opening extract from

Alone on a Wide Wide Sea

written by

Michael Morpurgo

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Arthur Hobhouse is a Happening

I should begin at the beginning, I know that. But the trouble is that I don't know the beginning. I wish I did. I do know my name, Arthur Hobhouse. Arthur Hobhouse had a beginning, that's for certain. I had a father and a mother too, but God only knows who they were, and maybe even he doesn't know for sure. I mean, God can't be looking everywhere all at once, can he? So where the name Arthur Hobhouse comes from and who gave it to me I have no idea.

I don't even know if it's my real name. I don't know the date and place of my birth either, only that it was probably in Bermondsey, London, sometime in about 1940.

The earliest memories I have are all confused somehow, and out of focus. For instance, I've always known I had a sister, an older sister. All my life she's been somewhere in the deepest recesses either of my memory or my imagination – sometimes I can't really be sure which – and she was called Kitty. When they sent me away, she wasn't with me. I wish I knew why. I try to picture her, and sometimes I can. I see a pale delicate face with deep dark eyes that are filled with tears. She is giving me a small key, but I don't remember what the key is for. It's on a piece of string. She hangs it round my neck, and tells me I'm to wear it always. And then sometimes I hear her laugh, an infectious giggle that winds itself up into a joyous cackle. My sister cackles like a kookaburra. She comes skipping into my dreams sometimes, singing *London Bridge is Falling Down*, and I try to talk to her, but she never seems to be able to hear me. Somehow we're always just out of reach of one another.

All my earliest memories are very like dreams. I know that none of them are proper memories, none that I could really call my own anyway. I feel I've come out of half-

forgotten, half-remembered times, and I'm sure I've often filled the half-forgotten times with made-up memories. Perhaps it's my mind trying to make some sense of the unknown. So I can't know for certain where the made-up ones end and the real ones begin. All the earliest childhood memories must be like that for everyone I suppose, but maybe mine are more blurred than most, and maybe that's because I have no family stories to support them, no hard facts, no real evidence, no certificates, not a single photograph. It's almost as if I wasn't born at all, that I just happened. Arthur Hobhouse is a happening. I've been a happening for sixty-five years, or thereabouts, and the time has come now for me to put my life down on paper. For me this will be the birth certificate I never had. It's to prove to me and to anyone else who reads it that at least I was here, that I happened.

I am a story as well as a happening, and I want my story to be known, for Kitty to know it – if she's still alive. I want her to know what sort of a brother she had. I want Zita to know it too, although she knows me well enough already, I reckon, warts and all. Most of all I want Allie to know it, and for her children to know it, when they come along, and her children's children too. I want them all to know who I was, that I was a happening and I was a story too. This way

I'll live on in them. I'll be part of their story, and I won't be entirely forgotten when I go. That's important to me. I think that's the only kind of immortality we can have, that we stay alive only as long as our story goes on being told. So I'm going to sit here by the window for as long as it takes and tell it all just as I remember it.

They say you can't begin a story without knowing the end. Until recently I didn't know the end, but now I do. So I can begin, and I'll begin from the very first day I can be sure I really remember. I'd have been about six years old. Strange that the memories of youth linger long, stay vivid, perhaps because we live our young lives more intensely. Everything is fresh and for the first time, and unforgettable. And we have more time just to stand and stare. Strange too that events of my more recent years, my adult years, are more clouded, less distinct. Time gathers speed as we get older. Life flashes by all too fast, and is over all too soon.

Three Red Funnels and an Orchestra

There were dozens of us on the ship, all ages, boys and girls, and we were all up on deck for the leaving of Liverpool, gulls wheeling and crying over our heads, calling goodbye. I thought they were waving goodbye. None of us spoke. It was a grey day with drizzle in the air, the great sad cranes bowing to the ship from the docks as we steamed past. That's all I remember of England.

The deck shuddered under our feet. The engines

thundered and throbbed as the great ship turned slowly and made for the open sea ahead, the mist rolling in from the horizon. The nuns had told us we were off to Australia, but it might as well have been to the moon. I had no idea where Australia was. All I knew at the time was that the ship was taking me away, somewhere far away over the ocean. The ship's siren sounded again and again, deafening me even though I had my hands over my ears. When it was over I clutched the key around my neck, the key Kitty had given me, and I promised myself and promised her I'd come back home one day. I felt in me at that moment a sadness so deep that it has never left me since. But I felt too that just so long as I had Kitty's key, it would be lucky for me, and I would be all right.

I suppose we must have stopped off in Cape Town. I know that most of the great liners bound for Australia did in those days. But I can't say I remember it. There's a lot I do remember though: the three pillar-box-red funnels, the sound of the orchestra playing from first class where we weren't allowed to go – once they even played *London Bridge is Falling Down* and I loved that because it always made me happy when I heard it. I remember mountainous waves, higher than the deck of the ship, green or grey, or the deepest blue some days, schools of silver dancing dolphins,

and always, even in the stormiest weather, seabirds skimming the waves, or floating high above the funnels. And there was the wide wide sea all around us going on it seemed to me for ever and ever, as wide as the sky itself. It was the wideness of it all I remember, and the stars at night, the millions of stars. But best of all I saw my first albatross. He flew out of a shining wave one day, came right over my head and looked down deep into my eyes. I've never forgotten that.

The ship was, in a way, my first home, because it was the first home I can remember. We slept two to a bunk, a dozen or more of us packed into each cabin, deep down in the bowels of the ship, close to the pounding rhythm of the engines. It was cramped and hot down there and reeked of diesel and damp clothes, and there was often the stench of vomit too, a lot if it mine. I was in with a lot of other lads all of whom were older than me, some a lot older.

I was in trouble almost from the start. They called me a 'softie' because I'd rock myself to sleep at night, humming *London Bridge is Falling Down*, and because I cried sometimes. Once one of them found out I wet my bed too, they never let me forget it. They gave me a hard time, a lot of grief. They'd thump me with pillows, hide my clothes, hide my shoes. But sending me to Coventry was the worst, just refusing to speak to me, not even acknowledging my

existence. I really hated them for that. They reserved this particular punishment for when I was at my most miserable, when I'd been sick in the cabin.

Sea-sickness was my chief dread. It came upon me often and violently. To begin with I'd do what everyone else seemed to do, I'd vomit over the rail – if I could get there in time. It was while I was doing this one day that I first met Marty. We were vomiting together side by side, caught one another's eye, and shared each other's wretchedness. I could see in his eyes that it was just as bad for him. It helped somehow to know that. That was how our friendship began. Some kindly sailor came along and took pity on us both. He gave us some advice: when it gets rough, he told us, you should go below, as far down as you can go. It's the best place, because down there you don't feel the roll of the ship so much. So that's what we did, and it worked – mostly. Marty came down to my cabin, or I'd go to his. But sometimes I'd get caught out and find myself having to be sick on the cabin floor. I'd clean it up, but I couldn't clean up the smell of it, so if I'd done it in my cabin they'd send me to Coventry again. It was to avoid having to face them that I sought out Marty's company more and more. I think it was because I felt safe with him. He was a fair bit older than me, about ten he was, older even than the boys in my cabin and

taller too – the tallest of all of us, and tall was important. I never asked him to protect me, not as such. But I knew somehow he might, and as it turned out, he did.

We were up on deck, the two of us, watching an albatross gliding over the waves – like me, Marty loved albatross – when a gang of these lads from my cabin were suddenly there behind us. They were northern lads, all of them – sometimes I could hardly understand what they said. One of them, their ringleader Wes Snarkey, started calling me names and taunting me, I can't remember why. I was "nowt but a poxy cockney!" Marty stared at Wes for a moment. He just walked right up to him and knocked him flat. One punch. Then he said very quietly, "I'm a cockney too." They all slunk away, and after that life got a whole lot easier for me down in the cabin. It might have been just as hot and sticky, just as crowded and smelly, but at least they more or less left me alone. All Marty's doing.

It was Marty too who explained it all to me, why we were on the ship, where we were going and why. I don't know how much, if anything, I had understood before. We were going to Australia, that was all I knew for certain. All of us, Marty said, had been specially chosen from all the orphans in England, to go out and live in Australia – that's what he'd

been told. Australia, he said, was a brand new country where there hadn't been a war, where there hadn't been bombings and rationing, where there was lots of food to eat, huge parks to play in, and beaches too. We'd be able to go swimming whenever we liked. I told him I couldn't swim, and he said he'd teach me, that I'd soon learn. And, he explained, we weren't ever going to be sent to an orphanage again like the ones we'd grown up in, but instead we were all going to live in families who wanted to look after us. So, with all that to look forward to, it was worth being sea-sick for a while, wasn't it? Nothing was worth being sea-sick for, I said, and I promised I would never ever set foot on a ship or a boat again, not for all the tea in China. It was a promise I singularly failed to keep – often.

During that whole long voyage into an uncertain future, Marty cheered my spirits. He became like a big brother to me, which was why I confided in him about Kitty, about how she'd been left behind and how much I missed her. I showed him the lucky key she'd given me. I could never think of her or even say her name without crying, but Marty never seemed to mind me crying. But he *did* mind me humming *London Bridge is Falling Down*, said I was always doing it, and couldn't I hum another tune? I said I didn't

know any others. He told me that, like as not, Kitty would probably be coming out to Australia on another ship, that there wasn't room on this one, which was why they hadn't let her on, that I'd see her again soon enough. That was Marty through and through, always hopeful, always so certain things would work out. But Marty, as I discovered later, didn't just hope things would get better, he'd do all he could to make sure they did too.

You need people like Marty just to keep you going. Even if things don't seem to be working out quite as you'd like them to, you need to feel they're going to, that all will be well in the end. If you don't believe that, and sometimes in my life I haven't, then there's a deep black hole waiting for you, a black hole I came to know only too well later on. I learned a lot from Marty on that ship, about hope, about friendship. Mighty Marty everyone called him, and it was a nickname that suited him perfectly.

Kookaburras, Cockatoos and Kangaroos

In my time I've sailed into dozens of harbours all over the world. None is more impressive than Sydney. Liverpool had been grim and grey when we left, Sydney was blue and balmy and bright and beautiful. It was an arrival I shall never forget. We came in to port in the morning in our grand red-funnelled ship, the ship's horn sounding to announce us proudly. And I felt part of all this new glory.

Marty and I stood there leaning on the ship's rail gazing in wonder – *agog* is the best word for it, I think. Everything about the place was new and marvellous to me, the warmth of the breeze, the hundreds of sailing boats out in the bay, white sails straining, the majesty of Sydney Harbour Bridge, the red-roofed houses on the hillsides all around, and the sea – I never knew blue could be so blue. Nowhere could have been more perfect. I knew without question that we were steaming into paradise. And as the ship crept in, ever closer, I could see that everyone was waving up at us and smiling. We waved back. And Marty put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. I was filled with sudden hope. I was aglow with happiness, and so was Marty. He had his arm around my shoulder. "I told you, Arthur, didn't I?" he said. "A brand-new country. We'll be all right now."

In all the bustle and chaos on the dockside they gathered all of us children together, gave us a roll call, and then, without telling us why, began to split us up into groups. When I saw what was happening I stayed as close to Marty as I could. The last thing I wanted was to get separated from him. But that's just what they tried to do. Marty grabbed my arm, held on to it, and told me to stay right where I was beside him. Quick as a flash, he said, "Him and me, Mister, we're

cousins. Where Arthur goes, I go. Where I go, Arthur goes." The man ticking our names off his list said it was quite impossible, that arrangements had already been made and couldn't be changed. He was adamant, and bad-tempered too. He shouted at Marty to button his lip and do as he was told. Like everyone else on the dockside, he spoke English, but it didn't sound the same language as it had in England at all. I recognised the words, some of them, but the sounds they made were different and strange.

Marty didn't shout back and scream. He didn't jump up and down. Marty, I discovered, had his own very individual way of dealing with authority. He spoke very quietly, perfectly politely, fixing the man with a steady stare. "We're staying together, Mister," he said. And we did too, which was why I found myself later that morning sitting beside Marty on a bus, heading out of Sydney and into open country. There were ten of us on that bus, all boys, and as I looked around me I was relieved to see that only one of the boys from my cabin was there. It was Wes Snarkey, the one Marty had thumped that day on deck – he'd never given me any trouble since, so that didn't bother me. Lady Luck really had smiled on me – that's what I thought at the time anyway.

The driver, who seemed a chatty, cheerful sort of bloke,

told us he was taking us to Cooper's Station, a big farm over 300 miles away. It would take us all day to get there. Best to settle down and sleep, he said. But we didn't. None of us did. There was too much to look at, too many wonders I'd never seen before. For a start, there were the wide open spaces, hardly a house in sight, hardly any people either. But that wasn't all that amazed me that first day in Australia. All the animals and birds were as different and strange to us as the country itself. The bus driver told us what they were – and it turned out their names were about as odd as they were themselves – kookaburras and cockatoos and kangaroos and possums. They didn't even have the same trees we had back home in England. They had gum trees and wattle trees instead. This wasn't just a different country we were in, it was more like a different planet. And the scrubby surface of this planet seemed to go on and on, flat on every side as far as the horizon, which shimmered blue and brown and green. And the towns we drove through were like no towns I'd seen before. They had great wide dusty streets, and all the houses were low. If you saw another car it was a surprise.

I was hot and dusty and thirsty on that bus, and I thought the journey would never end, but I was happy. I was happy to have arrived, happy not to be sea-sick any

more. Tired though we were, we were buoyed up by the excitement of it all. This was a new adventure in a new world. We were on a bus ride into wonderland and we were loving it, every single moment of it.

Evening was coming on by the time we got to Cooper's Station, but we could still see enough. We could see it was a place on its own way out in the bush, and we could tell it was a farm. I mean you could smell it straightaway, the moment we clambered down off the bus. There were huge sheds all around, and you could hear cattle moving and shifting around inside. And from further away in the gloom there was the sound of a running creek, and ducks quacking raucously. A gramophone record was playing from the nearby farmhouse, which had a tin roof and a verandah all around it. I thought at first that was where we'd all be living, but we were led past it, carrying our suitcases, down a dirt track and into a compound with a fence all around. In the centre of this was a long wooden shed with steps at one end and a verandah.

"Your new home," the man told us, opening the door. I didn't take much notice of him, not then. I was too busy looking around me. The gramophone needle got stuck as I stood there. I can never think of Cooper's Station without that stuttering snatch of a hymn repeating itself

remorselessly in my head, "What a friend we have in Jesus, have in Jesus, have in Jesus, have in Jesus". I wasn't to know it then, but it was the eerie overture that heralded the darkest years of my life.