

The Imagination Box

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FABER & FABER

First published in 2015
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House, 74–77 Great Russell Street
London, WC1B 3DA

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

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

ISBN 978-0-571-31165-1



2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

For Inge

Prologue

‘There is a box. Anything you imagine will appear inside. You have one go, one chance to create *anything* you want. What would you pick?’

The professor’s voice echoed through the huge theatre. He sipped his water, breathing deliberately. For him, this was a big moment.

The audience waited quietly, hundreds of men and women – a sea of faces. There were academics, press and select members of the public, all pondering the question. A cube-shaped object, about the size of a microwave, was on the desk next to him. Although a purple velvet sheet was hiding the item, every eye in the room drifted towards it. With a deep breath, he arranged his notes on the lectern in front of him,

pressed the little button on his microphone, cleared his throat and began to speak once more.

‘Such a device, indeed, sounds impossible . . .’

His nerves had calmed a little; he glanced down – his hands were almost steady. The professor then took the microphone from its stand and walked confidently across the stage to the hidden desk.

‘And yet, here we are,’ he said, ‘at the beginning. Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I present to you, on this humble stage, on this humble Saturday . . .’ He whisked the sheet off his invention. The crowd watched on, silent now . . .

Chapter 1

One month earlier . . .

The Dawn Star Hotel stood proud, even in the rain. A muggy storm swelled above the city. Tim was sitting in the hotel's huge, well-lit reception, looking out at the flurry of rush-hour workers making their way home.

It was the first day of the first week of the summer holidays. As usual, Tim was drawing. Hunched over a bird's-eye view of the umbrellas outside, he scribbled away. As he was a bit of a messy artist his picture didn't *really* resemble the rainy street scene at all. But he knew what it was meant to be and surely that's all that mattered.

‘Don’t you touch that sofa,’ Elisa shrieked, rushing across the lobby.

She barrelled towards Tim, as if getting marks on the cushions was an emergency of giant proportions. Wetting her cloth with the bottle of spray she was clutching, she began firmly scrubbing at Tim’s hands. She huffed when she saw pencil smudges on his face. Tim frowned at the smell of the cloth as it scraped up and down his cheek. This wasn’t the first time she had cleaned him in the same manner she cleaned any other object. In wide-eyed horror he watched a huge drip of soapy water splash on to his masterpiece. He slammed his sketch pad shut.

‘I have told you more than once about sitting here,’ Elisa said.

‘I was drawing the people outside.’

‘The consultant is arriving shortly. The last thing he’ll want to see is you sitting in reception covered in pencil lead.’

‘I doubt that’s the *last* thing he’ll want to see,’ Tim muttered. Nonetheless, he gathered his pencils and stood to leave.

‘And, Tim, don’t touch the cakes in the function room. They’re for the staff – Donald’s called a meeting.’

Tim headed out of the reception area, pushing his way through the broad oak doors into the long red-and-gold-carpeted hallway. Eyes fixed on the floor beneath, he let his imagination get the better of him. In his mind, this wasn’t a carpet at all, *this* was a river of lava and the spirals were his stepping stones. Treading on the lighter parts would, therefore, result in a grizzly death. So he hopped from rock to rock, past the ground-floor rooms, each with the same door but a different, ascending bronze number.

Hang on, what’s this? Delicious smells from the function room at his side slowed his pace. Chocolate? Certainly. Strawberry sponge? Without a doubt. He stopped. Tasty, fresh and, most appealingly of all, forbidden cakes; how could he possibly resist such temptation?

But wait: Tim spotted Mary, the decidedly dumpling-shaped chambermaid, at the service cupboard, preparing to do her rounds – the slight whiff of bleach and fresh towels rising from her trolley.

‘Hello,’ he said. She just gave a big smile in return.

Mary didn’t speak much English, but she could muster enough to rat him out to Elisa if the truth about this cakey mission ever came to light. So he waited patiently on his rock, like some kind of confectionary ninja, with glowing lava licking at his feet. Mary just trampled through the bubbling magma as if it wasn’t even there, pushing her trolley along and round the corner, out of sight.

Above him, mounted on the wall near the ceiling, was a CCTV camera, one of hundreds recently installed at the hotel. It gently turned its lens up and down the hall. Tim waited a moment, until it was facing away, and then approached the function-room door.

This kind of heist was a fairly typical pastime. Living where he did, at the Dawn Star, Tim had to make his own fun. After all, not really having any friends his own age (that being ten, as of last month), he spent the vast majority of his time either alone, or with adults. But that was fine; he had decided a long time ago that he preferred his own company anyway.

Paper, pencil and escaping in his own imagination – this is what Tim thought made him happy. It had never crossed his mind that he might need more.

The hotel had been Tim's home for nearly three years now, since his adoption. It sat in the centre of Glassbridge, a quaint city full of history, complete with old buildings, wonky roofs, cobblestone streets, rusted iron railings and statues of people on horseback. The place was to tourists what jam is to wasps, so the hotel was always full and the streets always busy.

Inside the function room, all the royal-red chairs were set out around a long, well-polished table. Still clutching his sketch pad under his arm and his pencils in his hand, he proceeded. There were some desks on the other side of the room, full of all kinds of food, platters of perfectly triangular sandwiches and, as expected, cake. There was also a display of the Dawn Star chocolate fudge puddings – individually presented in little glass bowls, complete with the hotel's logo on the side. Sadly, the layout was symmetrical, meaning one missing would be noticed. But then he spotted a tray of large chocolate brownies.

Like playing a game of squidgy Jenga, he picked one up from the back of the pyramid and carefully removed it without disturbing the others. Still warm, he noticed. Excellent.

It was time to leave. He turned on his heel, but stopped dead in his tracks, dropping his pad. The path was blocked by an old man wearing a rough lab coat over a white shirt, tie and a pair of thick glasses. Some kind of scientist, Tim thought. The sketchpad had fallen open on the floor; the man looked down at the umbrella picture, crouching to retrieve it.

‘Indeed, yes, I could have done with one of those,’ he said, passing it back.

His lab coat was wet, his shoulders peppered with raindrops. He had curled wisps of grey hair bursting from the sides of his head and his gold-framed glasses had those little half-moon magnifiers in the bottom for reading.

Tim took the book with his free hand, without uttering a word.

‘They *are* umbrellas, aren’t they?’ the man asked. ‘In your drawing?’

‘Yes, they are,’ Tim replied.

As he rarely drew things he saw in the real world, he was surprised to hear this picture was recognisable. In fact, the only other *real* thing he tended to sketch was his all-time favourite animal: finger monkeys – about the size of a mouse, they are so small they can wrap around your finger, hence the name. Generally, though, he did some of his best work entirely from the depths of his mind – reality offered just a dash of inspiration. Tim would conjure up distant lands and animals that, to his knowledge, had never existed. His recent creations included a rather compelling bat-dolphin-scissor-pig, and a fairly brilliant chalk and charcoal rendition of Bob the Mexican cow-snail. There was a fantastic world, endless and vibrant, enclosed inside the hard cover of his favourite sketch pad.

‘Hmm, yes ... can you keep a secret?’ the man whispered, bringing Tim’s attention back. He peered down through thick lenses. ‘I’ve come in here to steal a cake. Indeed.’

‘Me too,’ Tim said, showing the man his loot,

pleased to have a partner in crime.

‘I didn’t see you, and you didn’t see me, right? Promise?’

‘Promise.’ Before he turned to leave Tim wondered what a person like this – clearly some kind of professor – was doing here. ‘So, why are you at the Dawn Star?’ he asked.

‘Ah, now –’ the man shook his head – ‘let’s just say, like our little theft, that it’s top secret . . .’