

michael  
morpurgo

private  
peaceful



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

## FIVE PAST TEN

They've gone now, and I'm alone at last. I have the whole night ahead of me, and I won't waste a single moment of it. I shan't sleep it away. I won't dream it away either. I mustn't, because every moment of it will be far too precious.

I want to try to remember everything, just as it was, just as it happened. I've had nearly eighteen years of yesterdays and tomorrows, and tonight I must remember as many of them as I can. I want tonight to be long, as long as my life, not filled with fleeting dreams that rush me on towards dawn.

Tonight, more than any other night of my life, I want to feel alive.



Charlie is taking me by the hand, leading me because he knows I don't want to go. I've never worn a collar before and it's choking me. My boots are strange and heavy on my feet. My heart is heavy too, because I dread what I am going to. Charlie has told me often how terrible this school-place is: about Mr Munnings and his raging tempers and the long whipping cane he hangs on the wall above his desk.

Big Joe doesn't have to go to school and I don't think that's fair at all. He's much older than me. He's even older than Charlie and he's never been to school. He stays at home with Mother, and sits up in his tree singing *Oranges and Lemons*, and laughing. Big Joe is always happy, always laughing. I wish I could be happy like him. I wish I could be at home like him. I don't want to go with Charlie. I don't want to go to school.

I look back, over my shoulder, hoping for a reprieve, hoping that Mother will come running after me and take me home. But she doesn't come and she doesn't come, and school and Mr Munnings and his cane are getting closer with every step.

"Piggyback?" says Charlie. He sees my eyes full of tears and knows how it is. Charlie always knows how it is. He's three years older than me, so he's done everything and knows everything. He's strong, too, and very good at piggybacks. So I hop up and cling on tight, crying behind my closed eyes, trying not to whimper out loud. But I cannot hold back my sobbing for long because I know that this morning is not the beginning of anything – not new and exciting as Mother says it is – but rather the end of my beginning. Clinging on round Charlie's neck I know that I am living the last moments of my carefree time, that I will not be the same person when I come home this afternoon.

I open my eyes and see a dead crow hanging from the

fence, his beak open. Was he shot, shot in mid-scream, as he began to sing, his raucous tune scarcely begun? He sways, his feathers still catching the wind even in death, his family and friends cawing in their grief and anger from the high elm trees above us. I am not sorry for him. It could be him that drove away my robin and emptied her nest of her eggs. My eggs. Five of them there had been, live and warm under my fingers. I remember I took them out one by one and laid them in the palm of my hand. I wanted them for my tin, to blow them like Charlie did and lay them in cotton wool with my blackbird's eggs and my pigeon's eggs. I would have taken them. But something made me draw back, made me hesitate. The robin was watching me from Father's rose bush, her black and beady eyes unblinking, begging me.

Father was in that bird's eyes. Under the rose bush, deep down, buried in the damp and wormy earth were all his precious things. Mother had put his pipe in first. Then Charlie laid his hobnail boots side by side, curled into each other, sleeping. Big Joe knelt down and covered the boots in Father's old scarf.

"Your turn, Tommo," Mother said. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I was holding the gloves he'd worn the morning he died. I remembered picking one of them up. I knew what they did not know, what I could never tell them.

Mother helped me to do it in the end, so that Father's gloves lay there on top of his scarf, palms uppermost, thumbs

touching. I felt those hands willing me not to do it, willing me to think again, not to take the eggs, not to take what was not mine. So I didn't do it. Instead I watched them grow, saw the first scrawny skeletal stirrings, the nest of gaping, begging beaks, the frenzied screeching at feeding time; witnessed too late from my bedroom window the last of the early-morning massacre, the parent robins watching like me, distraught and helpless, while the marauding crows made off skywards cackling, their murderous deed done. I don't like crows. I've never liked crows. That crow hanging there on the fence got what he deserved. That's what I think.

Charlie is finding the hill up into the village hard going. I can see the church tower and below it the roof of the school. My mouth is dry with fear. I cling on tighter.

"First day's the worst, Tommo," Charlie's saying, breathing hard. "It's not so bad. Honest." Whenever Charlie says "honest", I know it's not true. "Anyway I'll look after you."

That I do believe, because he always has. He does look after me too, setting me down, and walking me through all the boisterous banter of the school yard, his hand on my shoulder, comforting me, protecting me.

The school bell rings and we line up in two silent rows, about twenty children in each. I recognise some of them from Sunday school. I look around and realise that Charlie is no longer beside me. He's in the other line, and he's winking at me. I blink back and he laughs. I can't wink with one eye, not

yet. Charlie always thinks that's very funny. Then I see Mr Munnings standing on the school steps cracking his knuckles in the suddenly silent school yard. He has tufty cheeks and a big belly under his waistcoat. He has a gold watch open in his hand. It's his eyes that are frightening and I know they are searching me out.

“Aha!” he cries, pointing right at me. Everyone has turned to look. “A new boy, a new boy to add to my trials and tribulations. Was not one Peaceful enough? What have I done to deserve another one? First a Charlie Peaceful, and now a Thomas Peaceful. Is there no end to my woes? Understand this, Thomas Peaceful, that here I am your lord and master. You do what I say when I say it. You do not cheat, you do not lie, you do not blaspheme. You do not come to school in bare feet. And your hands will be clean. These are my commandments. Do I make myself absolutely clear?”

“Yes sir,” I whisper, surprised I can find my voice at all.

We file in past him, hands behind our backs. Charlie smiles across at me as the two lines part: “Tiddlers” into my classroom, “Bigguns” into his. I'm the littlest of the Tiddlers. Most of the Bigguns are even bigger than Charlie, fourteen years old some of them. I watch him until the door closes behind him and he's gone. Until this moment I have never known what it is to feel truly alone.

My bootlaces are undone. I can't tie laces. Charlie can,

but he's not here. I hear Mr Munnings' thunderous voice next door calling the roll and I am so glad we have Miss McAllister. She may speak with a strange accent, but at least she smiles, and at least she's not Mr Munnings.

"Thomas," she tells me, "you will be sitting there, next to Molly. And your laces are undone."

Everyone seems to be tittering at me as I take my place. All I want to do is to escape, to run, but I don't dare do it. All I can do is cry. I hang my head so they can't see my tears coming.

"Crying won't do your laces up, you know," Miss McAllister says.

"I can't, Miss," I tell her.

"Can't is not a word we use in my class, Thomas Peaceful," she says. "We shall just have to teach you to tie your bootlaces. That's what we're all here for, Thomas, to learn. That's why we come to school, don't we? You show him, Molly. Molly's the oldest girl in my class, Thomas, and my best pupil. She'll help you."

So while she calls the roll Molly kneels down in front of me and does up my laces. She ties laces very differently from Charlie, delicately, more slowly, in a great loopy double knot. She doesn't look up at me while she's doing it, not once, and I wish she would. She has hair the same colour as Billyboy, Father's old horse – chestnut brown and shining – and I want to reach out and touch it. Then she

looks up at me at last and smiles. It's all I need. Suddenly I no longer want to run home. I want to stay here with Molly. I know I have a friend.

In playtime, in the school yard, I want to go over and talk to her, but I can't because she's always surrounded by a gaggle of giggling girls. They keep looking at me over their shoulders and laughing. I look for Charlie, but Charlie's splitting conkers open with his friends, all of them Bigguns. I go to sit on an old tree stump. I undo my bootlaces and try to do them up again remembering how Molly did it. I try again and again. After only a short while I find I can do it. It's untidy, and it's loose, but I can do it. Best of all, from across the school yard Molly sees I can do it, and smiles at me.

At home we don't wear boots, except for church. Mother does of course, and Father always wore his great hobnail boots, the boots he died in. When the tree came down I was there in the wood with him, just the two of us. Before I ever went to school he'd often take me off to work with him, to keep me out of mischief, he said. I'd ride up behind him on Billyboy and hang on round his waist, my face pressed into his back. Whenever Billyboy broke into a gallop I'd love it. We galloped all the way that morning, up the hill, up through Ford's Cleave Wood. I was still giggling when he lifted me down.

"Off you go, you scallywag, you," he said. "Enjoy yourself."