

The Imagination Box:

**Beyond
Infinity**

Martyn Ford

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FABER & FABER

For top parents, Barbara and Mick

First published in 2016
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House, 74–77 Great Russell Street
London, WC1B 3DA

Typeset in Garamond by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-571-31167-5



2 4 6 8 1 0 9 7 5 3 1

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martyn Ford is a journalist from Hampshire. He likes pasta and enjoys pressing keys on his laptop until stories appear. This is the second novel in his trilogy for young readers (9+).

ALSO BY MARTYN FORD

The Imagination Box

Chapter 1

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

The Dawn Star Hotel's sign was bold, glowing through the grey air. Heavy hats of fresh snow, orange under spotlights, sat atop it. The bronze D, in particular, was creaking under the weight – a small gust was all it took to dislodge the letter, causing it to lean and fall.

Inside, in reception, Elisa flinched at the deep thud. After a swift inspection outside, she stomped back through the hotel's new revolving doors, shaking away the chill.

'The D's snapped off,' she said. 'The place is falling apart. I'm getting the builders to look at that too. It could have killed someone.'

'What's that?' Tim said, from the sofa in the lobby.

He didn't look up – his hand continued flowing left and right as he shaded a picture in his sketchpad.

'It's just outrageous. "The 'awn Star Hotel?" What next?'

'The A?' Tim suggested, changing his pencil for another.

Unimpressed, Elisa disappeared through the tall oak doors, deeper into the building. Tim put his feet up on the small coffee table in front of him – tilting his head, inspecting his work. The hotel's reception was huge, in fact you could probably fit an average-sized house in there and it wouldn't touch the sides. Tim enjoyed a big room – it was as though the further he could see the clearer he could think. This was no more so than at night when he would look up at the stars.

His thick sketchpad, perched on his lap, was open on an incredibly detailed picture of a tortoise. Not just any tortoise, no – this was Astro-Turtle, The Shelled Cosmonaut. And it was good work, Tim thought, adding a final reflection to the visor with the corner of his rubber. He'd drawn enough for today, so he

shut the pad, put it under his arm and headed for his bedroom.

In the hall, Tim was greeted by a ripping noise that echoed all the way to the stairwell. Two decorators were tugging up the last strips of carpet, the dust making him think of a vacuum cleaner as he resisted the brewing tickle of a sneeze.

The patterned carpet – which Tim had spent much of his youth hopping up and down, pretending the red parts were lava and the spirals were stepping stones – was going. It was to be replaced, he had been told, by well-polished floorboards. The hotel was growing up.

Not letting the very literal demise of fond memories bother him too much, Tim went up to the second floor and into his bedroom – his sanctuary. It used to be just another guest suite but, besides the layout, it was now unrecognisable as a hotel room. Colourful and messy, it was decorated and cobbled together with artwork and things he had created in his imagination box: his clapper lamp, his glow-in-the-dark clock, the bubble machine, Merry Monkey

Circus (a doll's-house-sized tent of fun for Phil) and everything in between.

You see, during last year's summer holidays, a man called Professor George Eisenstone had stayed at the Dawn Star Hotel. As a consequence of being pretty curious Tim had found his invention: the imagination box. This is, basically, a gadget that creates whatever the user is imagining. Things like, say, a pencil or party poppers or a self-aware, talking finger monkey called Phil. Pop the reader (a hatty type thing that downloads your thoughts) on your noggin, picture what you want and, bam, there it is. Tim had even used the contraption to create his *own* imagination box. Clever. Like wishing for more wishes. To date, however, he was still the only person who could successfully operate the device.

Some other stuff happened too. There was a jetpack, some goo, a few robotic bees, the occasional explosion and even a monster at one point. Now though, things had simmered down and normality was the order of the day. Good, old-fashioned, monotonous normality.

Elisa – who ran the hotel – was reverting back to

some of her old ways too. There had been a distance between Tim and her in the past and the summer's events had certainly brought them closer. Even though he would now refer to her as his mother if someone asked – something he *never* used to do as he was, in fact, adopted – she would still sometimes appear detached and hopelessly preoccupied with managing the hotel. And her partner, Chris – he was just as absent as always.

Elisa's newest focus, and therefore source of sustained stress, was the refurbishment of the Dawn Star. However, her frenzied renovations hadn't infected Tim's bedroom – it was just as it had always been. This really was his cave. A place that would always be *his*, would always—

BANG: the door swung open. Elisa waddled in backwards, holding a large cardboard box with candlesticks and plates and other such clutter jutting out at wild angles.

'Tim,' she huffed, setting it down. 'We're going to put a couple of things in here while we wallpaper the top floors. I hope that's all right.'

This was *not* all right. 'What about all the other

space in this huge building?’ Tim asked.

‘We can’t give up a guest room – you know we need the money.’

‘I see.’

Tim was not happy with this idea, but he knew she was unlikely to change her mind. Once she had an idea in her head, Elisa was unstoppable. Although he understood she generally meant well, it still sometimes felt like the Dawn Star was her number one priority. Meaning Tim came in at a close second place.

‘It’ll only be for a few days, and only a couple of things.’ She paused in the doorway, looking back. ‘Is that all right?’

‘You’ve kind of already started.’ He pointed to the first box.

‘Great, I’ll let the boys know.’

Within half an hour, Tim’s room was full. New corridors had been created by bulging boxes – carefully constructed pathways of floor. He had a narrow route to his bed, his desk, his door and to his window. Every other inch of space was occupied.

His sanctuary had become Elisa’s dumping ground.

Sandwiched in his bed, Tim didn’t sleep well – it was the last night of the Christmas holidays and the Sunday blues kept him clinging on to the last few hours of freedom. And when the faded rays of winter sun cut a square around his curtains, his unusual alarm was activated . . .

‘Gooooood morning.’ Phil sang loud, clicking along with his tiny fingers. ‘Young Timothy, it’s time for you to rise. Oh such a wonderful, glorious day.’

Tim grumbled into his pillow. ‘What tune is that?’

‘I have made it up,’ the finger monkey continued to sing. ‘Made it up to wake, wake, waaa-aake you up.’

‘No,’ Tim moaned. ‘It has to stop.’

‘Wooo-ah – we’re halfway there . . . Wooo-ah – wrestling grizzly bears.’

‘This song doesn’t even make sense. I am awake.’

Phil deflated. ‘Are you not enjoying it?’

‘It’s just . . . terrible. Deranged. Maybe even offensive.’

‘Oh,’ Phil said. ‘It was merely my heartfelt way of saying good morning.’ He bowed.

‘Is it really though?’ At times like this, Tim

wondered why he hadn't created Phil to be the kind of creature that liked lie-ins.

'Yes of course, Timothy, back to school today,' he said, pacing along the bedside cabinet. 'Where is your zest for life, sir? Why are you not more excited?'

'Reasons beside disliking early mornings and disliking school?'

'But school is a wonderful place, full of intrigue and knowledge, things to see, things to learn, things—'

'You have no idea what it is like. It's not all sunshine and sing-alongs,' Tim said. 'It's easy for you to be so optimistic – you can just think of a rainbow and you're in a good mood.'

'Now you are dramatically simplifying the nuanced, introspective correlation ...' A broad smile spread across Phil's face.

'You're thinking about rainbows, aren't you?'

'They are just so colourful, and strange,' the monkey yelled, grinning with teeth. 'Ponder them. Go on. Heavens, how do they even work?'

'Refraction.'

'Tim!' Elisa shrieked through his door. 'Are you awake? Tim—'

'Yes, I'm awake,' he shouted. 'I'm awake.' Whispering now. 'I'm so very awake.'

He got up and dressed in his new school blazer, then slung his rucksack over his shoulder. It was still early enough for the hands on his clock to glow.

'Right,' Tim said. 'I've got to go.'

Phil was sitting on the desk, distracted by his own knees. 'So, so useful.'

Rolling his eyes and smiling, Tim left the room. He made his way downstairs and paused in the hallway with a sigh.

The carpet was now completely gone.

Nodding to himself, he continued. He had to be careful, because these weren't just normal floorboards – no, this was the deck of a vast ship, a frigate, and a storm was abrewin'. He steadied himself on the handrail as waves thrashed and roared up at his sides, great cliffs of black water blocked the horizon, and salty spray rained down on him as fellow pirates rallied around the ropes and secured the sail. They

needed to ... Oh, what's the point, Tim thought, looking down at his feet.

This was just a regular wooden floor.

It was quiet in the lobby. However, outside, a man wearing a black leather jacket was standing perfectly still in the light snow, staring through the window into the hotel. Perhaps a potential guest, Tim reasoned.

'The bus is going to be here in three minutes, Tim,' Elisa said, tugging on his tie. 'What is ... what kind of knot *is* this?' She undid it, then started looping it back around.

Tim wasn't paying much attention – instead, he was looking over her shoulder at that man who was making eye contact now. He had the strangest expression on his face, as though he was sleepwalking or something.

'You know that guy?' Tim said, shuffling out of his view.

'What's that?'

'That ... man. Behind you.'

When she turned, however, he was gone. 'There's

no one there.'

'I ...' That's weird, Tim thought, double-checking through the glass.

'Got your maths book?' Elisa said, bringing his gaze back.

'Yes.'

'Lunch money?' Now she was interfering with his collar.

'Yes.'

'Pencil case?'

'Yes.'

'Did you do your science homework?'

Tim's eyes widened. 'Um ... yes?'

'Oh, Tim,' Elisa sighed. 'One piece of homework over Christmas, *one piece*.'

She was right. One piece, so easy and so straightforward Tim didn't even need to worry about it. Or think about it. Or remember it. Or do it.

'How long until the bus gets here?' he asked, placing his bag on the floor.

'Two minutes now.'

'Plenty of time.'

Tim turned and barrelled down the corridor – the wood was charmless, and loud, under his feet. Three stairs at a time, yanking at the banister, up to his room. Straight to his cupboard, straight to his imagination box. He put the reader on, the hat that will extract his thoughts and send his creation to the contraption, then closed his eyes as the box gently rumbled and fizzled away.

‘Bye, Phil,’ Tim said, whipping the freshly cooked homework from the sleek metal device. Back in the lobby, he swung his bag on his shoulder and made for the exit.

Elisa spotted the sheet of paper, realising what he’d done. ‘I’m *pretty* sure that’s cheating.’

‘Is it?’ Tim said, stepping backwards.

‘Well, it’ll be interesting to see what mark you get,’ she said.

Tim laughed, pressing himself into the swivel door. ‘I imagine I’ll get an A.’

Chapter 2

The following morning Tim stepped off the bus and headed through the front gates of Glassbridge Academy – high, navy blue iron railings and cobblestones conjured images of an old-fashioned prison. He passed a cluster of disproportionately tall, dim-faced Year 11s huddled in a circle.

Today his bag was particularly heavy as it contained something that it most certainly should not have contained – his imagination box. Swallowing, he glared at fellow pupils and staff as he went, trying his best not to appear suspicious. The decision to bring the contraption into school was not taken lightly. In fact, the day before, he had given it a great deal of thought ...