

Once by Morris Gleitzman

Chapter 1

Once I was living in an orphanage in the mountains and I shouldn't have been and I almost caused a riot.

It was because of the carrot.

You know how when a nun serves you very hot soup from a big metal pot and she makes you lean in close so she doesn't drip and the steam from the pot makes your glasses go all misty and you can't wipe them because you're holding your dinner bowl and the fog doesn't clear even when you pray to God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Pope and Adolf Hitler?

That's happening to me.

Somehow I find my way towards my table. I use my ears for navigation.

Dodie who always sits next to me is a loud slurper because of his crooked teeth. I hold my bowl above my head so other kids can't pinch my soup while I'm fogged up and I use Dodie's slurping noises to guide me in.

I feel for the edge of the table and put my bowl down and wipe my glasses.

That's when I see the carrot.

It's floating in my soup, huge among the flecks of cabbage and the tiny blobs of pork fat and the few lonely lentils and the bits of grey plaster from the kitchen ceiling.

A whole carrot.

I can't believe it. Three years and eight months I've been in this orphanage and I haven't had a whole carrot in my dinner bowl once. Neither has anyone else. Even the nuns don't get whole carrots, and they get bigger servings than us kids because they need the extra energy for being holy.

We can't grow vegetables up here in the mountains. Not even if we pray a lot. It's because of the frosts. So if a whole carrot turns up in this place, first it gets admired, then it gets chopped into enough pieces so that sixty-two kids, eleven nuns and one priest can all have a bit.

I stare at the carrot.

At this moment I'm probably the only kid in Poland with a whole carrot in his dinner bowl. For a few seconds I think it's a miracle. Except it can't be because miracles only happened in ancient times and this is 1942.

Then I realise what the carrot means and I have to sit down quick before my legs give way.

I can't believe it.

At last. Thank you God, Jesus, Mary, the Pope and Adolf Hitler, I've waited so long for this.

It's a sign.

This carrot is a sign from Mum and Dad. They've sent my favourite vegetable to let me know their problems are finally over. To let me know that after three long years and eight long months things are finally improving for Jewish booksellers. To let me know they're coming to take me home.

Yes.

Dizzy with excitement, I stick my fingers into the soup and grab the carrot.

Luckily the other kids are concentrating on their own dinners, spooning their soup up hungrily and peering into their bowls in case there's a speck of meat there, or a speck of rat poo.

I have to move fast.

If the others see my carrot there'll be a jealousy riot.

This is an orphanage. Everyone here is meant to have dead parents. If the other kids find out mine aren't dead, they'll get really upset and the nuns here could be in trouble with the Catholic head office in Warsaw for breaking the rules.

'Felix Saint Stanislaus.'

I almost drop the carrot. It's Mother Minka's voice, booming at me from the high table.

Everyone looks up.

'Don't fiddle with your food, Felix,' says Mother Minka. 'If you've found an insect in your bowl, just eat it and be grateful.'

The other kids are all staring at me. Some are grinning. Others are frowning and wondering what's going on. I try not to look like a kid who's just slipped a carrot into his pocket. I'm so happy I don't care that my fingers are stinging from the hot soup.

Mum and Dad are coming at last.

They must be down in the village. They must have sent the carrot up here with Father Ludwik to surprise me.

When everyone has gone back to eating, I give Mother Minka a grateful smile. It was good of her to make a joke to draw attention away from my carrot.

There were two reasons Mum and Dad chose this orphanage, because it was the closest and because of Mother Minka's goodness. When they were bringing me here, they told me how in all the years Mother Minka was a customer of their bookshop, back before things got difficult for Jewish booksellers, she never once criticised a single book.

Mother Minka doesn't see my smile, she's too busy glaring at the Saint Kazimierz table, so I give Sister Elwira a grateful smile too. Sister Elwira doesn't notice either because she's too busy serving the last few kids and being sympathetic to a girl who's crying about the amount of ceiling plaster in her soup.

They're so kind, these nuns. I'll miss them when Mum and Dad take me home and I stop being Catholic and go back to being Jewish.

'Don't you want that?' says a voice next to me.

Dodie is staring at my bowl. His is empty. He's sucking his teeth and I can see he's hoping my soup is up for grabs.

Over his shoulder, Marek and Telek are sneering.

'Grow up, Dodek,' says Marek, but in his eyes there's a flicker of hope that he might get some too.

Part of me wants to give my soup to Dodie because his mum and dad died of sickness when he was three. But these are hard times and food is scarce and even when your tummy's stuffed with joy you still have to force it down.

I force it down.

Dodie grins. He knew I'd want it. The idea that I wouldn't is so crazy it makes us both chuckle.

Then I stop. I'll have to say goodbye to everyone here soon. That makes me feel sad. And when the other kids see Mum and Dad are alive, they'll know I haven't been truthful with them. That makes me feel even sadder.

I tell myself not to be silly. It's not like they're my friends, not really. You can't have friends when you're leading a secret life. With friends you might get too relaxed and blurt stuff out and then they'll know you've just been telling them a story.

But Dodie feels like my friend.

While I finish my soup I try to think of a good thing I can do for him. Something to show him I'm glad I know him. Something to make his life here a bit better after I've gone, after I'm back in my own home with my own books and my own mum and dad.

I know exactly what I can do for Dodie.

Now's the moment. The bath selection has just started.

Mother Minka is standing at the front, checking Jozef all over for dirt. He's shivering. We're all shivering. This bathroom is freezing, even now in summer. Probably because it's so big and below ground level. In ancient times, when this convent was first built, this bathroom was probably used for ice-skating.

Mother Minka flicks her tassel towards the dormitory. Jozef grabs his clothes and hurries away, relieved.

'Lucky pig,' shivers Dodie.

I step out of the queue and go up to Mother Minka.

'Excuse me, Mother,' I say.

She doesn't seem to notice me. She's peering hard at Borys, who's got half the playing field under his fingernails and toenails. And a fair bit of it in his armpits. I can see Mother Minka is about to flick her tassel towards the bath.

Oh no, I'm almost too late.

Then Mother Minka turns to me.

'What is it?' she says.

‘Please, Mother,’ I say hurriedly. ‘Can Dodek be first in the bath?’

The boys behind me in the queue start muttering. I don’t glance back at Dodie. I know he’ll understand what I’m trying to do.

‘Why?’ says Mother Minka.

I step closer. This is between me and Mother Minka.

‘You know how Dodek’s parents died of sickness,’ I say. ‘Well Dodek’s decided he wants to be a doctor and devote his life to wiping out sickness all over the world. The thing is, as a future doctor he’s got to get used to being really hygienic and washing himself in really hot and clean water.’

I hold my breath and hope Dodie didn’t hear me. He actually wants to be a pig-slaughterer and I’m worried he might say something.

Mother Minka looks at me.

‘Get to the back of the queue,’ she says.

‘He really needs to be first in the bath every week,’ I say. ‘As a doctor.’

‘Now,’ booms Mother Minka.

I don’t argue. You don’t with Mother Minka. Nuns can have good hearts and still be violent.

As I pass Dodie he gives me a grateful look. I give him an apologetic one. I know he wouldn’t mind about the doctor story. He likes my stories. Plus I think he’d be a good doctor. Once, after he pulled the legs off a fly, he managed to stick a couple back on.

Ow, this stone floor is really cold on bare feet.

That’s something Dodie could do in the future. Design bathroom heating systems. I bet by the year 2000 every bathroom in the world will be heated. Floors and everything. With robots to pick the twigs and grit out of the bathwater.

Look at that, Borys is the first one in and the water’s brown already. I can imagine what it’ll be like when I finally get in. Cold, with more solid bits in it than our soup.

I close my eyes and think about the baths Mum and Dad used to give me. In front of the fire with clean water and lots of warm wet cuddles and lots and lots of stories.

I can’t wait to have a bath like that again.

Hurry up, Mum and Dad.