been terribly burned and scarred in action. He had undergone extensive operations by plastic surgeons. However hard he tried, of course, six-year-old Michael could not take his eyes off that damaged face.

Michael has written several books about war. *War Horse*, *Farm Boy*, *The Butterfly Lion* and *Private Peaceful* all include the dramatic and sometimes terrible experiences of people, and animals, in the First World War. *Toro! Toro!* is set during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39. *Billy the Kid* takes its reader through the North African desert, Italy and on to the horrors of the concentration camps in Germany in the Second World War. *Waiting for Anya* takes place in a German-occupied village in the French Pyrenees in

the same war; and *The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips* is told against the background of the tragic rehearsals in South Devon for the D-Day Landings of 1944. Looking back, Michael is sure his awareness of the parts his two uncles – and his Spitfire pilot hero – played in the war was an important element in firing his interest in the impact of war and its after-effects.

His uncles were influential in another way. Even when he was very young, Michael felt somehow that the sacrifice made by his Uncle Peter, and the mysterious bravery of his Uncle Francis, set high standards that he was supposed to live up to. Like

A school photo of Michael, 1948.

the Spitfire pilot, they had clearly had a strong sense of duty. Even now, despite all the stories he has written, all the prizes he has won and all his successful work for the charity, Farms for City Children, Michael still feels a strong pressure to succeed in whatever he does – and an anxiety that he might fail. Sometimes, that pressure can be helpful; at other times, it is a burden.

But it wasn't only his uncles who made him feel that kind of pressure as he grew older. A new and more powerful influence was about to enter Michael's life.