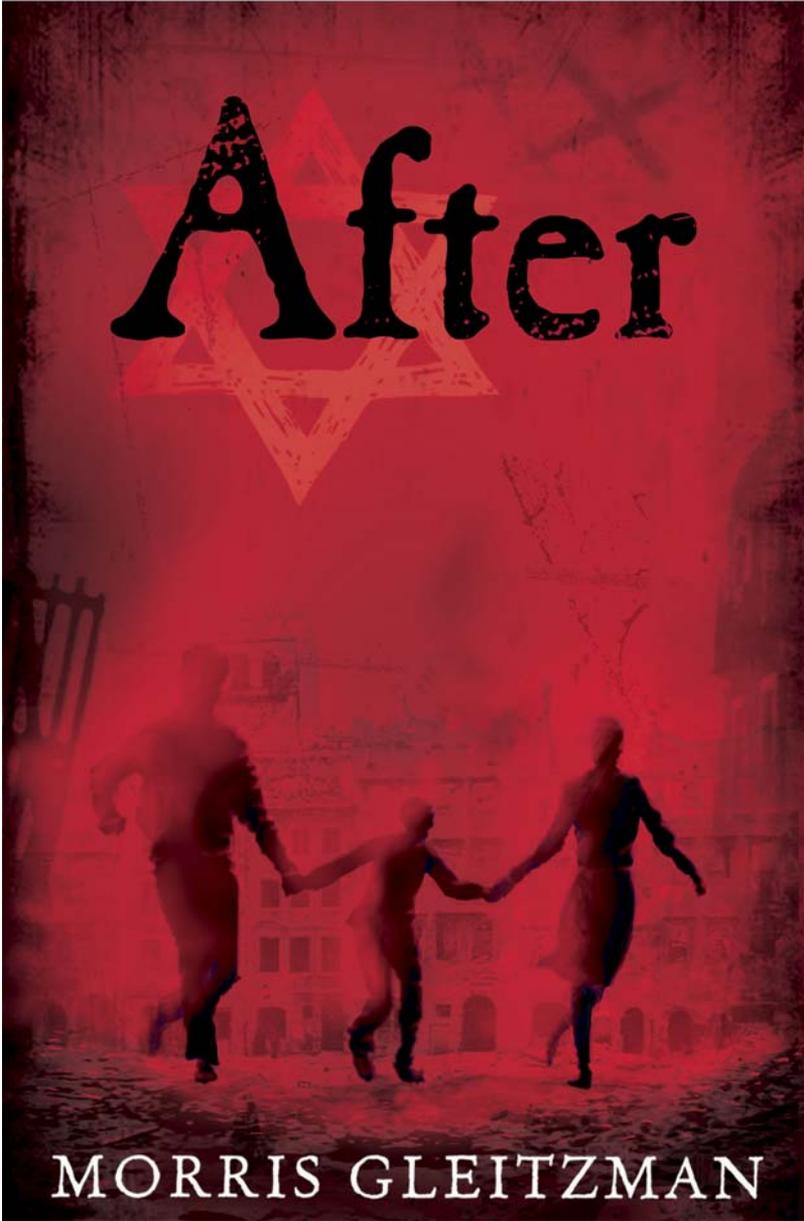


# After



MORRIS GLEITZMAN

**After** I woke up and had a stretch as usual and got dirt under my fingernails as usual, I heard voices above me in the barn.

Lots of voices.

Which wasn't usual at all.

I held my breath in the dark and tried not to make any scared noises.

You know how when there's a war and you hide in a hole for two years so the Nazis won't find you and each night a kind man called Gabriek brings you food and water and takes your wees and poos away and the only voice you ever hear is his and you don't want to hear anybody else's because that could mean the Nazis know where you are and they've come to get you?

I think the Nazis have come to get me.

The voices up there sound bossy and impatient and angry.

I sit up on my mattress and listen hard to catch

what they're saying. I try to make out if they're using Nazi expressions like *Jew vermin* and *shoot him in the vermin head*. But I can't hear properly because this hole is under a horse stall and Dom is a big horse and he's muffling the sound.

I struggle to stay calm and think who else the people could be. Neighbours from the next farm wanting to borrow some turnips? The choir from the local church trying to persuade Gabriek to join?

I look at the luminous watch Gabriek gave me.

Five past six.

It's evening. In the middle of winter. Normal people don't go out at all in winter if they can help it, and definitely not after dark.

The men up there must be Nazis.

I try to make myself as small as I can in my hole, which isn't easy because I've been growing a bit lately. Plus at the moment my body is completely rigid with fear.

This is what I've been dreading. This is what I've been trying not to think about.

Why did the Nazis have to come today?

On my birthday.

Maybe they're doing it on purpose. Maybe they've got a Jewish birthday list. Maybe for Nazis it's extra fun to kill people on their special day.

I get cramp in my leg.

Ow.

I rub it as quietly as I can. I wish the straw in this mattress wasn't so scratchy and noisy. You'd think

in 1945 they'd have invented quieter straw. And I wish I wasn't surrounded by things that go clink and clunk. Pee bottles and Richmal Crompton books and the small pieces of machinery Gabriek gives me to explore with my hands when the candle runs out so I can get an education.

All that education will be wasted if I die now.

I try to breathe very softly. I try to relax and take my mind off things by thinking about the hydraulic valve system in a hand-operated water pump.

It doesn't work.

I'm still feeling scared.

Not just of being shot. I'm even more scared of what will happen to Gabriek if the Nazis find me here. The Nazis hate people who protect Jews. They shoot them too, but they do worse things to them first.

The voices up there sound like they're arguing.

I still can't make out what they're saying. I hope Gabriek's telling the Nazis the story we made up, the one about how they should stay away from Dom's stall because Dom is a moody horse with a very catching skin condition.

Which isn't true, but you have to lie to Nazis, it's the only way.

I try something else to stop myself panicking. It's what I do when I have a lot of loneliness or fear or worry. I close my eyes and pretend I'm William from the Richmal Crompton books. Having adventures in the woods with my friends. Cooking

on campfires and building tree houses and inventing irrigation systems to help ants grow crops.

Now I'm thirteen I'm probably a bit old for that, but I don't care.

Except it's not working either.

I hear a sound up above. A loud metallic sound. I know what that sound is. The safety catch on a gun.

I feel sick.

I think about a story Mum read me when I was little. About a fieldmouse who was going to be killed by a dragon. Instead of cowering in the dry leaves, the mouse decided to look death in the face.

I bet Mum and Dad did that when the Nazis murdered them in the death camp.

It's what I've decided to do if the Nazis murder me. Keep my eyes wide open and look death in the face like Mum and Dad did.

Plus that way, if there's a chance to escape, I'll see it.

The voices up there are getting louder. One of them is definitely Gabriek. And I can hear the other voices more clearly now as well.

Wait a minute.

Everyone's speaking Polish. Nazis usually speak German. It's very unusual for them to speak Polish.

What's going on?

I feel around for my glasses, put them on and gently tug on the security pulley system Gabriek made. Above my head the trapdoor opens just a bit.

I wait for lumps of horse poo to fall in like they always do, then I carefully kneel up and peek out.

And almost faint.

In front of my face, sitting on the sawdust between Dom's back hooves, is a small parcel wrapped in one of Gabriek's hankies and tied with string.

A birthday present.

Gabriek must have left it there to surprise me when I come out for my meal later.

If any Nazis see it, I'm finished.

I open the trapdoor a fraction more, grab the present and stuff it into my pocket.

Then I peer out to make sure nobody saw it.

My glasses are smudged and cracked, and Dom's back legs are blocking part of my vision, but I can still see what's going on.

Except I don't understand what I'm seeing.

There are about six men surrounding Gabriek. They've all got guns and torches, but they're not wearing Nazi uniforms, just ordinary clothes. And they look too tough and fierce to be hungry neighbours or grumpy choir members.

Who are they?

Why are they so angry with Gabriek?

Another person steps into view. She must have been there all the time, but I couldn't see her behind Dom's big shoulders.

I stare.

Mum?

I go weak with shock and the rope slips out of my hand and I grab it again just in time to stop the trapdoor slamming shut.

I stare some more.

It's not Mum. It's just a woman who looks sort of like Mum did when Mum was younger. Mostly because she's wearing a red headscarf like one of Mum's. But this woman is about twenty and Mum would be much older than that if she wasn't dead. Plus this woman is wearing a leather jacket with a gun over her shoulder, and Mum didn't like leather jackets or guns.

One of the men grabs Gabriek by the arm and pushes him towards the door.

Gabriek doesn't fight back.

I realise what's happening.

Whoever these people are, they don't know I'm here. Gabriek's letting them take him to protect me.

They all leave the barn together, Gabriek and the men and the woman.

I close the trapdoor and huddle back onto my mattress. I'm shivering now and not just because it's always cold in this hole.

I've guessed who those people are.

The Polish secret police.

I learned about the Polish secret police from one of the old newspapers Gabriek put in here to try to soak up some of the damp.

The Polish secret police are on the Nazis' side. One of the jobs they do for the Nazis is arrest Polish

slave workers who've escaped from Germany.

Gabriek was a slave worker, and he escaped from Germany.

In my imagination I ask Richmal Crompton for her help. So Gabriek can escape again.

'Felix.'

I jump, startled.

It's Gabriek's voice.

That was quick.

'Felix, listen,' says Gabriek quietly.

He must be crouching close to the trapdoor so nobody else can hear him.

'I can't bring your birthday meal just at the moment,' he says. 'I have to go out for a while with our visitors.'

I hear the clank of Dom's bucket.

My insides sag.

Gabriek hasn't escaped. He's probably just told the secret police he has to pop back into the barn for a moment to feed Dom. So he can secretly try to stop me worrying.

'Do you hear me?' says Gabriek. 'Felix?'

'Yes,' I say.

'Try to sleep some more,' says Gabriek. 'Or do some education.'

I hear Dom nuzzling into his bucket again, but I don't hear anything else from Gabriek.

He must have gone back out to the secret police. Who'll hand him over to the Nazis.

My insides ache with worry.

I don't want Gabriek to sacrifice himself to protect me.

If the Nazis catch me they'll just shoot me. But when they catch escaped slave workers, they hurt them badly and stick up photos of their crippled bodies in Germany as a warning to all the other slave workers there.

It was in the paper.

I don't want them to do that to Gabriek.

So I don't have any choice.

I have to try to rescue him.

**After** a quick listen to make sure the secret police hadn't come back into the barn, I went to rescue Gabriek.

Or tried to.

The trapdoor wouldn't open.

I knew why. Dom must be standing on it. When a horse is standing on your trapdoor, forget trying to push it up, you won't be able to.

Urgently I jiggle the pulley rope in a special way that makes the security lock rattle. It's a signal between me and Dom.

I hear a clunk as Dom steps off the trapdoor.

I push it open and climb out.

Ow.

It always hurts, climbing out. When you live in a hole your legs get weak and painful because the muscles stop growing properly, even if you do thirty minutes of walking round the barn every night like I do.

'Thanks, Dom,' I say, and give him a pat.

I'm lucky to have a friend like him.

I can see from the glint in his eyes he wants to help me rescue Gabriek. For a moment I'm tempted. Dom's a workhorse and not that fast, but riding him would still be quicker than trying to chase secret police on legs like mine.

Except I think my only hope is to stay out of sight until I work out how to do the rescue. It'd be really hard to keep a big horse like Dom hidden, even at night.

'Sorry, Dom,' I say.

Dom snorts softly and I can see he understands. I can also see he's telling me something with his breath, which is white in the wintry air.

'Good thought,' I say to him. 'Thanks.'

I grab one of my blankets from the hole. Then I close the trapdoor, say goodbye to Dom and make sure the gate to his stall is latched tight.

As I hurry towards the barn door, I listen anxiously for the sound of an engine. If the secret police came by car, I won't have a hope. They'll drive Gabriek to a Nazi dungeon in town before I can even get to the farm gate.

But I can't hear any engines, not even in the distance.

Luckily the one thing that does improve when you live in a hole is your hearing. Well, two things, because you also get pretty good at seeing in the dark. Which is just as well for me because these

glasses are cracked, and I've had them since I was ten, so sometimes things are a bit blurry.

I start to open the barn door, then stop.

I haven't been out of this barn for two years.

Suddenly I'm scared.

I remind myself that Gabriek needs me. I didn't have the chance to save Mum and Dad from the Nazis. Or Zelda, or Barney, or Genia. But I do have the chance with Gabriek.

I go outside.

And stop again.

Outside is huge.

The sky is everywhere, crammed with stars.

I haven't seen anything like this for so long, not even all those times in the hole when I closed my eyes and pushed my fists into my eye sockets for entertainment.

But I'm not here for entertainment now.

I peer down the track towards the farm gate. No car lights, no torches, nothing. I scan the fields all around, acres of frosty cabbage stumps twinkling in the moonlight.

There. On the other side of that field. Dark shapes moving across the stumps.

But that's the wrong direction.

Why are they taking Gabriek away from town?

Of course. They must be heading for the forest. The Nazis like to shoot people in forests. I think it's to save making the graveyards in town overcrowded. Probably the same thing happens when the Nazis

want to hurt people badly. They probably do that in forests too, so people in town won't be woken up by the cries of pain.

The Nazis must be doing forest shooting and hurting tonight, which is why the secret police are working late.

I wrap the blanket round me and go after them.

My legs hurt.

I don't mind because I'm managing to keep up with the dark figures who are hurrying across the fields ahead of me.

I'm praying the secret police don't hear me and turn round.

Please, Richmal Crompton, make it so those secret police haven't done any special training to improve their hearing.

I wish I had better boots. These fields are frozen and rough. I'm not complaining though. People in holes should leave the best boots for people who need to run for their lives, that's only fair.

Nobody up ahead looks like they're running for their life. Or lagging behind, or being dragged. Gabriek must be co-operating. Probably to get the secret police as far away from the barn as possible.

I try to keep my breathing regular so I have enough oxygen in my legs to keep up.

It's hard to breathe properly when the air's this cold. And when you think about a person like Gabriek being maimed or crippled. A brave kind

loving person who risks his safety every day to protect a kid who isn't even his real-life son.

I wish Gabriek had some weapons to help him escape. But he's not interested in weapons. He's only interested in mending things. He's a genius at that. Machinery, animal equipment, electrical objects, anything except weapons.

If my best friend Zelda had met him, she'd have called him a mending person. Zelda was only six but she had the loving heart of a ten-year-old and she knew when a person was good.

That's another reason Gabriek has to be kept safe. The world needs all the mending people it can get at the moment. There are too many people around who just break things.

Well, I'm an imagining person, and I'm going to use my imagination to work out a way to stop the Nazis hurting Gabriek.

I can do it, I know I can, as long as those secret police stay in the open where I can see them and don't go into the forest.

They've gone into the forest.

It's much harder to follow them in here.

Before it was just field after field after field. All flat. All moonlit.

Now it's trees after trees after trees. This forest path is dark and winding and hilly and I can't see far enough ahead to spot them. Plus forests aren't as cold as fields and there isn't any frost on the

ground for footprints. Even my very good hearing isn't helping me.

No footsteps, no voices, nothing.

At least that means they probably haven't started hurting Gabriek yet.

I have to find them. I've thought of a way to save Gabriek and I need to do it before it's too late.

Before I get too scared and change my mind.

I wish there was another way but there isn't. All my other saving ideas involve unarmed combat and avalanches and forest fires. I'm not very good at those things because you don't get much chance to practise them in a hole.

So I'm going to use something I am good at.

A story.

When I find the secret police, I'm going to hand myself in. Then I'm going to tell them a story about how Gabriek is a brilliant Jew-hunter who's been after me for months, on my trail, tracking me. How I can't take it any more and I want to surrender.

It's not true of course, but I'm hoping Nazis like those sorts of stories. I'm hoping they'll forgive an escaped Polish slave worker once they know he's been tirelessly hunting down a Jew.

I think they will. Two years ago I heard a Nazi say that a dead Jew is worth ten dead slave workers.

I'm pretty sure Gabriek will understand what I'm doing. It's the story game we play together in the barn, where I start telling a story and he thinks up the next part.

Gabriek's a clever storyteller, which is just as well because his part of the story will be really important.

He has to tell the Nazis that he wants to finish the job and shoot me himself. That he needs to take me to another part of the forest where the ground is softer so I can dig my own grave. That the Nazis should call it a night and go home and have a hot drink by the fire and leave us to it.

So after they've gone, we can escape.

I'm fairly certain Gabriek will be able to come up with that part of the story. I hope so, because if he doesn't . . .

What's that?

Lights through the trees, down that slope.

Torches.

Please, Richmal Crompton, if that's the Nazi hurting place, don't let me be too late.

I slither through the undergrowth until I can see down the slope.

Oh no.

Down there, gleaming in the moonlight, is a railway line running over a huge wooden bridge. The secret police are all standing around Gabriek, who's kneeling with his head close to the ground and his arms across the train tracks.

That is horrible.

I can see exactly what's happening.

The Nazis and their assistants have killed so many people in this war, they've got bored with

doing it the normal way and they're trying to find new ways to do it for entertainment. Like making someone lie on a railway track so a train will chop their arms off.

And I can hear a train. In the distance. Getting closer.

I have to rescue Gabriek now.

But I hesitate.

There's a chance the Nazis won't wait for Gabriek's part of the story. There's a chance they'll just listen to my part, then shoot me themselves.

It's a chance I have to take.

The way I see it, I don't know for sure what happens after we die, but whatever happens to me will also be what happened to Mum and Dad.

So in a way, if I die, I'll be with them.

And Zelda.

Which makes me feel not quite so scared. As long as the shooting is quick. And as long as Gabriek doesn't have to see it because he's suffered enough grief already.

For a moment I don't move. I imagine Mum and Dad with their arms round me.

Then I stand up and run down the slope.

'Don't,' I yell at the secret police. 'Don't hurt him. I surrender.'