

# Morris

The boy who found the dog

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**An extract**

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Go and stand at the window, in your hat and your coat. Don't look at your feet and don't look back.  
Don't ask any questions.

'Will it be much longer?'

Don't. Or you'll miss the start.

Someone has to say, 'Yes, oh yes.' And rub their hands.

When the sky is grey, then you know for sure. It'll be thick. A thick, thick layer.

You see the first flakes falling. You think: I'm going to say something, but you forget to say it.

Someone else says it instead: 'It's snowing.'

Oh.

Sometimes snow lies and stays. That doesn't mean snow has legs.

When snow stays, you have to go outside. When a snowball hits the back of your head, and then another one, and maybe a few more, there's probably enough to start building a snowman.

You need a carrot. A dozen buttons. And a bucket.

The cold turns your hands red. You're not making just a little snowman, not you. You're making a snow giant, three times your size.

It's hard work. But – ohhh – when the snowman's standing there.

No complaining, by the way. Look, your mum and dad are here.

'We've brought your mittens, sweetheart. And soon we'll be making pancakes and waffles and apple upside-down cake. We'll have hot chocolate with cinnamon and whipped cream. But first we're going to give you a cuddle, come here, come here.'

Aren't you lucky?

So, so lucky.

Almost as lucky as Morris.

Morris was on his way home. A dog was growling in his arms. Not a very big one. It was his grandma's dog, but it was also a little bit his, because he was living with his grandma.

Just for a while.

It was better that way. That's what his grandma said.

Some sad things had happened.

The dog was white with black spots. She was whimpering and struggling. She wouldn't stay still. She would never stay still. She wanted to run. Best of all: to run away. Up the mountain. She did it whenever she got the chance. A kennel? Just a joke. Chains were no good. No matter how many padlocks they had. She jumped over fences. She squeezed through. And into. And under.

The animal already had a name. Although there were a few others that would have worked. Mutt. Monster. Pest. Scruffbag. But yes, the dog already had a name. Morris's grandma had come up with one that suited her. The animal was called Houdini.

There was once a man who had that name. He became famous for holding his breath for a very long time. Under the water and out of the water. If you wrapped a chain around him, he just wriggled himself free. He was a master of disappearing and appearing.

When Morris's grandma pointed at the mountain, she didn't have to tell Morris what to go and do up there. He would already have his boots on. It meant Houdini had escaped again. Inside a bag in Morris's pocket, there were two bits of sausage. Two, for if one didn't do the trick.

Before Morris lived with his grandma, she had to go and find Houdini herself. She didn't do that these days. She had tricky knees and lots of work to do.

She sewed patchwork quilts. Which she sold. It wouldn't make her rich, but it did make her happier.

Other people helped her. One neighbour or another, someone she knew from a nearby village. Everyone brought pieces of material with them. They cut it into squares. As time went by, all those patches came together to make something beautiful.

Lately, a man called Randy Pek had also been coming to visit. He liked to sit near the sewing machine.

'I'm excellent at helping to watch,' he always said.

And then he would crack up. But he didn't ever lift a finger.

You should have seen him sitting there, Randy Pek. He paid Morris's grandma one compliment after another. He kept his hat on inside the house. He looked as if he was planning to stay for just a short time, but he usually stayed for ages. Usually until after lunch or after a few sandwiches.

'Want me to come along?' he sometimes said to Morris. It sounded more like watching than doing. Grandma and the neighbour or the person she knew from the nearby village, all they saw was his smile. What a nice man, they thought. But Morris noticed other things. That Mr Pek never looked at him, for example.

After all that time, Morris knew the best way up the mountain and the best way down the mountain. On this side, the mountain was not very welcoming. Imagine rocks big and small, some of them overhanging. There were steep slopes and a plateau with a gorge running through it.

People told stories about the mountain. In whispers. They all sounded made up. That rocks started rolling by themselves. And that the thunder had made a hole up there, and whenever there

was lightning, blue flashes came out of the ground. 'It starts with one story,' Morris's grandma said. 'Before you know it, you have a patchwork quilt.'

Morris didn't get lost because he'd given some things a name. Sometimes a stone is not just a stone.

At the top of the mountain, for instance, there was a craggy rock in the shape of a flickering flame. He called that rock the Fire.

Further on, there were some thorny bushes that could hurt you badly. For him, that thicket was the Hedgehogs. For a long time, he thought he had to go all the way around the Hedgehogs, but one day he discovered that you could crouch to walk through them, even with a struggling dog in your arms.

Halfway up the mountain, there was a crooked spruce tree. All the other spruces grew straight. Because of the Crooked Spruce, you knew how far you still had to go up or down. Other than that, the tree wasn't much use. But thanks to Morris, it did have a name. If something has a name, it exists more than it does without one.

The sky was grey when Morris went to look for the dog. Of course, he'd rather have found the animal by the time he reached halfway, and then he wouldn't have had to walk so far, but no: he had to climb all the way up to the top to fetch it, way past the Hedgehogs and the Fire. Up beyond the highest rock, he caught her with one bit of sausage.

But she didn't make life easy for him. She refused to cooperate. And whined and whined, as if Morris were being mean and squeezing her, when all he was doing was holding her tightly.

'Stop it,' said Morris. 'Stop it.' He thought: this is the last time I'm taking this creature home. He knew that wasn't true. Tomorrow or the day after, he'd be climbing the mountain again. And if necessary, over the top, to the other side.

He had to be careful where he put his feet. A root or a rock – and he would twist his ankle. If he fell, Houdini wouldn't help him to get back up. The animal would seize her chance. And shoot off like a rocket.

Morris longed for the stove in the kitchen. The sad things that had happened made him feel the cold faster than before.

He paid no attention to the grey sky. He imagined his grandma putting a pot of soup on the table and rubbing her hands. Maybe she was saying something to Mr Pek or to the people who actually helped her. Maybe they were all looking at the greyness through the window and saying: 'Oh, it's going to snow.'

At the top of a mountain, the first snowflakes fall sooner than they do down in the valley. But this time you couldn't say up there that it began snowing. You couldn't say that the first flakes fell. And in fact, not even that flakes were falling.

Just as Morris was walking around the Fire, with Houdini in his arms, and looking down into the valley, the snow dropped from the sky as if a hatch had opened up in the clouds. From one moment to the next, the boy was up to his ankles in it.

After that layer, it just went on snowing. There was no room for air in the air – that's how big the snowflakes were.

Morris stumbled in the tumbling confusion. He leaned forward to protect Houdini, but he might as well not have bothered. Houdini wanted to walk by herself. Whining, she told him so. She wriggled and growled and tossed her head around.

Ow, thought Morris. His arms were tired; his muscles were numb. If only the mutt would keep quiet.

Just when she'd been doing exactly that for a few seconds – keeping quiet – and he was about to say: 'Good dog,' Houdini saw her chance. With a twist of her rear end, she tore herself free. She jumped and fell at the same time.

'Come back!' Morris shouted.

The dog glanced up at him. Then it was as if she'd been swallowed by the snow.

Morris spun around, left, right. He hoped he'd see some black spots running off somewhere. What he hoped for didn't happen. Houdini had disappeared.

Morris thought what he very often thought: that everything always changes, just when you don't want it to.

And, of course, then everything changed.

It stopped snowing.

There he stood in the cold, without a dog.

The world was pure white: the sky, the mountain, the other mountains all around.

A thick layer of snow covered the Hedgehogs. An Inuit could have lived under it. The Fire looked like a cold white finger saying, 'Beware, beware!'

At first sight, the village in the valley seemed to have been erased. If you looked very closely, you could see a chimney smoking here and there. That was how you could tell there were houses there. The plumes of smoke were orange.

It feels so good to sit beside the stove, thought Morris. But how was he doing? His head was on his torso and his torso was on his legs and his feet were standing deep in the snow.

He held his breath so that he could listen better. Could he hear panting? Could he hear whimpering?

He gasped as his lungs suddenly lurched upward. He sobbed – just once. It was a sob that was left over from the night before. When you cry in secret, you never really cry everything out.

Morris put his hands up to his mouth like a shell and shouted where he was.

'Here!'

His echo boomed softly around the valley. As if people were searching for Houdini on a few other snowy mountains too. That was funny at first, but not when you stopped to think about it. The dog suddenly seemed even more lost than before.

He put his hands in his pockets to protect them from the cold and turned around.

That was when he saw the ram.

The animal was a few steps away from him. Nothing about the beast was moving. If it had been chewing something or had bleated, then Morris would have thought: Look, a sheep. Now he thought: Look out, a ram.

The animal was waiting for something. Its eyes were bulging, and the tips of its big horns were pointing forward. You didn't want that giant chasing after you.

Morris moved one foot, and then, carefully, the other one. It was hard to do it slowly. His heart pounded like a rabbit's.

'Hey,' he suddenly heard a voice say. A boy was standing next to the Fire. He was leaning on a stick. He probably used it to whack people with. He looked a bit like a wild animal, in his fleece coat.

'You scared of a sheep?' the boy said.

'No. Not me,' said Morris.

'Liar,' said the boy. He took a few steps forward. He needed the stick because he was limping.

Morris kept his mouth shut. When you're silent, you half disappear.

The boy had a loud voice. He put a hand on the ram's head and said, 'Who are you looking for? Your mummy?'

Morris's grandma had never said you had to be careful on the mountain. She had also never said in so many words that there were no dangers up there.

Suddenly Morris realised that maybe not everything people said about the mountain was made up. Maybe there really were rocks that started rolling by themselves. There was a woman who had disappeared, and she'd been found alive weeks later – but in the meantime she'd grown a long beard. Someone had followed a blue light and fallen into a gorge. Someone else had gone blind for a few minutes.

And there was Mr Pek, who always made the same stupid joke whenever the subject of the mountain came up. 'Click-clack,' he would say, and then he would lock his lips with an invisible rusty key, as if it were a box with secrets inside.

But Morris had never heard anyone tell a story about a giant ram and a boy who was a bit like a wild animal.

'I'm looking for my dog,' said Morris.

It was as if the other boy hadn't heard him. Maybe he wasn't in the mood for listening. He came straight out and asked if Morris had any food to eat. The boy called food 'fodder'.

Morris patted the empty pockets of his coat and shook his head. He thought about the bit of sausage he still had in his trouser pocket, but he wasn't going to hand that over.

'I'm warning you,' the boy said.

It was odd that he took that tone. Morris was just standing there, without a stick, without fists.

'If I whistle with my fingers,' the boy said, 'you're dead. You've never heard of us?'

'Don't know,' said Morris.

The boy clicked his tongue. He looked over his shoulder, as if a few more people were standing behind him.

'We're a gang. Ajax and me – and my dad. There are very few people who can tell the tale of running into us by accident.' He searched for a word he could use as an exclamation mark. Finally he said: 'Little boy.'

That stung Morris. No one could call him 'little boy'. Or 'lad'. No one could pat his head and say 'poor thing'.

Grandma had realised that a long time ago.

Months before, they had unpacked his suitcase in a corner of her bedroom. They found a place for his belongings. Then she took off her glasses. Something important was coming.

‘I know you’re sad and angry, Morris,’ she said. ‘I feel the same way. But here’s what helps: chin up.’ She squeezed his cheek and smiled, but her face wasn’t happy. ‘Superman,’ she said.

With a name, you exist more than you do without one, and there are some names that give you broad shoulders.

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