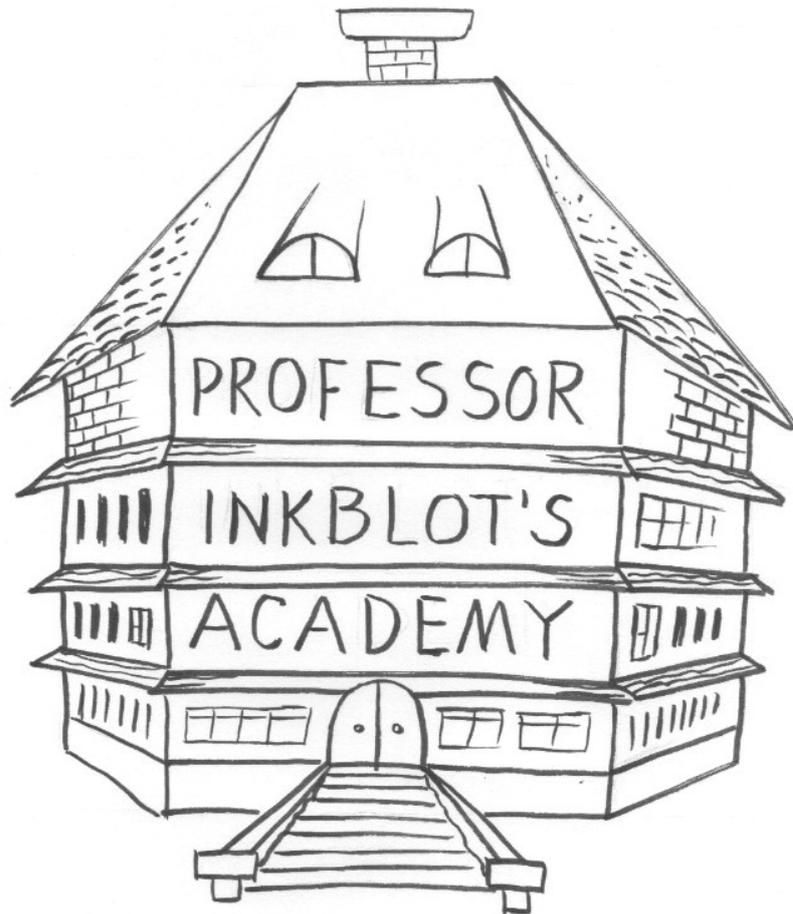


JW Fletching's

**PROFESSOR INKBLOT'S
ACADEMY OF WONDERS**



originally

Jan Brzechwa's

AKADEMIA PANA KLEKSA

translated by

Marek Kazmierski

LEGALS

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AKADEMIA PANA KLEKSA

London

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2020 INDEX	PAGE
JW FLETCHING'S <i>ACADEMY OF WONDERS</i> – an Introduction	5
CHAPTER ONE – THIS FABLE ALONG WITH OTHERS	7
CHAPTER TWO – MATTHEW'S INCREDIBLE TALE	13
CHAPTER THREE – PROF INKBLOT'S ODDITIES	23
CHAPTER FOUR – STUDIES AT THE ACADEMY	33
CHAPTER FIVE – PROF INKBLOT'S KITCHEN	41
CHAPTER SIX – MY GREAT ADVENTURE	49
CHAPTER SEVEN – FACTORY OF HOLES LARGE AND SMALL	57
CHAPTER EIGHT – THE DREAM OF SEVEN GLASSES	65
CHAPTER NINE – ANATOLY AND ALOSIIUS	75
CHAPTER TEN – THE FABLE OF THE MOON PEOPLE	83
CHAPTER ELEVEN – PROF INKBLOT'S SECRETS	91
CHAPTER TWELVE – FAREWELL TO OUR FABLE	98

MORE BOOKS TO COME:

PROFESSOR INKBLOT'S ADVENTURES (1961)

PROFESSOR INKBLOT'S TRIUMPH (1965)

JW FLETCHING'S *ACADEMY OF WONDERS* TRILOGY – an Introduction

Recent research shows that 74 years on from its original publication (one year after the end of World War II) Jan Brzechwa's *Akademia Pana Kleksa (Professor Inkblot's Academy)* remains Poland's most loved book for young readers. This novel, featuring a teenage hero sent to study at an academy of magic and wondrous skills, has been published in about a dozen languages, but never in English – not until the year 2020.

Born 15 August 1898 as Jan Wiktor Lesman, the author of this novel had a very colourful upbringing. Born in Russia to a Polish speaking Jewish family which had him baptised in the Christian faith, he changed his name to Brzechwa (“fletching” = the feathered end of an arrow – in English), fought in various wars before becoming one of the most popular writers in the Polish language – famed especially for his poems and stories for young readers.



Jan Wiktor Brzechwa

aka

Jan Brzechwa

aka

JW Fletching

He wrote this particular novel during World War Two, while trying to survive in the capital city of Warsaw as it was being demolished by Nazi and Soviet forces. Published a mere year after the end of this terrible global conflict, it remains an enduring classic of world literature – a powerful celebration of creative learning, of travel and discovery, of both traditional and modern storytelling, of personal and collective courage – and of the desire to at all costs triumph over soulless and destructive forces of modern civilisation.

Although similar in concept to the Harry Potter novels by JK Rowling, this story is not set in any particular time or place – featuring characters from a range of world fables (including the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen), it has been translated into numerous world languages (Bosnian, French, German, Russian, Slovak, Czech, Ukrainian, Spanish and Estonian) – now this absolutely timeless classic of world children's literature is finally available in English!

Having translated the book and the author's name from Polish into English, I now give you Jan Brzechwa's *Akademia Pana Kleksa* as:

JW FLETCHING'S *PROFESSOR INKBLOT'S ACADEMY OF WONDERS*

This edition is dedicated to my siblings Anna Maneco and Peter Kazmierski & my grandfathers Segiusz Orłow & Władysław Kazmierski & great-grandfather Edwin Ernst – all of whom mean the world to me...

Marek Kazmierski, translator, editor and publisher

CHAPTER ONE

THIS FABLE ALONG WITH OTHERS



My name is Adam Notagree, I am twelve years old and I've been at Professor Inkblot's Academy now for about six months. When I lived at home, nothing ever went right. I was always late for school, never managed to finish my homework on time, not with my two left hands. I dropped everything I picked up, smashing it all on the floor, while glasses and saucers cracked and fell to pieces at the very sight of me, even before I managed to touch them.

I hated groats soup and carrots, which is exactly what I got to eat each day, because they're filling and nutritious.

When, to top it all, I spilled ink onto a pair of trousers, a tablecloth and Mum's new suit, my parents decided to send me to study and learn good manners with Professor Inkblot.

His Academy is located right at the end of Chocolate Street, in a large, three-storey mansion built of multicoloured bricks. The top floor is reserved for Professor Inkblot's own secrets – no one is ever allowed up there, and even if someone did think of trying to sneak in, they wouldn't have any way to do so, because the stairs only lead up to the second floor and Professor Inkblot gets up to his secret level through the chimney stack.

All the classrooms are to be found on the ground floor; on the first are the student bedrooms and the dining hall, while Professor Inkblot himself shares a single room on the second floor with Matthew, all the other rooms on that floor being locked shut.

Professor Inkblot's Academy only accepts boys whose names begin with the letter A, because – as he explains – he has no intention of cluttering his head with all the letters of the alphabet. That is why the Academy is home to four Adams, five Alexanders, three Andrews, three Alfreds, six Anthonys, one Arthur, one Albert and one Anastasius, making a total of twenty-four students. Professor Inkblot himself is called Ambrose, and so the only person in the whole Academy whose name doesn't begin with the letter A is Matthew. Although Matthew is not really a student. Nor is he a person. He is a learned starling who belongs to Professor Inkblot. Matthew can speak fluently, but he can only pronounce the ends of words, not paying any attention to their beginnings. So when he picks up the phone, he will usually answer:

“lo, is s r lot's emy.”

Which actually means:

“Hello, this is Professor Inkblot's Academy.”

Those who don't know him cannot understand a word he says, though Professor Inkblot and all of his students have learnt how to understand him perfectly well.

Matthew helps us with our homework, often substituting for Professor Inkblot during lessons, when the head of our Academy is out catching butterflies for our brunch.

Oh, yes! I almost forgot to tell you that our Academy is surrounded by a huge park,

full of all sorts of pits, ravines and small valleys, all of it surrounded by a tall wall.

No one is allowed to step beyond that wall without Professor Inkblot in attendance, because it is a wall which is like no other. On the side which runs along the street it is completely smooth, with only one opening – the glass gate which is our main entrance.

Meanwhile, in three other sections of the wall there are long rows of iron gates, secured with small, silver padlocks. All those gates lead to many neighbouring fairytales and fables – our Professor Inkblot is very good friends with them all. Every gate has a sign on it, telling us which fairytale it leads to. There are gates which take us to all of the stories written by Mr Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, another which leads to the fable of the Nutcracker, and another about the fisherman and the fisherwoman, about the wolf who dressed up as a beggar, about Mary the Orphan and her gnomes, about Wacky Ducky and many, many other fables. No one actually knows how many gates there are, because anyone who tries to tot them up always eventually makes a mistake and loses count. Gate 12 is suddenly gate 28, and where nine should be we have 31 or six. Even Matthew doesn't know how many fables there are, and when asked answers:

“Aybe dred, aybe dred...”, which everyone knows means either one or maybe two hundred. Prof Inkblot keeps the keys to all the gates in a large, silver chest and always knows which key goes into which padlock. He often sends his students out to visit various fairytales in order to run errands. He often chooses me to do so, because I have bright red hair and so I stand out from the crowd.

Then this one day, when Professor Inkblot ran out of matches, he called me over, handed me a golden key on a golden ring and said:

“My dear Adam, you'll pop over to Mr Andersen's fable, the one about the Little Match Girl, and ask her for a box of matches.”

Delighted, I ran over to the park and, not really knowing at all how, managed to instantly find the right gate. A moment later, I was on the other side.

I then saw a street in a strange town, crowded with people. It was snowing, even though on our side of the wall it was summer. Everyone walking past shook with the cold, something I couldn't actually feel – not one of the snowflakes falling from the sky landed on my head.

As I was standing there, surprised, an elderly, grey-haired gentleman approached, patted me on the head and said, smiling:

“Do you not recognise me? My name is Andersen. You are surprised to see that snow is falling, winter all around us, but back where you come from it is June and the cherry trees are just starting to ripen. Correct? Young man, you do have to understand that you come from a totally separate fairytale. Why did you pay us this visit?”

“I came here, dear sir, to get some matches. Professor Inkblot sent me.”

“Ah, you're the one Prof Inkblot sent!” cried Mr Andersen with joy. “I like that odd fellow. Soon, you will receive your box of matches.”

Saying that, Mr Andersen clapped his hands and, a moment later, a small, shivering girl appeared from around the street corner, carrying boxes of matches. Mr Andersen took one box from her and handed it to me, saying:

“There you go, take this to Professor Inkblot. And stop crying. Don't feel sorry for this girl. She looks poor and frozen, but it only seems so. This is a fairytale, after all. Everything you see here is invented and unreal.”

The girl smiled at me, waved to say goodbye, and Mr Andersen walked me back to my gate.

When I told the other boys back at the Academy about my adventure, they were all very envious that I had met Mr Andersen.

In time, I would go to visit various fables and fairytales on a range of errands: one time, I had to bring back a pair of boots from the fable about the Puss in Boots, and another time mice appeared in Professor Inkblot's secrets and I had to get Puss himself, or else when there was nothing to sweep the courtyard with, I had to go borrow a broom from a certain Baba Yaga from the fairytale about Bald Mountain.

Then, one beautiful day, a strange fellow appeared at our gates, wearing a long, velvet coat, a pair of short velvet trousers, a hat topped with a feather, and insisted on being taken to see Professor Inkblot.

We were all incredibly curious as to what the man had come for. Professor Inkblot talked in a whisper for many hours, serving him the same hair growth pills he himself liked snacking on, and then – pointing at me and one of the Andrews – said:

“Listen, boys, this here gentleman has come to us from the story of the Sleeping Princess and Seven Brothers. Two of the brothers went into the forest yesterday and have not returned. So you surely understand that the story about the Sleeping Princess and Seven Brothers has lost its ending. This is why I am assigning you to this fellow for a couple of hours. Just remember – you have to be back in time for supper.”

“upper ved fore ix,” Matthew called out, which let us know supper served before six.

Andrew and I followed the chap wearing those exotic velvet garments. Along the way, we learnt that he was one of the Sleeping Princess' brothers, and we too would have to dress up in similar velvet outfits. We agreed readily, because we were both very curious to see what the Princess was like.

I will not here go into detail about what happened next in her fairytale,

because everybody has heard it all before. I do however have to say that, after she had awoken from her sleep, the Princess asked Andrew and I to tea.

Not everybody knows what princesses have for tea – especially not those princesses who appear in fairytales. Her servants brought in trays piled high with cream cakes, along with bowls full of just fresh cream by itself. We both received as many cakes as we asked for, along with three whole glasses of cocoa, solid bits of chocolate floating in each glass. There were tables loaded with silver trays, full of animals and dolls made out of marzipan, as well as jellies, candies and sugared fruits. And then there were crystal plates and vases filled with grapes, peaches, tangerines, strawberries and many other fruits, as well as various flavours of ice cream in pots made of chocolate. The Princess smiled at us and encouraged us to eat as much as we could, because no amount of eating could do us any harm. Everyone knows, of course, that in fairytales no one ever gets sick from overindulging, something which is never true in real life.

I put a few of the chocolate cups with ice cream in my pockets, to take back to give to the other boys at the Academy, but the ice cream melted and dripped all down my legs. Good thing no one noticed.

After tea, the Princess gave the order for a couple of ponies to be hitched to a small carriage and rode along with us all the way back to the walls of Professor Inkblot's Academy.

“Please, give my regards to the Professor,” she said in parting. “And do ask him to come round to have some butterflies dipped in chocolate.”

After a moment, she added:

“I have heard so much about Professor Inkblot's fables. I simply have to remember to pay them a visit some day.”

This was how I learned that Professor Inkblot also had his own fables, but I only got to actually hear them much, much later.

In any way, from that day on I respected our headmaster even more than before, and decided to become close friends with Matthew, to learn from him as much as I could.

Matthew is not keen on talking, and there come the days when he refuses to talk to anyone at all.

Professor Inkblot has a special cure for his stubbornness, and that cure is – freckles.

I don't remember if I have already mentioned that Professor Inkblot's face is completely covered with freckles. At first, I was most surprised by the fact that every day those freckles would change their position: one day, they would sit upon Professor Inkblot's nose, the next they would move to his forehead, to then on the third day appear on his chin or his neck.

It turned out this was caused by Professor Inkblot's absentmindedness – every night, his custom was to take off his freckles and hide them in a golden snuffbox, and then reapply them in the morning, but always in a different part of the face. Professor Inkblot is never apart from his snuffbox, which contains many replacement freckles of numerous sizes and shades.

Every Thursday, a certain barber comes over from our town, by the name of Phillip, and he brings Professor Inkblot new freckles, which he removes from his customers' faces while shaving them with a razor blade. Professor Inkblot studies each freckle with great care and attention, trying them on in front of a mirror, and then hides them carefully in his snuffbox.

On Sundays and school holidays Professor Inkblot always says, at 11.00am sharp:

“Now, it's time to apply some freckles.”

Saying that, he takes four or five of the biggest and the most impressive freckles from his golden snuffbox and places them on his nose. According to Professor Inkblot, there is nothing prettier than large, red or yellow freckles.

“Freckles are very good for the brain and protect us from catching colds,” he would often say to us.

And this is why, if one of the students studies particularly hard during a lesson, Professor Inkblot will make a show of taking out a fresh, as-yet unused freckle from his snuffbox and attach it to the nose of the lucky lad, saying:

“Wear it with pride, my boy, and never take it off, because this is the highest award you can ever achieve in my Academy.”

One of the Alexanders has already earned three large freckles, and some others have either two or one, and they wear the freckles with great pride. I envy them, and don't know what I would give to receive such a reward from Professor Inkblot, but he tells me that I still don't have enough skills.

And so, coming back to the topic of Matthew, I have to say that he loves Professor Inkblot's freckles, and considers them to be the greatest delicacy. Any time Matthew decides to be completely silent, Professor Inkblot takes the most used up freckle from his face and hands it to Matthew as a snack. The effect is immediate: Matthew starts talking and answering all questions. This is the way Professor Inkblot handles his starling!

One day, about half way through June, Professor Inkblot fell asleep in our park and completely failed to notice he was being stung by mosquitoes. He began scratching his nose with such fervour, all his freckles came away. I quietly gathered them up and took them to Matthew. Since that moment on, he has truly befriended me and told me the incredible story of his life. I repeat it here in full – the only thing I changed, of course, is to add all the missing beginnings to all the words Matthew used to tell his tale.

CHAPTER TWO

MATTHEW'S INCREDIBLE TALE



I am not a bird – I am a prince. During my childhood, I often listened to fables about people who had been turned into birds or animals, although I never believed in the veracity of such tales.

Meanwhile, my own life would one day turn out just the way lives are described in all these fairytales.

I was born to a royal court, the only son and successor of a grand and powerful ruler. I lived in a palace lined with marble and gold, where I strolled across Persian carpets; every one of my whims was instantly satisfied by loyal ministers and courtiers; whenever I cried, each one of my tears was counted, and every smile was written up in a special book of princely smiles – today, however, I am a mere starling which feels equally alien among birds and people.

My father was a king, ruling over numerous countries and nations. Millions of people shook in fear at the sound of his name. Uncounted treasures and palaces, gold crowns and sceptres, precious stones, riches the likes of which none could even dream of – they all belonged to my father.

My mother was a princess, renowned across all the lands and seas of our world for her remarkable beauty. I had four sisters, each one married to a different king: one became the Queen of Spain, the second the Queen of Italy, the third the Queen of Portugal and the fourth the Queen of Holland.

My father's royal ships ruled over the four seas, and his armies were so numerous and so powerful, our country had no enemies and all the other kings around the world strived to secure my father's friendship and good will.

Ever since I could remember, I had a passion for hunting and horse riding. My own personal stable numbered 120 Arabian and English stallions, as well as 48 wild mustangs.

My armoury and arsenal was full of hunting rifles, crafted by the finest gunsmiths and modified to match my height, the length of my arm, tuned to suit my sight.

When I turned seven, my father the king handed me over to a group of the world's finest scholars and ordered them to share with me all of their knowledge and skills.

I was a good student, but my unchecked passion for the saddle and the rifle fired up my mind and soul to the point that I could think of nothing else.

This is why, in fear for my health, my father eventually forbade me from riding horseback.

Unable to ride, I cried bitter tears, tears carefully collected by four court dames and kept in a crystal flask. When it was filled to the brim, in accordance with the customs of our kingdom, a three-day period of mourning was declared. The whole court dressed in black garments and all the receptions, balls and parties were cancelled. The flag over our palace was dropped to half-mast, and all our armies took off their spurs out of sadness.

I was missing my horses so much, I had lost my appetite and desire to learn, sitting all day long on a tiny throne, not speaking to anyone and not answering their questions.

All of my tutors, as well as my mother, tried to convince the king to reverse his order – but it was all for nothing. My father was not in the habit of reversing his decrees.

He said only this:

“My fatherly and royal mind is firmly made up. I set the health of the inheritor of my throne above the fancies of my child. Although my heart weeps to see him so saddened, we will follow the advice of our court medics and surgeons. The prince will not mount a horse again until he turns 14.”

I could not grasp why the court doctors had barred me from my favourite pastime, seeing as it was public knowledge that I was one of the best riders in our country and was as good at handling a horse as my father was at handling his empire.

At nights, I dreamt about my stout Tatar horses, my beloved stallions and in my sleep I spoke their names out loud, names I could recall so well.

Then one night, I was woken by the sound of quiet neighing beneath my bedroom window. I jumped out of bed and looked out to the garden – my fabulous stallion Ali-Baba was standing on the path, already saddled, having evidently heard me calling out his name in the dark.

Now, seeing me looking out the window, he snorted joyfully and approached the window sill. I dressed in the dark, grabbed my rifle and, keeping as quiet as I could, jumped out of the window, right onto Ali-Baba's back. The horse leapt forward, cleared a few garden fences and raced into the distance, carrying me who knows where.

We flew like this for a long time by the light of the moon, and when it was clear no one was chasing after us, I grabbed the reins and set off in the direction of a nearby forest. Intoxicated by this nighttime ride, I forgot about my father's order, not realising we were getting further and further away from the palace and that forests can be dangerous places.

I was eight years old at the time, but I had no less courage than five royal grenadiers put together.



When we entered the woods, my horse began to display a strange sense of unease: he slowed to a trot, then came to a complete stop, trembling and snorting.

Soon enough, I realised what had transpired: on the forest path, facing Ali-Baba, stood was a ginormous wolf, baring his fearsome fangs, foam dripping from his snout.

I quickly tightened the reins and grabbed my rifle. His jaws wide open, the wolf advanced towards me.

I shouted:

“In the name of the king I order you, wolf, to let me pass freely, otherwise I will be forced to kill you!”

But the wolf only giggled like a human being and kept on creeping towards me.

This was when I cocked the hammer, took aim and fired a full round of bullets into the wolf's gaping maw.

The shot was accurate. The wolf curled up, muscles tightened as if ready to jump, and finally collapsed by Ali-Baba's hooves. I jumped from the saddle and approached the dead beast. But then, just as I was standing over him, admiring his giant, fabulous head, with the last of his strength the wolf moved and buried a fang, as sharp as a dagger, in my right thigh. I felt a piercing pain, but a moment later the wolf's mouth opened by itself and his head fell to the ground with a loud thud.

Suddenly, all about us we heard the threatening, mournful howls of countless wolves.

Half-conscious with pain and terror, I mounted Ali-Baba and galloped back in the direction of the palace. By the time we sneaked back into the royal gardens, it was still night. I rode up to my window and jumped inside my bedroom, leaving the horse to his own devices. It seemed no one had noticed my absence, so I instantly jumped into bed and fell into a deep, hard sleep.

When I woke in the morning, I saw six doctors and twelve scholars bent over my bed, shaking their heads with worry. Blood would not stop dripping from my exposed thigh. The doctors could not find any explanation for the bleeding and I, in fear of my father, kept quiet about my nighttime adventure and the encounter with the wolf.

Time went by, blood kept dripping from my wound and the court doctors could not find any way in which to stem the flow. The best surgeons in our capital city were called in to help, but their efforts also came to nowt. I was losing more and more blood. News of my condition spread throughout the whole kingdom: crowds of people kneeled in town squares and city streets, putting up prayers for my return to health. My mother, sitting by my bedside, shed many tears, while my father the king sent appeals to all the countries around the world for them to spare their best doctors and surgeons.

In no time, so many of them arrived that we ran out of rooms in our palace in which to house them.

My father offered to pay the person who cured me enough money to allow them to buy their own kingdom, and yet foreign doctors demanded more.

They passed by my bed in a long procession, looking me over, performing their tests; some told me to swallow all sorts of syrups and pills, while others rubbed my skin with creams and sprinkled powders on it which smelt strange. There were also those who just prayed over

me, or else chanted mysterious incantations. None of them, however, managed to heal my wound. I was fading right before everyone's eyes, blood running from me without any end in sight.

It wasn't until all these medics had lost hope in my recovery and, realising how powerless they were, left the palace, that the court guards announced the arrival of a Chinese scholar, responding to my father's call for help.

The guards reluctantly led him to my bed – everyone had stopped believing in the chance of any possible cure, our whole country already in deep mourning.

The foreign guest was the court medic of the last Chinese emperor and introduced himself as Dr Pai Chi Wo. My father greeted him with despair in his voice:

“Doctor Pai Chi Wo, save my son! If you can rescue him, you will get from me enough diamonds, rubies and sapphires to fill this room! A monument with your name on it will be erected in the palace courtyard, and if you wish it, I will make you prime minister of my kingdom.”

“Oh, most high and just ruler,” Doctor Pai Chi Wo said, bowing low to the ground. “Save your jewels and give them to the poor of your kingdom. Nor am I worthy of a monument being erected in my name – where I come from, we only erect statues to our poets. I don't want to be a minister, seeing as I might then fall out of favour with you. Let me examine the sick child, and we can discuss the matter of payment later.”

Saying that, he approached me, inspected the wound, put his lips to it and began to blow his breath into me.

I instantly felt the live-giving flow of energy and had the impression that my blood was being transformed and flowed about my veins more quickly.

When, after a short while, Doctor Pai Chi Wo took his lips away from my body, the scar was completely gone.

“The Prince is well again and can rise from his bed,” the Chinese medic said, rising and bowing to me deeply, as is the Eastern fashion. My parents cried with joy and loudly thanked my saviour.

“If it is not a breach of etiquette at your court,” Dr Pai Chi Wo finally spoke, “I would like to be left alone for a moment with my distinguished patient.”

The King agreed and everyone left my bedroom. The Chinese medic then sat down on the edge of my bed and said:

“I have cured you, little Prince, because I possess secrets unknown to white people in the West. I know how you got that wound. You shot the Wolf King,

so you must now realise that wolves always exact terrible revenge and will never forgive you. He was the first Wolf King to be killed by a human being. From now on, you will be in constant, mortal danger. This is why I am giving you this magical Bogd Khan emperor's cap, which was given to me by the last Chinese emperor when he was on his deathbed, on the condition that it would only ever be given to another royal – such as yourself.”

Saying this, he took out a tiny, round cap, decorated with a large button at the top, from a pocket in his silken trousers and went on:

“Take it, little Prince, do not ever part with it and watch over it with great care. Should your life be threatened, you will don the magical Bogd Khan emperor cap and then you will be able to turn into any being you like. Once danger has passed, you will just tug on that top button again and once more transform into your human self.”

I thanked Dr Pai Chi Wo for his incredible kindness. He in turn kissed my hand and left the room. No one saw him leave, or knew how he managed to exit our palace. He vanished without trace, not saying goodbye to anyone nor demanding any payment for curing me.

Nevertheless, my father the king, out of gratitude to Dr Pai Chi Wo, ordered great feasts to be served to the poor people all across our kingdom, and for twelve sacks of diamonds, rubies and sapphires to be handed out to them.

Once I was fully recovered, I once again took up my studies, while also completely losing my passion for horse riding and hunting.

The thought that I had killed the Wolf King worried me incessantly. Years went by, but memories of his gaping, red maw and glowing eyeballs would not let me be.

I also kept thinking about Dr Pai Chi Wo's warning, and never allowed myself to be separated from the magical cap he had given me.

Meanwhile, some shocking things began occurring in our kingdom. News was coming in from all around that huge packs of wolves were attacking villages and towns, stripping them of food and kidnapping people.

In the southern districts, all the crops had been destroyed by hundreds of thousands of wolves, heading north. The bones of devoured people and cattle lay scattered across the roads and courtyards. The beasts were arrogant enough to attack smaller settlements in broad daylight, pillaging them within minutes.

People scattered poison about the woods, traps were set and pits were dug to catch the wolves, countering this terrible invasion with weapons of steel and iron, but still, their attacks did not ease off. Abandoned houses served as their lairs and dens; at nights,

worried mothers could not find their children, nor husbands their wives. The roaring and howling of cattle being slaughtered was relentless.

Well-armed royal army units were dispatched to counter this disaster, attacking wolves in the day and at night, but the beasts multiplied with such speed the whole kingdom was now threatened.

Hunger began to spread across the land. Citizens accused the minsters and the royal court of incompetence and ill-will. Waves of disappointment and despair rose and grew stronger. Wolves broke into homes and dragged starving people outside.

The king kept on changing his politicians and advisors, but no one knew how to bring an end to this misfortune.

Finally, one day the wolves arrived at the gates of the capital. No force on earth could stop their terrible advance. One November morning, the wolves broke into the palace. I was fourteen then, and already strong and brave. I grabbed my finest rifle, loaded it and stood at the entrance to the throne room, where my parents were holding court.

“Get thee gone!” I cried out, my voice full of fury.

I was about to shoot when one of the halberdiers, posted at the gates of the throne room, grabbed me suddenly by the hand and, bringing his face close to mine, roared:

“In the name of the Wolf King I order you, dog, to let me pass, else I'll be forced to kill you!”

I was overcome with terror. The rifle fell from my hands, I felt a terrible sense of tiredness, my eyes clouded over and I saw before me the wide-open jaws of the Wolf King I had killed.

What happened next – I don't know. When I came round after fainting, my parents were already dead, the wolves roaming the palace, and I was lying on the tiled floor, covered with bits of broken chairs and all sorts of other equipment. My head was battered. I called for help, but I could only pronounce the ends of words. I've had this speech impediment ever since.

Considering my disastrous situation, I realised I had survived only because I had been covered up by all those broken bits of furniture.

“What should I do?” I wondered. “How to get out of this hellhole? Oh God, oh God! If only it was possible to become a bird and flee from here, anywhere!”

And suddenly I remembered the magical hat I received from Dr Pai Chi Wo.

Did I have it with me? I checked my pocket. It was there! I was about to put it on when I noticed that the button at the top of the hat was missing. I therefore could, if I wanted to, become a bird, escape the palace and flee this thankless country – but only if I become a bird

forever, without the hope of ever recovering my original form!

That was when I heard some heavy breathing nearby. Through the broken bits of furniture piled up over me I could see the open jaws of a wolf!

The time for thinking was over. I put the hat on and exclaimed:

“I want to be a bird!”

Instantly, I began to shrink, my arms turning into wings, and I became a starling, the sort you see before you today.

I managed to hop out from all that rubble with ease, perch on a broken piece of furniture and fly out the window. I was free! It was a long time before I stopped circling over my homeland, but all I could hear coming from below me was the screams of starving people and the howling of hungry wolves. Villages and cities emptied. My father's kingdom fell apart and turned into dust, hunger and despair all that now remained of it.

Gliding over the earth, I cried over my parents' passing and the total collapse of our nation, and when I finally managed to stop thinking about these sad images, I began to consider the lost button of the magical Bogd Khan emperor cap.

Six years had passed from the moment I received the cap from Dr Pai Chi Wo. During that time, I had travelled to many countries and cities. And so the question was – when and where had I lost that precious button, without which I would never be able to become human again?

I knew no one could answer that question for me. I first flew to visit each one of my sisters, but none was able to understand my incomplete speech – they all thought I was just an ordinary starling. The oldest of the four, the Queen of Spain, shut me up in a cage and gave me to her daughter as a present.

A few weeks later, after I had begun to bore the frivolous princess, she gave me away to her servant girl, who then sold me – along with my cage – to a travelling salesman for a few pesos.

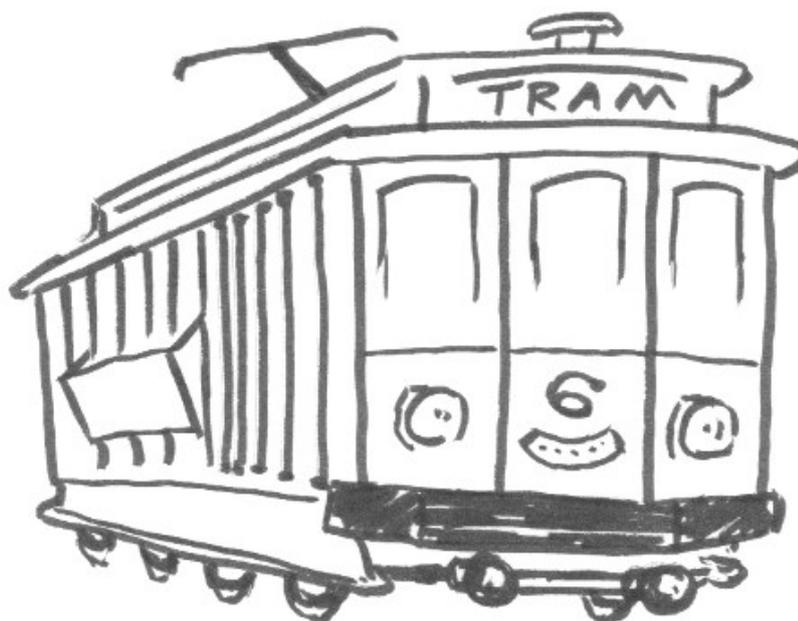
After that, I kept changing hands until finally a certain foreign scholar, fascinated by my odd form of speech, decided to buy me at a flea market in Salamanca.

His name was Professor Ambrose Inkblot.



CHAPTER THREE

PROFESSOR INKBLOT'S ODDITIES



I was incredibly moved by Matthew's story, and so I decided to do everything in my power to recover the lost button and return Matthew to his original form.

From that moment on, I carefully began to collect all the buttons I was able to find, and what's more, being outside Professor Inkblot's Academy – be it on a tram, or a street, or even when setting foot in neighbouring fables – I covertly used my penknife to cut buttons off of coats, jackets and blazers belonging to the gents and ladies I met. I got into all sorts of hot water because of this.

One day, a certain postman punished me by throwing me into a swimming pool filled with lobsters; another time, some hunchbacked fellow shoved me into stinging nettles; and a certain elderly lady beat me with her umbrella after I pulled a button off of her raincoat.

Even so, my search for buttons is still ongoing and I can confidently say that there is no button type or shape in this whole district which I do not have in my collection. All in all, I have managed to gather 78 dozen buttons, each one different. Unfortunately, Matthew doesn't recognise in any of them the button from his cap.

And so I made a vow to myself that I will continue my search, wherever possible, until I find the magical button which once belonged to Dr Pai Chi Wo.

There is only one thing I cannot understand: why Professor Inkblot has not done anything about this yet. After all, if he only felt like it, he could easily find that accursed button and free the unhappy prince. You see, Professor Inkblot can do it all! There is nothing under the sun which is beyond him.

He can always, with absolute precision, know what someone is thinking at any given hour; he can sit down in mid air and stay there, with or without the aid of chairs; he can hover, as if he was a balloon; he can turn small things large and vice versa; he can use coloured glass tiles to make all sorts of dishes; he can take the flames from candles and keep them stored safely in the pocket of his waistcoat for several days.

In short – he can do it all.

When I was thinking about all this during a lesson, Professor Inkblot – reading my thoughts – shook his finger threateningly and said:

“Listen, boys! Some of you seem to think that I am some kind of wizard or magician. Tell those who think so that they are stupid. I like to invent things and know the odd fable or two. That’s all. If you want to imagine I possess some incredible powers, it doesn’t bother me at all. You can fantasise all you like. I don’t stick my nose into other people’s affairs. There are even those who believe that a human being can turn into a bird. Right, Matthew?”

“aight, aight!” Matthew called out from the back pocket of Professor Inkblot’s frock.

“In my opinion,” Professor Inkblot went on, “These are tall tales, and I have no intention of believing in any of them.”

“But what about fairytales, dear professor, are they also untrue?” asked Anastasius all of a sudden.

“Ah, fairytales can be very different,” Professor Inkblot replied. “There are those who think, for example, that I too am an invention and that my Academy is a fantasy, but I suspect that this is a lie.”

All the students really respect and love Professor Inkblot, because he never gets angry and is remarkably kind.

One day, when he met me in the park, he smiled and said to me:

“You look great with all that red hair, my boy!” And a moment later, having looked at me closely, he added: “You just thought to yourself that I must be 100 years old, right? Meanwhile, I am 20 years younger than you.”

In fact, that is exactly what I had been thinking, and so I felt really terrible that Professor Inkblot had read my thoughts. For a long time afterwards, I kept on wondering how it was possible for Professor Inkblot to be so many years younger than me.

Then, Matthew told me that on the second floor, where he lived with Professor Inkblot, there were two tiny beds, no bigger than cigar boxes, and that is where Professor Inkblot and Matthew slept. I would not be surprised if a starling can fit in such a bed, but Professor Inkblot? ... I could not comprehend how. Perhaps Matthew was imagining it all or was actually telling fibs – anyway, he told me that every day at midnight Professor Inkblot begins to shrink, until he is the size of a newborn baby, losing his hair, moustache and beard, then lies down as if nothing was amiss in the minuscule bed next to Matthew.

At dawn, Professor Inkblot rises, puts the magnifying pump in his ear and a few moments later brings himself back to standard size. Next, he swallows a few hair growth pills and this way, after about ten minutes, he regains his usual form.

Professor Inkblot's magnifying pump really deserves closer attention. It looks like the kind of small pump engineers use to oil things, like sewing machines for example. When Professor Inkblot applies the pump to any sort of object and presses its base, that object then instantly begins to grow and increase in size. As a result, Professor Inkblot can transform from a baby to a grown man in a flash, and can also turn a steak the size of your hand into a dinner for everyone at the Academy – after cooking a piece of meat, Professor Inkblot then enlarges it using his magic pump so that it is the size of a massive roast.

Another special property of the magnifying pump is that it only works when it is really necessary, and when the need is no longer there, the effects of the pump also vanish and the object returns to its natural size.

This is why Professor Inkblot begins to shrink at midnight, and for this same reason after we eat his roasts we all feel very hungry, as if we hadn't eaten lunch at all, and have to supplement our diet with other dishes made from coloured glass tiles.

Because desserts are not really necessary for our diets, the magnifying pump has no influence on them and we always have to prepare them in a normal fashion.

It all makes us worry a lot, but Professor Inkblot has promised to invent some kind of special tool for magnifying desserts.

For his breakfast, Professor Inkblot tends to swallow some marbles made of coloured glass and drinks a special green liquid. This concoction – according to Matthew – allows Professor Inkblot to remember whatever happened the day before, because during sleep Professor Inkblot forgets absolutely everything.

When, one certain morning, he ran out of the green drink, he could not remember who he was and what he was called, could not recognise his own Academy or his students and even referred to Matthew as Azorek, seeing as he forgot that Matthew is not a dog, but a starling.

He walked around the Academy, completely at a loss, calling out:

“Mr Andersen! I have lost my yesterday! Johnny! Maggie! Squawk-squawk!
I am a chicken! I'm about to lay an egg! Give me back my freckles!”

If not for the fact that Matthew flew over the garden wall and borrowed a flask of that green liquid from three jolly gnomes, Professor Inkblot would certainly have lost his mind and we would also have lost our famous Academy.

After breakfast, Professor Inkblot applies some freckles to his face and starts to dress, and it is worth describing Professor Inkblot's dress code and appearance.

Professor Inkblot is of average height, but we don't really know if he is fat or thin, seeing as he always seems to be drowning in layers of clothing.

He wears wide trousers, which sometimes, especially when a wind is blowing, look just like a balloon; a very spacious, long frock coat, the colour of chocolate or red wine; a lemon-coloured velvet waistcoat, buttoned with glass globes the size of plums; a stiff, very high collar and a velvet bowtie instead of a cravat. What is truly remarkable about Professor Inkblot's attire are his pockets, which are numerous beyond measure. I once managed to count a total of 16 pockets in his trousers, and another 24 in his waistcoat alone. His coat only has one pocket – what is more, it is sewn into the back and is designed for Matthew, who is allowed to pop into it any time he feels like it.

This is why, when Professor Inkblot goes to work in the morning and is about to sit in his armchair, a voice can often be heard screaming from the back of his coat:

“ful, ling!”

Which of course means:

“Careful, starling!”

That is when Professor Inkblot parts the tails of his frock and takes more care sitting down, so as not to crush Matthew.

Sometimes, this concern is not needed, such as when Professor Inkblot enters the classroom and asks:

“Adam, could you remove my armchair?”

When the chair is gone, Professor Inkblot sits down in mid-air, right where the piece of furniture used to be, floating happily with no visible means of support for his backside.

A variety of objects can be found in the pockets of his waistcoat, objects which arouse wonder and envy among all the students at the Academy. There is a bottle for his green drink, a snuffbox with additional freckles, his magnifying pump, sleeping acid (which I'll tell you about later), coloured glass tiles, a few candle flames, hair growth pills, golden keys and various other oddities belonging to Professor Inkblot.

The pockets of his trousers are, in my opinion, bottomless. Professor Inkblot can hide in them anything he likes, and never know what he actually has in them. Matthew once told me that before he goes to sleep Professor Inkblot empties all his trouser pockets and arranges their contents in a room next door, although at times there is simply not enough space there and he has to open a second or even a third room in which to accommodate all his belongings.

Professor Inkblot's head is not like any head you might have seen as long as you live. It is covered with lots of hair, glistening with all the colours of the rainbow, and his face is surrounded by a bushy, raggedy beard, as black as tar.

The majority of Professor Inkblot's face is taken up by his nose, which keeps on leaning either to the left or to the right, depending on the time of year. A pair of silver glasses are perched upon his nose – they remind me of a tiny bicycle – while a bright orange moustache is perched upon his top lip. Professor Inkblot's eyes are like two little drills, and if it wasn't for his glasses which shield us from them, I bet he would pierce right through people just by looking.

Professor Inkblot can see absolutely everything, and when he wants to see that which he cannot see, he can find a way around that too.

In one of his basement storage rooms he keeps a collection of colourful balloons with little baskets attached to them. It was only a few weeks ago that I found out what Professor Inkblot uses them for.

This one time, as we were rising up from our tables after dinner, Phillip arrived after a visit to our town and said that on the corner of Reseda St and Jolly St a tram had broken down, completely blocking the traffic. No one seemed able to fix the tram. Professor Inkblot asked someone to instantly bring up a balloon, and then placed his right eye in the little basket attached to it, set the tin rudder in the right position and a moment later the balloon floated away in the direction of town.

“Boys, please prepare for a journey,” Professor Inkblot said. “In a moment I will see what is the matter with that tram, and we will come to its rescue.”

In fact, five minutes later the balloon returned and landed right at Professor Inkblot's feet. He took his eye out of the basket, popped it back into his eye socket and said with a smile:

“Now I see it all: the tram has run out of grease in the left rear wheel bearings, and the front axle is also damaged by sand. Apart from all that, the wires on its roof are worn through, and the tram driver has a swollen liver. Let's go! Anastasius, open the gates! Lively! Let's get marching!”

In groups of four, we went out to the street, Professor Inkblot trailing after us. After a moment, he took the glasses off his nose, applied the magnifying pump to them and they started to grow larger and larger. Once they were the size of a bicycle, Professor Inkblot jumped on and rode ahead of our pack, pointing the way.

In this fashion, we quickly reached Jolly St. The road really was blocked by the empty tram – parked sideways, it was blocking all the traffic. A few tram drivers and mechanics, huffing and wiping sweat off their brows, poked around the broken carriage.

Seeing Professor Inkblot approaching, everyone parted and made way.

He ordered us students to surround the tram and join hands, so that no one else would have access, and then approached the tram driver who was writhing in pain, giving him a small blue glass tile to swallow.

Then, he got busy with the broken tram. He took out a small hearing aid from his bottomless trousers, along with a small hammer, an English plaster, a jar with yellow ointment and a flask containing iodine. He rinsed the tram down from all sides, listened to it using the hearing aid, then spread the yellow ointment on its engine and crank. He sprinkled the axle with iodine, and finally climbed up on the roof of the tram and used the plasters to cover the worn out sections of cable.

All these treatments took no more than ten minutes.

“Ready,” Professor Inkblot announced. “Ready to ride!”

Having heard that, the tram driver, already cured by Professor Inkblot, jumped into his cab with a smile, cranked the engine over and the tram set off lightly and sprightly down the rails, as if it had only just rolled out of the factory. Having repaired the tram, we returned home, along the way singing Professor Inkblot's Academy theme song.

A few days later, I once again saw Professor Inkblot send his eye “out for a little lookie”, as he liked to call it.

We were all lying around the pond in our park, writing down all the ribbiting noise the frogs were making. Professor Inkblot was teaching us to recognise different syllables and it turned out that it was possible to arrange them into some really lovely poems.

I myself managed to note down the following verse:

The moon visited the pond,
because he had a lot on.
The pikes then had a chat:
“Who is that? Who is that?”
The moon quickly replied:
“I'm a goldfish from the sky!”
Hearing them scream and shout,
A fisherman's rod caught him out,
All night in a creamy sauce
For breakfast he cooked him, of course!

As we were sitting by the pond, Professor Inkblot looked at his own reflection in the water and at some point bent over so far that the magnifying pump fell out of his waistcoat pocket. We could all see as it sank in the water, and before Professor Inkblot could grab it, it went right down to the bottom.

Without thinking too much, I jumped into the pond, followed by a few other boys, and yet all our searching was for nothing. The pump vanished without a trace. At this point, Professor Inkblot took his right eyeball out of its socket and threw it into the water, saying:

“I’m sending my eye to have a little lookie. We will soon find out where the pump is.”

When a moment later the eye floated to the surface, and Professor Inkblot put it back where it belonged, he called out:

“I see it! It is lying in a cave, full of lobsters, four metres from shore.”

I instantly dove into the water and really did find the pump exactly where Professor Inkblot had pointed me to.

Less than a week later, Professor Inkblot served us up a rather special surprise. He requested a blue balloon be brought up from the basement, placed his right eye in the little basket attached to it and said:

“I am sending it to the Moon. I have to know who lives up there, because I want to write for you a story about the Moon People.”

The balloon soon rose up into the air, but it still hasn't come back. Professor Inkblot is of the opinion that the Moon is very high up and that the balloon will be back before Christmas. Meanwhile, he continues to see with his left eye, the right eye socket covered up with a sticky plaster.

Coming back to Professor Inkblot's everyday habits, I would also like to mention here that in the morning, as soon as he gets dressed, Professor Inkblot walks downstairs to begin his lessons.

Actually, it is impossible to say that he “walks downstairs”, seeing as he slides down the bannister, sitting on it as if on a horse, holding onto his glasses with both his hands. And there would be nothing unusual about this, if it wasn't for the fact that Professor Inkblot is just as adept at riding the bannister back up the stairs. In order to do so, he holds his breath, swells his cheeks and becomes as light as a feather.

In this way, Professor Inkblot can not only ride up that bannister, he can also float freely in the air wherever and whenever he likes. He especially likes to float when he sets off to catch butterflies, which represent an essential part of his diet, especially for brunch, when he eats nothing else.

“Remember now, my boys,” Professor Inkblot once announced. “Taste is not only found in the food itself, but also in its colours. I am not interested in nutrition, seeing as I get enough of that with my hair growth pills, but I really have a refined palate and like all sorts of tasty things. This is why I only eat that which is colourful, including butterflies, flowers, various coloured glass tiles and dishes which I will first paint all sorts of tasty colours.”

And yet, I noticed that when eating his butterflies, Professor Inkblot spits out the same kind of pips as are found in all sorts of cherries.

Reading my thoughts, Professor Inkblot explained that he only eats a special kind of butterfly, a species which contains pips and which can be planted in the ground like beansprouts.

All of Professor Inkblot's students start off thinking that it is very easy to float in mid air the way he does. And so they try inhaling air with all their strength, swelling their cheeks, copying Professor Inkblot's movements, but even so they never get it right. Arthur tried so hard blood started to run from his nose, and one of the Anthony's almost burst.

Along with all my pals, I made the same attempts, but day after day went by and although Professor Inkblot gave us certain tips and hints, my efforts remained unsuccessful.

Until, that is, one Sunday afternoon when I sucked in air in a way which was odd, and I felt a remarkable sort of lightness inside – when I filled my cheeks with air, the earth started to slip out from beneath my feet and I rose upwards.

Stunned by the sensation of floating, I rose higher and higher and eventually had myself an unforgettable adventure which managed to surprise even Professor Inkblot himself.



CHAPTER FOUR

STUDIES AT THE ACADEMY



Every morning, precisely at 5.00am, Matthew opens the so-called floodgates. These are small openings in the ceiling, placed right above the boys' beds. There are as many such skylights as there are beds, meaning some 30 in all. When Matthew opens them, cold water begins to pour down, dripping straight onto our noses.

In this way, Matthew wakes Professor Inkblot's students.

As he does so, Matthew's loud call can be heard:

“ake nd ise!”

Which means:

“Wake and rise!”

This call to attention has us all jumping out of bed and dressing as quickly as we can, seeing as we are just dying of curiosity what Professor Inkblot will be teaching us today.

Our sleeping hall is very spacious. Sinks are located all along the walls and everyone of us has his own shower. We are very keen to wash, seeing as the showers soak us in fizzy water with syrup, and every day of the week the syrup is a different flavour. When it comes to me, I wash myself most thoroughly on Wednesdays, when raspberry cordial is added to the water, a flavour I love. Professor Inkblot's syrups really foam up well and give a lot of bubbles, which is why in the mornings our sleeping quarters look like a giant bubble bath.

Our clothes include navy blue shirts, long white trousers, navy socks and white shoes. If one of the boys does something naughty, or he cannot remember what the lessons were about, then as punishment they have to wear, all day, a yellow tie with green dots.

This tie is very beautiful and in fact everyone should be pleased to wear one, and yet we are all terribly worried when any of us are punished in this way.

At 5.30am, we take our dreaming mirrors and head to the dining room for breakfast.

A large round table stands in the centre, and every student has his permanent place to sit. The window panes are multicoloured, which really increases the flavour of all dishes.

Professor Inkblot eats breakfasts and suppers separately, while during dinner he floats in midair over the table holding a ladle in one hand, pouring our dishes with a variety of sauces. Every sauce has a different property: white strengthens our teeth, blue improves our eyesight, yellow regulates our breathing, grey cleanses the blood, green removes dandruff.

During our meals, Matthew stands on the edge of a vase in the middle of our table, making sure we leave nothing on our plates.

At 6.00am, Matthew grabs a small, silver bell with his beak and rings calls reverie. We all then run to Professor Inkblot's study, where he is waiting for us and kisses all his students on the forehead in greeting.

After the morning assembly, Professor Inkblot enters a large wardrobe which stands in the corner of his study and, through a little window in its doors, he collects our dreaming mirrors. They have a very specific purpose. They are perched all night on the small tables next to our beds. They reflect our dreams and in the morning, when we hand our mirrors over to Professor Inkblot, he carefully watches what all of us dreamt of. Dreams which are no good, unfinished, silly and inappropriate go in the bin, and the only ones left are those Professor Inkblot liked the look of.

With the aid of cotton wool soaked in dreamy acid, Professor Inkblot scoops up all his chosen dreams from the mirrors, and then squeezes them out into a porcelain bowl. There they stay for a while, drying. Once they turn into powder, Professor Inkblot uses a special press to turn them into round pills which we then take at night. Thanks to this method, our dreams become more pretty and more interesting, and the most beautiful of these he records in the Academy's dream journal.

My dream about seven glasses so impressed Professor Inkblot that he wrote it all down, from beginning to the very end, and awarded me two freckles. He also told the whole class that on Sunday afternoon my dream would be read out loud to everyone.

Lessons begin at 7.00am. There is no place where boys are as keen to learn as at Professor Inkblot's Academy. Above all, we never know what Professor Inkblot will think up on any given day, and also – everything we end up learning is incredibly interesting and entertaining.

“Remember, boys,” he said to us at the start of the semester. “I will not teach you multiplication, nor grammar, not calligraphy, nor any of the other subjects which are usually taught at schools. I will simply open up your heads and fill them with wisdom.”

In order to work out what sort of learning we enjoy at Professor Inkblot's Academy, I will use the example of what transpired yesterday, seeing as trying to describe all the lessons, subjects, lectures, tasks and exercises from the whole school year would take up more space than would fit in any one book.

Yesterday, the first lesson was “inkblotography”. Professor Inkblot invented this subject, so that we could learn how to handle ink.

Blotography involves making a few large inkblots on a piece of paper, then folding the sheet in half and the blots smudge across the paper, taking on the shapes of various figures, animals and characters.

At times, these squished inkblots end up creating complete pictures, and we then write appropriate stories for them, invented by Professor Inkblot.

I think that Professor Inkblot himself was created through this sort of squashed ink blot and that is why he is called what he is called.

Matthew is of the opinion that we can expect anything from Professor Inkblot and that my suspicions are quite probably true.

Professor Inkblot once composed a two-line poem to go with one of my inkblots:

It really is quite hard to know
If it's a bird or else rhino.

Blotography lessons were really to our liking. Several bottles of ink were used during the sessions, along with a whole pile of paper, not to mention the fact we were all covered in ink, right up to our elbows. In the evening, we had to use lemon juice to wash with, seeing as nothing else would shift the stains from our hands and our faces.

After the inkblotography lesson, we got busy threading letters.

You must all have by now noticed that the letters printed in books are arranged in black threads, woven in all sorts of ways. Professor Inkblot has taught us how to unpick those letter threads, untie individual bits of thread and link them into one long piece of thread, which we then wind round a bobbin. In this fashion, we have already wound a whole bunch of books from Professor Inkblot's library, leaving nothing but blank pages, without letters. One book can produce seven, sometimes even eight large spools of black thread. Professor Inkblot then ties knots in them, something which he considers to be his greatest passion. He can while away whole hours, sitting in an armchair, or in midair, tying his knots.

When I asked him why he was doing it, he answered with great surprise:

“What do you mean? Do you not understand? I am reading! By passing the thread between my fingertips I can read a whole book, without straining my eyes. Once you have spooled up all my books, I will also teach you boys how to read with your fingers.”

Threading letters can be rather tiresome, but I prefer that to reading of extracts or doing arithmetic.

After lessons of threading letters, Professor Inkblot led us all to the second floor and opened one of his locked rooms.

“Enter carefully, my boys,” Professor Inkblot requested, letting us inside. “In this room you will find the hospital of sick items, and you have to take care not to disturb any of them. Do you recall how I cured the sick tram? And so today I want to teach you how to heal other sick things.”

After we entered the room, we beheld a real scrap heap. There were armchairs with no legs, beds with no springs, cracked mirrors, broken clocks, warped tables, crooked wardrobes, holed chairs and many other damaged gadgets.

Professor Inkblot told us to line up against the walls, and then got busy working.

Each item he approached creaked or squeaked with joy at his advance and rubbed up against his coat with real affection. Chairs and stools stomped their legs with joy, while sprained clock springs moaned with pleasure.

We watched Professor Inkblot's healing techniques with real curiosity. He focused on a table which was standing in the corner of the room. He knocked on its surface, from all sides, held one of its legs and then took its pulse, and then said with real care:

“And so, my little one? It no longer hurts, right? The fever has passed, your cracks have healed, in three or four days you'll be completely well.”

As the table moaned with pleasure, Professor Inkblot rubbed yellow ointment into its top, sprinkling the gaps in its surface with greenish powder.

Next, he approached a wardrobe which was creaking horribly from both its doors.

“How are things?” Professor Inkblot asked. “Are you coughing terribly still? It seems not. Soon, you'll be well, just don't worry.”

Saying that, he put an ear to its back, listening very carefully, and then used a dripper to apply some castor oil to all its hinges.

The wardrobe inhaled deeply and began to rub itself affectionately against Professor Inkblot.

“Tomorrow, I'll pay you another visit,” he said. “Just be thinking positive thoughts.”

A broken mirror was hanging on the wall - Professor Inkblot looked carefully at his own reflection, adjusted some of the freckles on his nose, took out a black English plaster from a pocket and stuck it onto the crack.

“Look, boys, learn how we should cure broken glass!” Professor Inkblot called out to us cheerfully.

Having said that, he began to rub the mirror with a flannel cloth, and a moment later removed the plaster, with not a sign of the crack to be seen.

“Have Anastasius and Arthur bring the mirror down to the dining hall. It is healed,” Professor Inkblot announced.

It took a little while longer to treat the broken clock. It was necessary to rinse all its screws, give it some healing drops, rub and massage a broken spring, apply iodine to its pendulum.

“Poor thing,” Professor Inkblot sympathised aloud. “That you have to suffer so much.

Well, no matter, everything will be well.”

When Professor Inkblot kissed its face and soothingly caressed its wooden casing, the clock suddenly struck the hour, the pendulum started swinging and the whole room echoed with the sound of its “tick-tock, tick-tock”.

We were all really surprised, and soon enough we would learn just how attached all the objects in that sick room were to Professor Inkblot.

We were just intending to leave the hospital, when it turned out that Professor Inkblot had lost his favourite golden toothpick.

“I will not leave here until the lost item is found,” Professor Inkblot announced.

We began our search. Everyone, all those who were in the room, knelt on the floor and, crawling around, checked every nook, corner and hiding place. Matthew flew about the room, sticking his beak into all sorts of crannies and gaps in the floor and the walls – only our Professor Inkblot sat in midair, his legs crossed, swallowing hair growth pills (a few strands had fallen out due to sudden stress) and pondered.

Our search lasted a long time, yet we never managed to find the golden toothpick. Professor Inkblot was also helpless, seeing as his right eye had not yet returned from the Moon and so could not be sent out for an inspection.

It was therefore not surprising that, seeing Professor Inkblot's distress, as well as our helplessness, all the sick objects got busy looking for the lost item. Hobbling tables and stools wobbled about, keyholes looking around intently, drawers pulling out and moaning with their bottoms, mirrors trying to reflect everything they could in turn, everything they could fit, and even the oven, also wanting to be of use in searching for the toothpick, kept on repeating:

“Cold-cold-warm, cold-warm-warm.”

The clock kept on ticking back and forth for a long time, but only once it got close to the window did the oven call out:

“Warm-warm-warm!”

The clock carefully checked out the window sill and the frame, and then started to go through the net curtains.

“Hot-hot!” the oven shouted.

It turned out that the golden toothpick was calmly lodged in the folds of the curtains just above the floor.

In this way, the unwell items helped us find Professor Inkblot's missing golden toothpick. Our stay in the hospital had lasted until noon. At this time, Professor Inkblot always

ate his brunch, while his students would wonder over the pond or the sports pitch, where we would always have one open air lesson a day.

And so, once we had left the hospital of unwell objects and went downstairs, Professor Inkblot floated out the window to the garden to catch butterflies. Meanwhile, Matthew organised a collection and led us to the soccer pitch, for a geography lesson.

I had previously attended two other schools, but this was the first time I had seen this sort of geography class.

Matthew rolled out a big football made out of a globe, split us up into two teams and spread us out across the pitch as if we really were to play a game of soccer. Matthew was the referee, flying all the time over the ball, whistling any time any of us made a mistake. The whole point of the game was to, as we kicked the ball with our feet, simultaneously call out the name of the town, river or mountain we had just connected with using the tips of our shoes.

A sign given by Matthew meant that the game was on. We ran chasing the globe like mad, kicking the ball with all our strength.

Every kick was accompanied by a shout from one of the players:

“Radom!”

“Australia!”

“London!”

“Tatras!”

“Skierniewice!”

“Vistula!”

“Berlin!”

“Greece!”

Matthew whistled time and time again, seeing as it turned out that Anthony called out Skierniewice instead of Myslowice, Albert got Kielce mixed up with China, and Anastasius mistook Africa for the Baltic Sea.

The game really was unbelievable fun, we kept on shoving one another, falling on the ground, calling out names of cities, countries and seas, Matthew's beak dripping with sweat, while I huffed and puffed like a smith's kiln, and yet in one lesson I had learnt more geography than in all my two previous schools over the course of three years.

At the very end of the match, something unexpected happened: one of the Alexanders kicked the globe so hard, it flew really high up in the air, and then fell back down not onto the pitch, but flew over the wall and thus landed in one of the neighbouring fables.

We were really worried, seeing as we had no idea which fable we should go searching for our ball: Should we go visit Tom Thumb, or the Three Little Pigs, or else Sinbad the Sailor?

As we were wondering about this, not sure what to do, Matthew's jolly cry could be heard:

“tch ut, oys!”

Which meant:

“Watch out, boys!”

We looked up ahead and saw the most incredible apparition: approaching from the wall was the most gorgeous princess Snow White, and her twelve dwarves carrying our globe on their tiny backs.

We ran up to meet them with real warmth. Snow White smiled at us kindly and said:

“Your ball smashed a few of my toys, but even so I am returning it to you, on the condition that you will teach my dwarves geography.”

“Fantastic! We'd love to!” Anastasius called out, being the most confident of us all.

Meanwhile, something really unexpected started to happen: Snow White along with her twelve subjects, began to slowly melt and dissolve in the hot beams of our July sunshine.

“I forgot that here you still have summer,” Snow White whispered embarrassedly.

Before I realised what was happening, poor Snow White melted away, moment by moment, until she finally dissolved completely and turned into a tiny, transparent stream. It was joined by twelve other streams and all of them rolled back towards one of the gates in our wall, whispering the famous words of the dwarves' march:

“Hey ho, hey ho, it's off back home we go.”

“How good it is that I am not made of snow,” I thought to myself, looking at the slowly departing stream.

And this was how the visit by Snow White to our Academy came to an end.

As I was standing there, lost in thought, the school bell started to ring suddenly.

It was Matthew calling us for dinner.

CHAPTER FIVE

Professor INKBLOT'S KITCHEN



There are no servants at Professor Inkblot's Academy, and so all the essential chores are things we have to do by ourselves. Duties are divided between students in a way that each one of us has some defined, permanent household tasks to complete. Anastasius opens and shuts the main gate, and in addition he manages Professor Inkblot's balloons. The five Alexanders take care of our clothing and underwear, which means that they ensure they are clean, socks are darned and buttons sewn on. Albert and one Anthony tidy the park and sports field; Alfred and the second Anthony set and serve at the dinner table; the second Alfred and third Anthony wash the dishes; Arthur tidies the assembly hall; three Andrews keep the dining room, sleeping hall and the staircases tidy; three Adams produce the juices for bathing and the sauces for cooking; the rest of the students take care of many other household jobs and only in the kitchen does Professor Inkblot insist on lording it up completely independently.

We were all always extremely interested how Professor Inkblot manages to cook for so many people by himself, but entry to the kitchen has always been forbidden. It is only last week that Professor Inkblot announced he would be assigning me to kitchen duties and nominated me as his assistant. I was thrilled by this and walked around the Academy as proud as a peacock.

When Matthew called for dinner, all the boys ran to the dining hall, where Alfred and the other Anthony were busy setting the round table, while I made my way to the kitchen.

I absolutely must describe its appearance and the equipment Professor Inkblot had installed.

Along one wall tin cans were arranged on long tables, filled with glass tiles of all colours and shades. On the other side of the kitchen containers with edible paints were kept, along with a massive collection of the strangest paintbrushes, large and small. The window sills were set with wooden boxes filled with brightly coloured flowers, mainly nasturtiums and geraniums. In the middle of the kitchen there was a giant table with a steel top. A round, glass jar was set atop it, filled with candle flames, along with many smaller jars with coloured powders.

When starting to cook, Professor Inkblot put on a white apron and got busy preparing the dishes.

Into an enormous saucepan he threw three quarters of orange glass tiles, added a handful of white powder, poured in some water, used a thin paintbrush to paint some green peas on the surface, and then at the finish threw in a few candle flames, which instantly made the water in the pan boil. That was when Professor Inkblot stirred its contents thoroughly, transferred them into a vase and said to me:

“Please take this vase to Alfred in the dining room. I think the tomato soup will be delicious today.”

And indeed, I have to admit that I have never in my life eaten anything equally as tasty, and yet cooking soup didn't even take five minutes.

While the boys were eating the first course, Professor Inkblot got busy creating the roast.

In order to do so, he placed a single candle flame inside a large casserole dish, put on top of it a tiny piece of meat, threw in two coloured glass tiles: one red and one white, sprinkling grey powder over it all, and when the meat was roasted and the glass tiles had dissolved, he applied his magnifying pump and pressed its base a few times. The dish instantly filled to the brim with a delicious and aromatic beef roast, surrounded by beetroot and mashed potatoes. Professor Inkblot painted some dill onto the potatoes, and the roast hardly fit into the serving dishes I used to carry it over to the dining hall.

For dessert, Professor Inkblot decided to make a gooseberry compote. He cut a few leaves from the geranium plant, sprinkled them with gooseberry powder and tried it for taste.

“It doesn't taste right!” he said to himself. “A raspberry compote will be a better idea.” Without pausing to think too hard, he grabbed a thick paintbrush, dipped it in red paint and repainted the gooseberry compote to make it raspberry flavour.

It was so delicious, I had three servings and would have gladly eaten more. I could have extra portions, because after he made the compote, which only took a moment, Professor Inkblot went into the dining room with a ladle in order to pour some brown sauce onto the roast, in order to strengthen the boys' gums.

When after dinner the boys started to tidy and catch up on other domestic chores, Professor Inkblot returned to the kitchen and said to me:

“Well, Adam, it is now our turn, I bet you must be very hungry. Tell me, what would you like to eat for dinner? You can choose any dish you would like to eat.”

I am by nature rather ravenous, and so Professor Inkblot's offer really appealed immensely. For a long time, I thought about what I was in the mood for that day, and finally chose an omelette with spinach.

Professor Inkblot instantly grabbed a paintbrush, dipped it in various paints and, combining them in various ways, painted an omelette, then the spinach, threw into it a candle flame, skilfully placing the whole lot onto a plate, saying:

“I think that my omelette will be to your liking; it should be delicious.”

The omelette was indeed divine, literally melting on the lips.

He then used a similar technique to prepare for me some chicken with cucumber salad and dumplings with blueberries.

“And what will you eat, Professor?” I asked shyly.

In response, Professor Inkblot took out a box with hair growth pills, swallowed five of them, one after the other, and said:

“This is for me perfectly sufficient. Meanwhile, just for the taste I will eat my favourite coloured dish.”

Saying that, he plucked a nasturtium flower, dipped it first in green paint, then in blue, and then in silver, finally eating it with great relish.

“I have to explain this to you,” Professor Inkblot said, seeing my surprise. “Many, many years ago I spent time in Beijing, the capital city of China, and befriended there a certain Chinese scholar, called Dr Pai Chi Wo. That surname must have come to your attention many times already. And so the aforementioned Dr Pai Chi Wo taught me to create edible paints, which represent the essence of various tastes. The blue paint is sour, the green is sweet, the red is bitter, the yellow is salty, while various blends of these paints produce intermediate flavours. This is how the correct blending of green and white paints, with a smidgeon of grey, gives vanilla flavour, brown with yellow has the taste of chocolate, silver mixed with black and splashed with a dash of celadon tastes of pineapple. And so on, and so on.”

In hearing Professor Inkblot's recipes, I was struck by how well he seemed to know Dr Pai Chi Wo, the same person who had given Matthew his magic cap. There was something very mysterious in all of this.

Meanwhile, Professor Inkblot kept on with his tale:

“Dr Pai Chi Wo revealed to me his other secrets and taught me all that which I know today. Among other things, he revealed to me the hidden meaning of human names. And so I have decided to admit into my Academy only students whose names begin with the letter A because, as we know already, they are talented and hardworking. The name Matthew brings with it all sorts of good fortune, which is why I gave that name to my favourite starling. The most blessed of names is Ambrose, which is my name. Anyway, no matter,” Professor Inkblot finished his story. “It's time to go to the park, the boys are awaiting us.”

We always spent the time after lunch in the park, where Professor Inkblot came up with all sorts of games and entertainments for us all. That day, we were playing at being treasure seekers.

“Look well, and you'll find it,” Professor Inkblot said to us knowingly.

All the boys scattered around the park, while I suggested to Arthur that he should go searching in tandem with me. Arthur agreed readily, which is why we got busy developing a joint plan for our adventure.

As I mentioned before, the park surrounding Professor Inkblot's Academy is amazingly spacious. Ancient oak trees, elms and hornbeams, chestnuts and tulip trees shoot high up into the sky, casting deep shadows across numerous ravines and tiny valleys. Wild bushes, nettles and plantains, along with many kinds of berries, thick growths and all manner of weeds created impassible thickets, making it hard to get into grottos and caves, which the ravines and escarpments were riddled with. Some parts of the park reminded me of a jungle, where no human had set foot for many years and which emitted strange noises and hums at night.

None of us had yet tried to penetrate the heart of these overgrown sections of the park, although we were all curious to discover what hid in them. We sometimes reached caves which were closer to the Academy, and looked into hollowed out trees which were a hundred years old, but our imaginations were constantly aroused by those unexplored and undiscovered wilds.

After consulting with Arthur, we took some torches from the Academy, along with ropes, a sharp hunting knife, a few other useful items, a handful of coloured glass tiles which Professor Inkblot gave us in case we became hungry, after which we set off in the direction of the eastern part of the park.

We struggled to push through a forest of tall stinging nettles, through a thicket of wild lupine, using the knife we broke through the tangled tree branches, we crawled on all fours beneath other low hanging branches, injuring ourselves on sticking out roots and knots, until we finally found ourselves standing in the very heart of the mysterious wood.

We looked round nervously, carefully listening to any noises. We heard quiet whispers, similar to human voices, some stifled laughs, the murmur of dried leaves knocked about by startled lizards.

I looked up. High above us, the mighty branches of an old oak tree stretched into a canopy. Some two metres above our heads there was the opening of a wide tree hollow, which was incredibly interesting to us both.

“It would be good to get in there,” Arthur said.

“You bet!” I replied keenly.

Without hesitating, we got to work. Arthur tied one end of our rope into a loop and threw it over one of the branches. The throw was accurate. The rope strongly caught on a thick bit of broken off branch, the rope looping round it.

A moment later, Arthur, with the agility of a cat, climbed up the rope and disappeared inside the tree trunk. I did the same and soon we were both inside the oak tree. With a sense of wonder, we realised we were standing at the top of a winding staircase, leading downwards.

“Shall we descend?” Arthur asked.

“Of course we shall!” I replied.

Shining our torches down, step by step we began to walk downwards along the narrow steps. All in all, I counted 207 of them. The descent lasted a good quarter of an hour, and when we were finally at the very bottom, our eyes fell on the opening of a dark, narrow corridor. I admit that my heart was in my throat, and at the same time I could hear not only the beating of my own heart, but also Arthur's. Several times, we had to make a right turn, and then left, until we finally found ourselves in a giant hall, illuminated with bright green light. In the centre of the room we noticed three iron chests, covered with beautiful ironwork. I had no trouble opening one of them. Imagine our surprise when at the bottom of that chest we saw a tiny green frog, wearing a tiny golden crown on its head.

“Do not touch me!” the frog uttered. “I know you have come from Professor Inkblot's Academy and have completely unnecessarily wondered into a neighbouring fable, the fable of the Frog Princess. If you touch me, you will instantly turn into frogs and be trapped here forever. My fairytale is indeed very beautiful, but it has no end and for fifty years I have been waiting for someone to come up with an ending. Neither of you is able to help me with that, so leave me in peace, respect my will, and in return you will be able to take with you anything which you find in the other two chests.”

Hearing those words, we bowed before the Frog Princess politely, and with great care lowered the lid of her chest.

I next opened the second chest, convinced that it too would contain some kind of surprise. However, at its bottom there was a small golden whistle and nothing else. With great disappointment, I said to Arthur:

“You can have the whistle, I can do without it!”

And without waiting for my companion, I approached the third chest. Arthur studied the whistle carefully, while I opened the third chest and took out the tiny golden key which was lying at its bottom.

“Now that is what I call treasures!” I called out with a laugh. I took the whistle from Arthur's hands, put it to my lips and whistled. At that very moment, some invisible force grabbed and lifted us high up into the air.

Before we knew what was happening, we were standing at the foot of the oak tree. Although our rope was hanging from its broken branch, we could no longer see the hollow in the same place where it was before.

Shocked by our adventure, we headed back towards the pond where Professor Inkblot was supposed to be waiting for us. We found him surrounded by other students, once they had all returned from their searches. Next to Professor Inkblot we saw all the treasures they had discovered – there were golden coins, along with strings of pearls, a violin with golden strings, an amethyst cup, a cigarette case, rings studded with precious stones, silver dishes, figurines made of amber and ivory and many other varied precious items.

We felt embarrassed when we saw all the other treasures.

“And what did you discover?” Professor Inkblot asked us with a smile. We showed him the key and the whistle.

Professor Inkblot studied these objects with great focus, as if he was looking at something extraordinary.

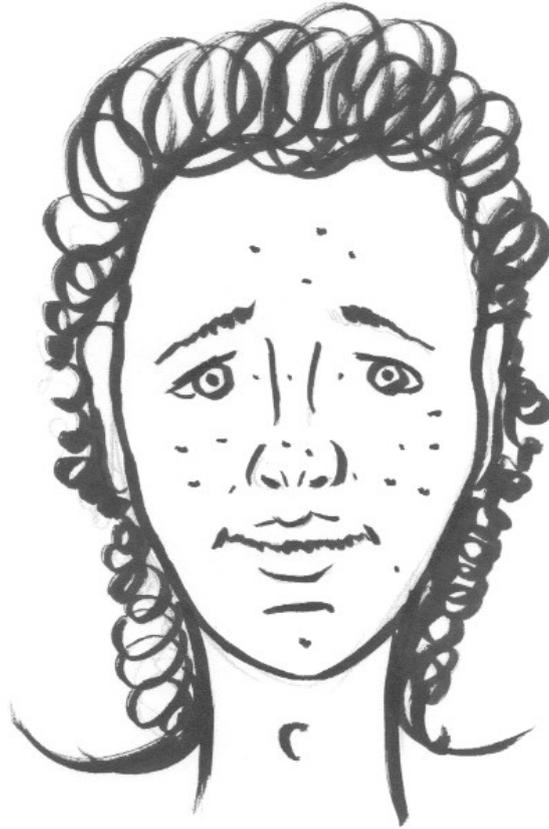
“These are priceless treasures,” he said to us. “This key opens all the world's locks, without exception. The whistle has such power that all you need to do is blow into it in order to find yourself wherever you desire. You have done the best job of all my students and that is why you will receive a noble prize!”

Having said that, Professor Inkblot took two big freckles from his nose and gave one each to Arthur and I.

All the boys inspected the two items we had found with great interest, and once we had told them about the Frog Princess, they really envied us our adventure.

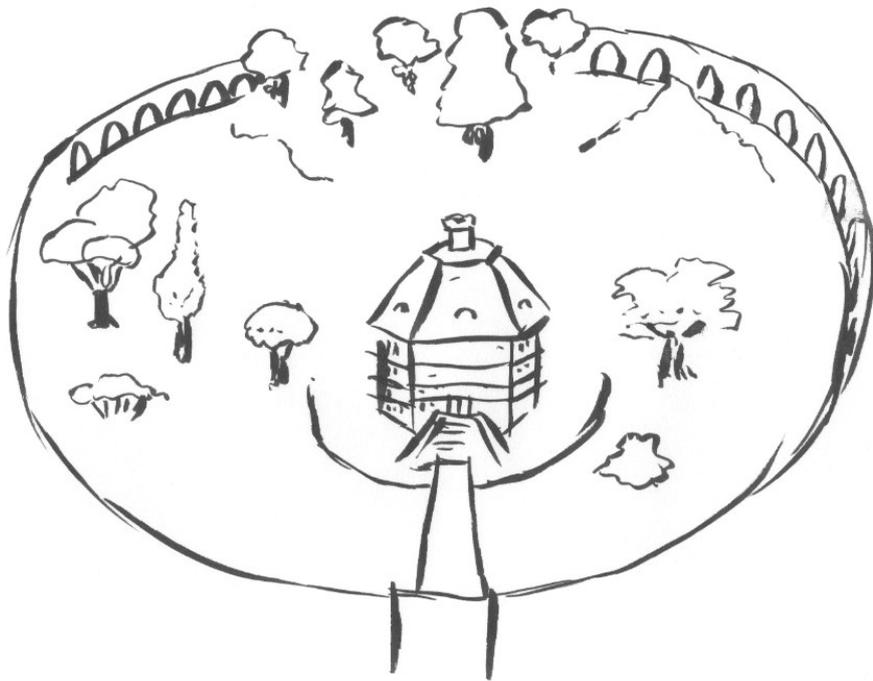
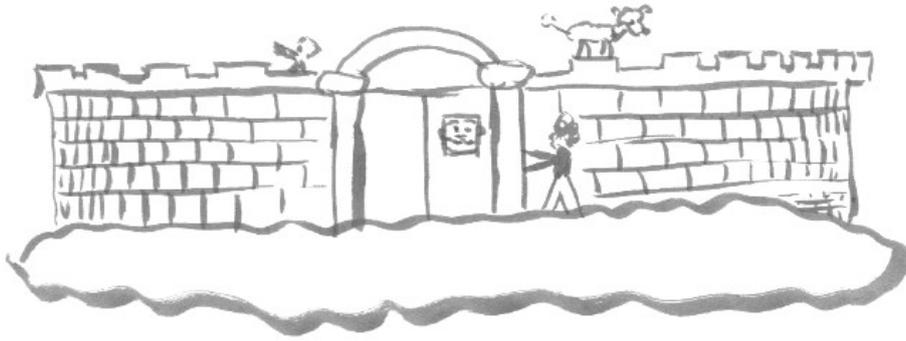
“Each one of you can keep the things you found today,” Professor Inkblot announced. “And now, let us not waste any more time. At 4.00pm, we are due to go into town. And seeing as we still have three quarters of an hour, let's listen to Adam Notagree telling us what happened when he felt in the mood to go flying, and what peculiarities he saw then. It is a very curious story.”

I had not told anyone apart from Professor Inkblot about my great adventure, seeing as I was worried that nobody would believe me. Now, however, as requested by Professor Inkblot, I had no choice but to tell the whole tale from beginning to end.



CHAPTER SIX

MY GREAT ADVENTURE



I always thought that flying is a rather easy thing to do – that all you need to do is rise in the air, and then you can glide around like a bird, high up into the sky.

Meanwhile, it turned out that my ideas were completely and utterly wrong.

In trying to copy Professor Inkblot, I inhaled a certain amount of air into my lungs and felt an incredible lightness inside. I then understood I was ready to fly. I inflated my cheeks and instantly began rising in the air. Beneath me, I saw Professor Inkblot's Academy moving away from me with great speed, the park shrinking and seemingly escaping downwards, my friends starting to quickly shrink. And as I was rising higher and higher, regardless of what my wishes might have been, I was overwhelmed with a sense of fear and decided to land as quickly as possible, although it turned out that I don't have any idea how to steer through the air. I used my arms and legs to perform various gestures, trying to copy the birds flying past me, holding my breath, but all of it was futile.

I hung in midair like a balloon and the wind carried me in an unknown direction. I noticed that I had flown over the walls of Professor Inkblot's Academy, expecting to now see all the neighbouring fairytales, having crossed over to them so many times before via the gates. And yet on the other side of the wall I saw little other than a few green hills, a birch wood and flowering meadows. There was no trace of any fables and the wall, like any other such wall, simply surrounded the Academy buildings. A while later, however, even that view faded from sight and I saw below me a town where the houses were set side by side like matchboxes. Tiny trams ran along very narrow streets, while people crawled about in all directions like ants. My appearance over their town seemed to arouse great interest.

Groups of pedestrians began to congregate in the town squares, looking up at the sky. I could see some of them climbing posts and roofs and others looking up at me through long telescopes, and a while later I realised searchlights were now trained on me from below.

Meanwhile, my flight continued and I still didn't know how to get back down to earth.

It was rapidly getting dark, the temperature suddenly dropped and soon enough I was trembling from the cold and also fear. I knew I could not expect any aid from Professor Inkblot, seeing as his all-seeing eye was still on the Moon, and I could count on no one else to help.

With the onset of night, I was overwhelmed by a fear that cannot be described. The only thing I could see all around me were stars. Finally, not knowing when and how, exhausted by the flight, by crying and fear, I fell into a deep sleep.

Suddenly, I was awoken by something shoving me in the back. I opened my eyes and saw a wall before me, and a strong gust of wind must have driven me into it. There was earth beneath my feet, but that earth was completely transparent and as blue as the sky. A giant, golden sun shone up from below, its rays really hot. The wall was built of matt-blue glass.

I decided to build up the courage and, moving along the wall, find some sort of entrance. I walked for a very long time along the transparent ground until, as I had predicted, I chanced upon a large gate made of panes of matt glass. After a short moment of hesitation, I knocked. One of the panes slid aside and I saw the mean head of a bulldog, which barked three times and quickly slid the glass shut.

Soon enough, however, the little window opened again and this time I saw the head of a white poodle, which bared his teeth in a friendly grin, stuck out his tongue and barked, as if he had met an old friend.

I smiled in spite of myself and whistled through my teeth. This was because a few years before then I had owned a favourite pug called Rex, and I was used to whistling at him thus.

To my immeasurable surprise, after I had given my whistle, I was answered with loud barking, the poodle was forcefully shoved aside and in the window I next saw the familiar snout of my old Rex. I thought he was going to leap out of his skin with joy when he saw me. I couldn't help myself – sheer joy made me kiss him on the nose, while he licked my face with such love, my heart beat even harder.

“Rex,” I kept calling out. “Rex, is that you?”

“Woof! Woof! Woof!” Rex answered me with lots of happy barking.

After a moment, the gates opened wide and I was confronted with an incredible sight.

A broad lane led away from the gate, lined on either side with countless doghouses, or rather smallish houses constructed from multicoloured bricks and tiles, with tiny porches and round windows, surrounded by the cutest gardens. Dogs and puppies of all sorts of breeds and types walked along the lane, happily barking and wagging their tails, the pink faces of fluffy, jolly pups looking out of the windows.

Rex kept cuddling up to me constantly, and I too couldn't get enough of his presence.

Many other dogs showed their curiosity by sniffing around me with interest, and some even licked my face and hands in a sweet manner. I felt rather odd and I was ashamed that I could not respond to their affection in the same fashion.

I could not understand them and so I stood out from their doggy crowd in a very visible way. That was when I gave into an inner voice telling me to follow my desire and try to become like the dogs surrounding me, and I began walking on all fours, which seemed to come easily to me and felt rather natural. Wanting to mimic their canine language, I tried to bark or growl, but instead of sounds words emerged from my mouth – words I did not at all know until then. The same words rang all around me and soon I heard Rex's familiar voice:

“Do not be surprised, Adam, every person who comes to visit us begins to understand our speech and is able to wield it as well as we can. Can you guess where you are?”

“I have no idea,” I answered. “My dearest Rex maybe you can enlighten me, and then introduce me to your friends, because I feel rather like a stranger around them.”

“Do not worry about this. You will quickly get used to your new surroundings. You have simply found yourself in dog heaven. All dogs which die come here, a place where they encounter no troubles or unpleasantness. Your human heaven can be found much, much higher than this. Ours is half way up and many people, making their way towards heaven, stop by here. Dogs really love people, you know that. This is why we really like to have them as guests and welcome them with great hospitality, and a while later we set them on their way. Are you too on your way to human heaven?”

I told Rex about my adventure, about how I hadn't yet died at all and that my truest desire was to return to Professor Inkblot's Academy.

I later learnt from Rex that a few months earlier he had run under the wheels of a car, and died as a result – as my faithful dog, he had made it into doggie paradise.

“And now,” Rex announced, “Allow me to introduce you to my friends. Here is bulldog Tom, the one who watches our gates. Once upon a time, he was a faithful servant to the queen of England, which is why we have the utmost respect for him. The poodle you've already met is called Glu-Glu. He is very well trained and entertains us all by performing various tricks.”

As if to confirm what Rex had told me, Glu-Glu did a series of five somersaults, while my old dog went on:

“This spitz is called Azor, this sheep dog is Jacob, and that is the pekingese Ralph, that is the doberman Kora, and this gorgeous greyhound is the pride of our paradise, he is called Lizard and wins first prize in all our races. Anyway, you will gradually meet all the other dogs, seeing as we live here in harmony and friendship.”

Indeed, before the hour was out, I had gotten on friendly terms with at least 100 various dogs and felt so good among them, as good as back in my own house, or maybe even better.

A small black pinscher approached and said to me with great dignity:

“Do allow me to introduce myself. My name is Lord.”

“I am very pleased to meet you,” I replied. “I am Adam Notagree.”

“How strange it is,” Lord went on, “that people cannot understand our speech, even though we speak quite plainly. I often wondered about this, why in certain places they have signs warning people about vicious guard dogs. No dog is ever vicious. That is not true. We all have sensitive hearts and become attached to people, who are often bad and unfair to us.”

“I will tell you, Lord,” Rex interrupted. “You are being most impolite. My friend, Mr Notagree, was my owner and I felt in his home no worse than I feel here, in doggie

paradise. Come, Adam,” he said, turning to me. “Not every Lord is a real lord. I will take you on a walk around our paradise city.”

I smiled at Lord a little crookedly, and followed Rex on a tour of doggie paradise, a place I had never heard about before.

“The street we are now trotting along is called White Fang Street,” Rex said. “It leads from the main gate all the way to Dr Doolittle Square. Look, there it is, along with a monument to Dr Doolittle we built.”

I looked around. The square was simply magnificent. Tidy, bright homes surrounded it from all sides. Outside the homes, freshly bathed puppies lay on soft cushions. Some of them played with balls, others sucked on sugar cubes, others yet chased flies which willingly fell into their snouts. In the centre of the square there was a monument in the shape of an elderly gentleman, a plaque at its base featuring the inscription: To Dr Doolittle, a philanthropist and animal doctor, from his grateful dogs. The whole monument was made of chocolate and lots and lots of dogs licked it from all sides. Rex blocked my way towards the monument, because I am ashamed to admit I had started to lick the chocolate along with all the other dogs, and managed to nibble on one of Dr Doolittle's shoes, which amounted to about half a kilogram of chocolate, something I ate with relish, seeing as I was starting to feel hungry.

“Each day,” Rex told me, “We eat the whole monument and each day we rebuild it anew. We are never short of chocolate, seeing as we are in paradise.”

“And where can I quench my thirst?” I asked. “I really need to have a drink.”

“Nothing simpler!” Rex called out cheerfully. “We are right in front of my little palace. Please do come in for a glass of milk.”

Rex's home was built out of green tiles. Cushions and carpets were laid out on the porch, little pups sunning themselves – I assumed they were all my friend's offspring.

In the garden at the back of the house I saw saveloy and sausage bushes growing. It was easy just to grab a piece of Cracow sausage and two saveloys from a branch, food I ate with delight. I also noticed the small trees growing beneath the windows of Rex's house had no branches and twigs, but delicious bones blossoming with pink marrow.

Once we had settled in his salon, Rex pushed on a tap which was sticking out of one of the walls and which – to my great surprise – instead of giving us running water flowed with chilled milk, flavoured with fresh cream ice cream. I drank three glasses of that fine beverage straight down, after which I set off with Rex to continue our journey.

Time and time again, Rex bowed before his various friends and had something interesting to say about all of them.

“That setter is Madame Nola. She never parts from her umbrella, although it doesn't

ever rain here and the sun shines up from below. This huge dog is called Tango. Every day, he eats too many saveloys and has to then drink castor oil. And this pair of sausage dogs is Sambo and Bimbo. They are never apart and are always trying to convince everyone that crooked legs are the best.”

Here he stopped and said to me:

“Be careful! We are now entering the Street of Torturers. You will see something interesting.”

Indeed, the street was remarkable – on either side, boys of various ages and appearances stood upon stone plinths. They included the sons of rich parents as well as those of poor folks, boys who looked tidy, well dressed, alongside those who were filthy and unkempt.

Each one spoke in dog language, admitting to wrongdoings:

“I am a torturer, because I threw the stone which took out my dog's eye,” said one of the boys.

“I am a torturer, because I pushed my dog Jack into a hole with calcium,” said another.

“I am a torturer, because I ordered my dog Rose to eat some hot pepper,” said the third.

“I am a torturer, because I was always tugging on the tail of my dog Rick.”

In this way, every one of those boys admitted humbly to crimes they had inflicted upon a range of different dogs. As Rex explained, boys who pick on dogs get sent to dogie paradise when asleep, and then come back before waking, convinced that they had dreamt the whole thing. And yet, after one such visit to the Street of Torturers, none of the boys ever punish their dogs again.

I was happy that I had been spared such shaming, even though I hadn't always been all that good to my Rex – one time, I had actually covered him all over in red paint. I gave a sigh of relief and instantly my mood improved. Once we had found ourselves on Glowworm Square, which was filled with merry-go-rounds, swings, barrels-of-laugh and other so-called dog tricks, I instantly jumped in to play with the other dogs.

I felt a sense of joy like never before, but eventually hunger began to creep up on me and I noticed that Rex was starting to sniff around nervously.

“Come,” he said to me. “We'll eat something light, and then go back home to eat some saveloys.”

He then led me to Biscuit Street, where piles of cakes lay around, dipped in honey. They were so delicious, I couldn't prise myself away.

“Consider,” Rex warned me. “We are in paradise, so nothing can do us harm, but you can quickly makes yourself sick.”

I was very interested how doggie paradise came to have so much chocolate, biscuits, honey and other delicacies: who built the dogs' houses and Dr Doolittle's monument; who produced the umbrellas, hats and other garments the dogs and their families wore. And yet I thought that I should not ask about it, seeing as it might have been impolite to stick my nose into heavenly business. Besides, I thought that this might be why paradise exists, so that everything could just appear in a flash, without anyone knowing where it came from.

Rex took me to visit lots more interesting places: the dog circus and dog cinema, Soap Bubble Street, Jokey Lane and Jam Street, the greyhound races and the Theatre of the Three Poodles, a farm for groats and pate sausages, minced meat gardens, the puppy baths and all sorts of other heavenly machineries.

Coming back to Dr Doolittle Square, which was also Rex's home, we popped into the barber shop on Syrup Lane. Two barbers from the Mountains of St Bernard cut our hair with great elegance, one them saying to me proudly afterwards:

“I don't know if dearest sir noticed that fleas simply don't thrive in our climate.”

“Indeed,” I replied. “You really lead heavenly lives up here.”

I noticed with some surprise that no one had asked for any payment for our haircuts, and so following Rex's example, I politely thanked my barber by licking his nose, and then went out to the street.

The sun was really heating us mercilessly, and as I learnt from Rex, it never set. When we returned to my friend's home, he told his puppies to clear the cushions on the porch and then asked me to stretch out next to him. We lay there, having a polite chat and watching dogs moving about on the square.

“How can you tell one day from another,” I asked Rex, “Seeing as the sun never sets and there are no nights?”

“It's very easy,” Rex replied. “When Dr Doolittle's monument is completely consumed, we know a day has passed. The rebuilding of a new monument takes the same amount of time as the eating of it. This is our equivalent of a day on earth. This is how we measure time here. A week is something we call 'the seven monuments'. Thirty monuments makes up a month. Each year is made up of 365 monuments. The Times Table Square is home to twenty fox terrier mathematicians, who are constantly busy counting the monuments and keep our doggie paradise calendar.”

Chatting in this way with Rex, I learnt all sorts of details about the afterlife of our canine friends.

I felt very happy to be in his home, and yet after a while I started to feel bored. The biscuits, chocolate and sausages became tiresome, and I desperately desired to eat

a little groats soup and carrots, the very things I so detested back home. I especially missed the taste of bread.

My thoughts kept returning to Professor Inkblot's Academy and I despaired to think what would happen if I had to stay forever in doggie paradise. One day, I was lying in the garden, warming myself in the sun with Rex's tiny pups. Saveloys hung down from branches over us, but they now filled me with disgust. Suddenly, a familiar voice called out from above:

“areful, arling! areful, arling!”

I jumped to my feet and, to my great joy, saw Matthew sitting on the branch of a marrow tree, holding a tiny envelope in his beak.

“Matthew! How happy I am to see you again!” I cried. “How good it is that you have flown here to get me. What great fortune!”

Matthew floated down to the porch and handed me the envelope. It was a letter written by Professor Inkblot, instructing me in how I should inhale and exhale air in order to freely steer myself in flight. I then spoke in doggie dialect to all the friends who had gathered round once they noticed Matthew, thanked them for their hospitality and the goodness of their hearts, hugged my dearest Rex goodbye, as well as the rest of his family, and then set off with bulldog Tom towards the exit gate. Matthew flew over me, whistling cheerfully.

I asked Tom to give me one of the buttons from his frock to add to my collection, took one last look back at doggie paradise and left its welcoming threshold.

I sucked air into my lungs, in a way which now felt familiar, blew up my cheeks and began to rise into the air.

As I flew away, I could hear the farewell howling of the dogs behind me, and in time the doggie paradise began to get further away from me, becoming a small, blue cloud and then finally vanishing from sight completely. I flew next to Matthew, following the pointers contained in Professor Inkblot's letter.

After a few hours of flying, I noticed below me, in the light of the setting sun, the roofs and streets of our town.

“demy s ose!” Matthew squeaked into my ear, so to say: “Academy is close!”

And indeed, after a while I spotted the Academy walls, the park which surrounded it from all sides and Professor Inkblot himself, floating up to meet me, waving his hands in greeting. Before dusk fell, we were already back home. It turned out that my absence had lasted twelve days. I am unable to describe the joy with which I made my return back down to earth. My school pals could not get enough of me, while Professor Inkblot ordered me to make a solemn promise that I would never fly off again.

I made such a promise and will keep to it with absolute certainty.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FACTORY OF HOLES LARGE AND SMALL



I wanted to describe one whole day of what life in Professor Inkblot's Academy was like. And so I have regaled you all with that which takes place, from the moment we wake right until the late afternoon. I described lessons of blotography, threading of letters, painted pictures of Professor Inkblot's kitchen, told you all about hunting for treasure and my adventures in doggie paradise. For many days now, I have been devoting all my free time to this diary, and even so I have only just managed to get to the point at which – at four p.m. - Professor Inkblot ordered all of us to gather round by the gate and said:

“I will now take you on a tour of the most interesting factory in the world. You will see there the most wonderful devices and machines, operated by 12,000 engineers and workers. My friend, the engineer Kopec, is the director of this factory and promised to take us round all the production halls so that we can take a closer look at the work done by his people and machines. This will be a very educational trip. Please, arrange yourselves in groups of four. We're off.”

Anastasius opened the gate and we set off for the centre of town. At Four Winds Square we got into a tram which was meant to take us to the factory. But because there wasn't enough room for us all, Professor Inkblot used his magnifying pump to enlarge the tram to include the six missing seats, allowing us to ride along in great comfort.

The road at first ran through the town, but after a while we emerged onto the shore of a river and soon enough rode onto a jukebox bridge. Professor Inkblot explained to us that the weight of the tram set in motion the mechanisms built into the bridge, making the trumpets hidden inside it play the Toy-Soldiers March. A picturesque, tidy little town lay on the other side of the river. These were the houses belonging to workers employed at the factory. The factory itself could be seen round a bend in the rails, where the end of the tram line could be found. Moving walkways led away from the stop towards the factory. Riding them, we felt completely like at a fairground, seeing as we were unused to this mode of transportation, unable to keep balance and falling on the ground time and time again.

Kopec the Engineer approached us, riding a moving walkway from the opposite direction. He was a tall, thin, grey-haired man with wind-blown hair and a goatee. He had slim, long legs and waved his slim, long arms about. He really reminded me of a scarecrow who was getting on in years.

With one bound, he jumped across to our walkway, embraced Professor Inkblot and kissed him on both cheeks.

“Do allow me, dear Bogumil, to present to you my students. There are 24 of them in total,” Professor Inkblot revealed.

“ful, ling!” Matthew could be heard shouting from the back of Professor Inkblot's overcoat.

“And here is my favourite starling, Matthew,” Professor Inkblot added, taking the bird out of his pocket.

Mr Bogumil Kopec studied us all carefully, stroked Matthew's feathers and said, toying with the end of his beard:

“It is a great honour for me to welcome you, Ambrose. I will also happily walk your students around my factory of holes, large and small. Only do remember, boys,” he said, addressing us. “You cannot touch anything while inside the factory.”

Having said that, he wrapped his left leg around the right, plaited the fingers of both hands together and flowed along at the head of our gathering on the mobile walkway in the direction of the factory, which approached us with remarkable speed.

The factory was made up of twelve huge buildings with transparent walls and glass roofs. We could see, even from a distance, the massive wheels driving the machinery, its clanging audible all over the district.

When we entered the first hall, we were almost blinded by plumes of multicoloured sparks flying off of transmission belts, electric drills and lathes.

Machines stood in several long lines, while others were suspended on lines and cranes, crowds of workers busy supervising them, dressed in leather aprons and hardhats with black visors.

Work went on, and the hum of machines and tools drowned out Engineer Kopec's words, as he tried to explain something to us with his squeaky voice.

I only managed to catch him saying that the hall we were visiting was where keyholes were produced, along with nostrils and earholes and many other small-scale openings.

We watched the machines as they worked with great interest, admiring the skills displayed by the lathe operators, who managed to produce ten to twelve well-honed holes with the movement of a single wheel.

They tossed the ready-made holes into small wagons, and once each one was full they would be grabbed by special moving cranes and carried over to the stores in a neighbouring building.

Professor Inkblot approached one of the wagons, took both of his well-used nostrils from his nose, chose two freshly minted nostrils and placed them where the old ones used to be.

They looked lovely, their polished edges glistening, and we could see how much Professor Inkblot was enjoying wiping his nose.

Remembering Engineer Kopec's instruction not to touch anything, we had to constantly keep an eye on Alfred, who had a real tendency to pick his nose and constantly kept reaching out in order to poke about inside the holes being finished off by lathe operators.

In other factory halls, we saw holes, large and small, being finished off at larger scales, including holes in elbows, holes in bridges and even holes in the sky. These last were especially large and the machines used to produce them stuck far out above the roofs of the factory, the workers maintaining them forced to climb up vast scaffolds.

The holes for elbows and knees had wonderfully ragged edges and required particular attention from the workers. Mr Kopec showed us various inventive drawings and patterns, thanks to which young engineers could cut out templates used to make these holes.

One of the warehouses housed a sorting facility, where many experienced engineers were busy controlling, measuring and checking completed holes, large and small. Those which were cracked, badly polished, bent or damaged were thrown into large cauldrons where they would be melted down and used again.

The last factory building was the packing house. Special women workers weighed the holes, large and small, on large scales and packed them into 5kg and 10kg cases.

Engineer Kopec gave us a gift of two cases of holes for bread pretzels.

After we returned to the Academy, Professor Inkblot baked a lot of sweet, vanilla-scented dough and used those holes to make a lot of delicious mini-pretzels for us – it took us all evening to eat everything.

We were all thrilled by the way the factory had been arranged, unable to tear our eyes away from the electric drills spinning so fast they had turned red, the lathes and all sorts of other tools the names of which none of us knew.

When we left the factory, it was almost dark. We could see in the distance, gazing through glass walls, fountains of blue, green and red sparks, lighting up the whole area like fireworks.

“We could use those sparks to make some really delicious, colourful dishes,” Professor Inkblot observed.

Engineer Kopec escorted us all the way to the tram stop, telling us all sorts of stories. It turned out that during periods when he wasn't working at the factory, he performed tricks on a tightrope in a local circus, so as not to become rusty at winding one leg around the other.

Once we had found ourselves at the end of the moving walkway, our tram was already waiting for us patiently. It was the same tram car which Professor Inkblot had cured some weeks back, hence when it saw us it squealed its wheels in joy and refused to leave until

we were all aboard. Engineer Kopec said goodbye to us with real feeling, tickling some of us with his goatee beard, then chatted with Professor Inkblot for a while in a language none of us knew – I think it might have been Chinese, seeing as the only words I could understand was the surname of Dr Pai-Chi-Wo.

We finally boarded the tram, which slowly got rolling. Professor Inkblot, wishing to avoid being crowded in, remained outside and floated alongside the tracks.

For a while longer, looking out the tram windows we could see Engineer Kopec still standing at the stop. He plaited the fingers of both hands and waved to us from a distance. In the evening darkness, against the glow of light rising up from the factory, his slim figure seemed to rise up towards the sky itself.

It was only once the tram turned into Forget-me-not Street that we lost sight of Engineer Kopec. Soon after, we rolled onto the jukebox bridge, this time playing the March of the Mushrooms.

Professor Inkblot, evidently wishing to test out the new nostrils, accompanied the bridge by humming along by blowing his nose. Once we had reached the Four Winds Square, night had fallen completely, and so Professor Inkblot handed out candle flames which he pulled from a pocket in his waistcoat, and in this way we reached our Academy come late evening.

At home, a nasty surprise awaited us.

All the rooms, classrooms, halls and corridors had become filled with swarms of flies.

These unbearably unpleasant insects, making use of our absence, had broken in via the windows we had left open, descended upon all our tools and devices, hovering and humming in the air in countless swarms, then attacked us with the relentless fury we associate with those beasts. They climbed inside our mouths and noses, got into our eyes, tangled in our hair, whirling as a black mass beneath the ceilings, in corners, on fireplaces and beneath our tables. In order to go from room to room we had to close our eyes, hold our breaths and chase them off with both hands. I had never seen such an invasion of flies in my whole life.

They flew in attack formations, like vast squadrons of fighter planes, switching shapes from triangles, squares and round regiments, descending upon us with a sound reminiscent of military trumpets. Their leaders had particularly large wings, displaying pugnacity and courage. The painful stings being inflicted upon me by this bloodthirsty swarm suggested this was a battle to the very death.

At some point, with a loud sort of buzzing, the Queen of the Flies flew into the room I was trying to run across, issued a few short orders to her commanders, stuck her sting in my nose and flew off to other battlefields in our Academy.

The light of our lamps could not break through this black, whirling cloud. We tried to use our hands to feel our way around, stomping and killing whole swarms of flies which settled upon us from all sides, but we didn't seem to be making a dent in their numbers.

Waving cloths and towels about didn't seem to help either. Any fly which was swatted would instantly be replaced by another, attacking us with even more fervour.

Professor Inkblot, who up until that time – flying about our rooms – fought a pitched battle against the flies, finally ran out of energy, crossed his legs and, suspended in midair, began to think deeply. The flies instantly descended upon him with such intensity, it was impossible to see him any more.

Finally, Professor Inkblot ran out of patience. He quickly flew out the window and a few minutes later returned, clutching a common garden spider – also called the cross spider, because of the cross shape upon its back. He applied to it his magnifying pump and the arachnid quickly began increasing in size. When it was the size of a cat, Professor Inkblot flew him up into the air and placed him on the ceiling.

Soon enough, we saw lots of silken threads suspended from the ceiling, hanging all the way down to the floor, and a while later a giant spider's web cut the room in two. Hundreds and thousands of flies, all their venomous squadrons fell into the trap, but nothing was capable of weakening their bravery and warring spirit.

The spider threw itself hungrily at the flies caught in its web, gobbling up their troops, sucking all their juices dry, squashing and quashing them with its giant, hairy arms, but after a short while he had eaten so many of them, the need for the pump to work its magic was gone. The spider began to shrink, returned to its normal size, its web shrinking too and the flies then tore him to shreds in an instant, getting their revenge for what he had done to their fellow flies. The Fly Queen rose up into the air, holding the cross from its back as a trophy, torn away as if it was a triumphant scalp. That was when Professor Inkblot called us round and announced that he had only just invented a whole new kind of flytrap, one which would free our Academy from the plague of flies.

A moment later, he brought into the school hall a tin basin filled with water, some powdered glue, soap and a glass pipe. As we chased flies off our beloved teacher, Professor Inkblot dissolved the glue and soap in the bowl, and with the help of the glass pipe began blowing bubbles, which then rose into the air, one after the other. The application of such a flytrap gave the most amazing results.

The flies became trapped by the sticky surface of the bubbles and, unable to tear themselves away, fell with them back down to the floor. Professor Inkblot did not interrupt his labours. He kept blowing more bubbles, while we grabbed brooms and quickly swept away piles of flytraps, black from all the flies stuck to them. Soon enough, all the rooms, halls and corridors filled with Professor Inkblot's sticky soap bubbles.

The flies threw themselves at their rainbow coloured, treacherous surface and whole hordes of insects thus became stuck. Not a single fly managed to evade such fate. Professor Inkblot blew his glass pipe without stopping and an hour later there was not a single fly left in our Academy – only a few bubbles, shimmering in all their lovely colours, floating above our heads.

We gathered up all the flies we had swept outside in tall piles and it wasn't until morning that three huge trucks arrived, sent to us by the City Refuse Department, to clean up this disgusting cemetery.

And so ended Professor Inkblot's war with the flies.

And in among all of that, one thing led us to really wonder: when a large number of the flies had been defeated, we noticed Philip the Barber in among all the swarms, sleeping on the settee in Professor Inkblot's study. At first, we hadn't noticed him at all, seeing as he was totally covered in flies. Once one of the boys noticed him, we could not get over how the invading flies, which had managed to settle and cover him completely, did not disturb his sleep. It was only the loud, staggered way in which he was snoring that made us realise his dreams were neither pleasant nor calm. After the flies had been exterminated, Professor Inkblot woke Philip, asked us to leave his study, locked the door with a key and had a long, mysterious chat with his barber.

Once the doors were once again open, Philip came out, clearly very upset and announced to Professor Inkblot in a raised voice:

“From this day on, you can find yourself another barber. I will no longer cut the hair of you, Sir, nor of your students. I have had enough of waiting and of promises. I will bring him here this week. And this is irrevocable. This Academy was meant to be for him, and not for all your horrid crowd of boys! Farewell, Professor Inkblot.”

And without paying us any attention, he left the Academy, slamming all the doors along the way behind him.

A moment later, we heard his terrifying laugh echoing round our park. Looking out the windows, we could see by the light of the moon as he jumped over our gate and ran up Chocolate Street towards town.

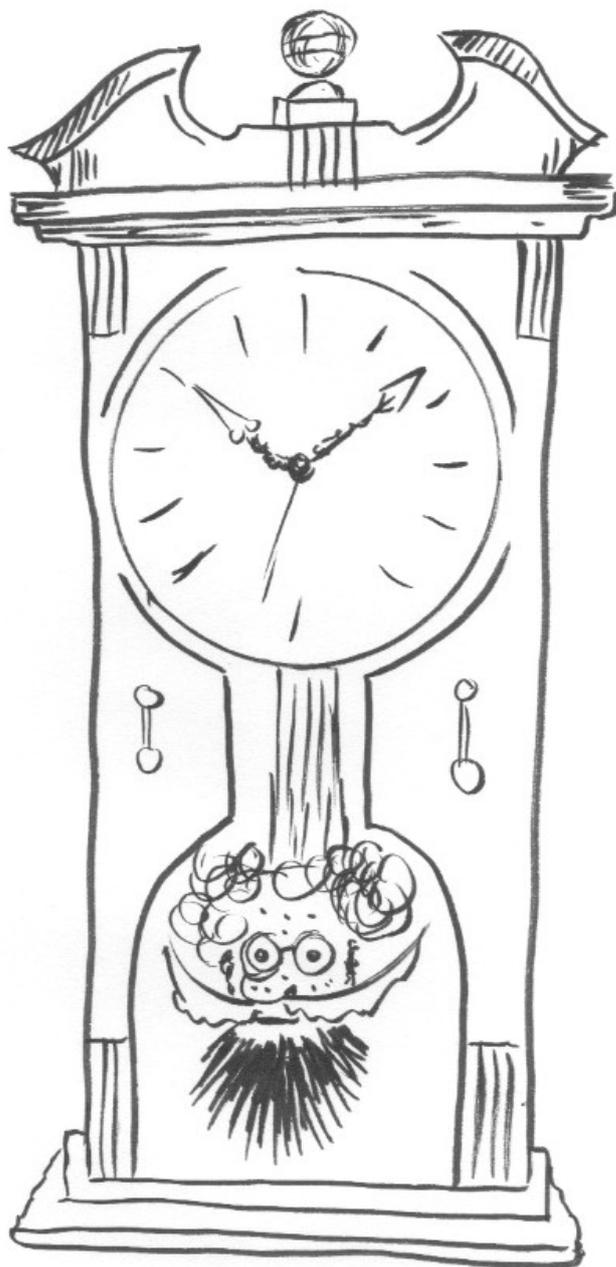
We sat down to supper very late that night. Professor Inkblot kept thinking about things and was so distracted, the cauliflowers he prepared for us were black in colour and in taste reminded us of baked apples.

After supper, Professor Inkblot called for two Andrews and told them to bring two extra beds into our sleeping halls, announcing that he was now expecting two new students to arrive at any moment.

Once the two Andrews had carried out his instructions, we went to the sleeping hall and, soon enough, fell into deep sleep.

And thus ends the description of just one of the days I spent at Professor Inkblot's Academy.

CHAPTER EIGHT
THE DREAM OF SEVEN GLASSES



The first of September was rich in events of great importance. It was a Sunday and each one of us could do anything we liked. Arthur taught his favourite rabbit how to count, Alfred carved flutes out of wood, Anastasius shot his bow and arrow, one of the Anthonys, kneeling over a huge anthill, observed the life of the insects who lived there, Albert collected chestnuts and acorns, while I played with my buttons, arranging them into all sorts of remarkable characters and shapes.

Professor Inkblot was not in a good mood. In fact, he had been out of sorts since the argument with Philip. I had no idea that barber could have been someone important in the life of our Professor Inkblot, and that this man who delivered freckles had the right to raise his voice and slam our doors. Professor Inkblot was not wrong to suspect that Philip the Barber had gone mad. And yet something changed in our Academy that day. Professor Inkblot became a little stooped, walking around lost in thought, spending days on end constantly repairing his magnifying pump. More and more often, he would ask Matthew to deliver his lectures for him, burning dishes in the kitchen due to absentmindedness, painting them all the wrong colour, running to the window every time the gate bell rang, tugging at his eyebrows nervously.

And when on the very day I am describing now I arranged a beautiful rabbit out of my collection of buttons, Professor Inkblot bent over me and sprinkled some brown powder over the buttons. The rabbit suddenly moved, ran off in the direction of the door and escaped, taking with it some of my buttons. Professor Inkblot seemed to really enjoy the joke, seeing as he began to laugh loudly, but then became saddened again and said:

“What good is it that I know all about coloured powders, paints and glass tiles, when I cannot seem to be able to handle one unbearable Philip. I have the impression he will cause me numerous worries and miseries. He's simply picking on me.”

I was surprised to hear Professor Inkblot say such words – I had never imagined that such a great man could fail to handle anyone else. Professor Inkblot, reading my thoughts, approached me and kept speaking in a whisper:

“You are the only one I can confide in, because you're my best student. Philip is demanding that I accept into our Academy two of his sons. He has come up with new names for them, both starting with the letter A, and he has threatened that if I refuse to take them in he will take away all my freckles. What is more, he recently went mad and keeps on doing things to upset me, constantly laughing. You'll see, this history will have a very miserable ending.”

Having said that, he took out a handful of buttons from a pocket, threw them on the floor so skilfully they arranged themselves into the shape of my rabbit, and then left the room shrinking and jumping up and down on one leg.

Our conversation was so intriguing to me, I decided to go find Matthew and ask him for more details about the relationship between Professor Inkblot and Philip.

Matthew tended to spend his Sundays visiting the fairytale about the nightingale and the rose, ever since he started to fly there for lessons in nightingale singing. I therefore went to the park in the hope that I will spot him as soon as he heads back to the Academy.

In the park, I was stunned by some kind of disturbance and odd noises. The yellowed undergrowth seemed to be alive, the bushes moving side to side, the grasses wavering – there could be no doubt that a stream of invisible animals was moving across the park, not following any roads or paths.

I ran towards this movement and when I got close to the pond, I realised what was happening. All the water had been drained from the pond, fish flapping about despairingly on the dry bottom, and countless rows of frogs and lobsters were setting off into the world in search of some new, appropriate home.

I kept them company for a while, especially impressed by the frogs who, in even leaps, completely ignoring my presence, followed their leader. When I approached her in order to take a closer look, I noticed she was wearing a golden crown and quickly realised that this was the Frog Princess which I had met once upon a time.

“I know who you are, lad, you recently visited my fable and I have fond memories of our encounter. Can you see what has happened? Professor Inkblot, for reasons unknown, took all the water from our pond, leaving all the frogs, fish and lobsters to fend for themselves. I decided to come to their rescue and that is why I have left my underground palace. Although I come from a different fable, I know a frog will have an easier time understanding another frog than Professor Inkblot. Hence, it is not surprising that my fellow frogs have followed me out of the pond.”

“And where are you taking them to, Frog Princess?” I asked, moved by her words.

“I haven't quite decided yet,” she replied. “I can take them to the lake from the fairytale about the Cursed Lake, or to the pond from the fairytale about the Green Water Witch.”

“We want to go to the pond!” the frogs ribbited in unison. They kept jumping up so high, their march reminded me of a frog circus, if such a thing exists anywhere.

The lobsters kept walking in silence, keeping a certain distance.

They made no noise, dragging their heavy claws along. There was far more of them than could be counted, almost as many as there was frogs, or maybe more. Some of them, likely due to effort and tiredness, turned completely red, as if they had been covered in boiling water.

I could not tear my eyes away from this view, although recalling the sight of those unfortunate fish, left without water, I excused myself and wanted to walk away from the Frog Princess, but I was stopped by the begging tone in her voice:

“Adam, please, wait a moment! Do you remember how when you visited my palace I allowed you to take the gold key from one of my chests? Without it, I won't be able to get into the fable about the Cursed Lake or the one about the Green Water Witch – it is only in such fairytales that I can find a new home for my frogs and lobsters. I was really troubled by this, but seeing as fate has brought you to us, I beg you to return that golden key to me now, thereby saving all the creatures you see here today.”

“Key?” I said. “Key? But of course, I will happily return it to you, Princess. I just don't remember where I hid it. I think Professor Inkblot took it from me. Give me a moment, I will be back soon.”

I had no idea what to do first. I was sad about the frogs, which were growing weaker from dehydration, but I was even more worried about the fish. I ran as fast as I could to the Academy, collected up a few of the boys I met along the way, told them about what had happened and convinced them to do something to help the fish.

None of the boys I spoke to had seen Professor Inkblot, and so I began to look for him all over the Academy. Unable to find him either downstairs or in his room, I ran into the Hospital of Broken Things.

I looked around the room. Yes. Professor Inkblot was there, but there was no way of believing what he was actually up to. No bigger than Tom Thumb, he clung onto the clock's pendulum with both arms and legs, swinging on it as if he were on a park swing, constantly repeating out loud:

“Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.”

At that very moment, the clock began to chime the hour and Professor Inkblot accompanied it with a basso voice:

“Bim, bam, bom.”

Seeing me, he stopped swinging, jumped to the floor, de-shrunk, straightened up and seemed to grow a little larger.

“You always have to interrupt!” he said, a clear note of annoyance in his voice. “What is going on? As you can see, I am teaching the clock to speak.”

He instantly composed himself, and said politely, as always:

“I am sorry, Adam, that you look so very surprised. Ah, it is all the fault of that awful Philip. He simply wants to destroy me. Everything in me is going wrong and I am finding it harder and harder to maintain a normal height. I am literally shrinking from day to day.

And now I have a new reason to worry: candle flames have started to burn me so much, I had to take them all out of my pockets and extinguish them with water from our pond. Terrible, it's all terrible! Don't tell anyone, because I won't be able to trust you any more. What is it you would like from me? Why did you come?"

I told Professor Inkblot about the awful consequences of the draining of the pond, informed him about the march of the frogs and lobsters and asked him to give me back the golden key which – as I imagined – he was hiding in the bottomless pockets of his pants.

Professor Inkblot seemed to grow even more sad than before.

"A pity, a great pity!" he said after a while. "The frogs will no longer compose their poems for us. But I had no other way out. I had to put out the candle flames, otherwise the whole of our Academy would have gone up in smoke. I desperately need a fire-proof pocket. And what will happen to the fish? Maybe I can come up with some sort of rescue for them... Ah, right! You wanted me to give you back your key... Wait..."

Saying that, Professor Inkblot began to carefully search through all his pockets.

"I have to admit," he noted, whispering, "That there is one other thing worrying me. Since the troubles with Philip started, most of my pockets have grown shut. I can't get into them at all. But I have luckily managed to find the key. Take it to the Frog Princess, greet her from me, send my apologies for draining the pond."

Having said that, Professor Inkblot once again grabbed onto the pendulum and began swinging back and forth, repeating with each swing:

"Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock."

I ran with the key to the park and placed it at the feet of the Frog Princess.

"I am incredibly grateful to you," the Princess said. "I am taking back this key, but don't think that you will lose out. In exchange, you will receive from me a Froggy Shakehand. She will assist you in anything you undertake."

Having said that, the Princess uttered a few words in frog language and a moment later a tiny frog, no bigger than a fly, emerged from the crowd. She was bright green and shone as if covered in enamel.

"Take her," the Princess said. "Best hide her in your hair and give her a single grain of rice to eat each day."

I took my Froggy Shakehand and placed her upon my head. It instantly hid her my hair, and was so small, I could not feel her at all.

Next, I thanked the Princess, bid her a respectful farewell and jumping over the crowds of frogs and lobsters, ran towards the pond. I found Professor Inkblot there, surrounded

by a dozen or so students. He looked the same as ever, only once more he appeared to be a little bit smaller.

Professor Inkblot instructed the boys to throw the fish, now breathing very heavily, into large baskets brought in from the pantry.

“Follow me,” Professor Inkblot ordered.

We did as told, bending under the weight of the baskets, passing by the chestnut avenue and raspberry thicket, and after a while of forcing our way through bushes and trees, we reached the wall of fables. Professor Inkblot stopped in front of a gate marked with the sign Fairytale about the Fisherman and Fisherwoman and opened the padlock. We could see the fisherman far off, standing on the shore of the sea, likely to be busy with his trade. He greeted us with great pleasure and smiled kindly, without taking the clay pipe from his lips.

We tossed all the fish from our baskets into the waters, and then, following the fisherman's advice, we took advantage of the opportunity and had a swim in the sea, seeing as the day was particularly warm.

When we returned to the park, there were no more frogs, nor lobsters, and the bottom of the pond was crawling with snails, playing about in the damp mud. We intended to go back to the Academy for lunch, when we noticed Matthew hovering over us. Clearly very much agitated, he flew over our heads, crying as loud as he could:

“ention, loon! ention, loon!”

Professor Inkblot was the first to realise what the starling said and looked up at the skies. After a moment, he too called out:

“Attention, balloon! Attention, balloon!”

And indeed, a small dot, suspended high above us, began to approach ever more quickly, until we could clearly make out a blue balloon with a basket attached to its bottom.

Professor Inkblot was delighted and, rubbing his hands with glee, repeated time and time again:

“My eye is back from the moon!”

The balloon descended ever faster, and once it was at arm's length, Professor Inkblot took out his eye from the little basket, ripped the plaster from his right eyelid and put the eye back where it belonged.

“No! Well, I say!” he called out, delighted. “No one has ever seen anything like it! What miracles! What wonders! I can see life up on the Moon! No one has yet come up with a fable like this!”

We stared at Professor Inkblot with envy, as he stood there thrilled to be reviewing

the moonscapes, delivered to him by his all-seeing eye.

Finally, he calmed down and said to us:

“The story of Moon People will eclipse all the fables and fairytales we've heard so far. But a time will come for that.”

“Dear Professor, could you tell us it now?” Anastasius pleaded.

“Everything in good time,” Professor Inkblot answered. “Now, we will go back to the Academy for dinner, and after we've eaten I will read from my Academy dream diary the one Adam Notagree dreamt up.”

The boys were thrilled to hear this news.

We ate our lunch very quickly, and then gathered in the central school hall.

Professor Inkblot sat down at his desk, opened the large book which contained the record of our dreams, and began to read:

“The dream of seven glasses.

I dreamt that I woke up.

Professor Inkblot turned all the chairs, tables, stools, beds, benches and coat stands, along with wardrobes and shelves, into students, so that we amounted to over a hundred members of the Academy.

“I will now take you to China,” Professor Inkblot announced.

When I looked out the window, I saw a tiny train waiting for us outside our mansion, made up of matchboxes, attached to a kettle in place of a locomotive. The kettle was on wheels and steam sprouted from its spout.

We got into those tiny wagons and it turned out that we all fit inside them perfectly.

Professor Inkblot sat on the kettle and our train was just about to move off, when suddenly in the skies above us we noticed a vast, black cloud. A gale picked up, tossing aside the matchboxes. A terrible storm was brewing.

I thus ran to the kitchen, took seven glasses, placed them upon a metal tray, grabbed a ladder from the pantry and returned outside.

Professor Inkblot was using his hands to try and hold back the steam which was pouring from the kettle and mixed with the cloud.

“Save, Adam, save my train!” Professor Inkblot shouted, jumping up and down along with the kettle lid.

Without looking at anyone else, I set the ladder against the Academy roof and, holding the tray with seven glasses in my hand, I climbed to the tallest rung of the ladder.

Once I was at the top, the ladder began to extend so quickly that it soon reached the black cloud and came to rest against its edge.

Without giving it much thought, I grabbed a spoon I had taken from the kitchen and began to use it to stir the cloud. First I spooned away all the rain from its surface, and poured it into the first glass. Then, I scraped off the snow which covered the cloud, and poured that into the second glass. I threw hail into the third glass, into the fourth – thunder, the fifth – lightning, the sixth – wind. Once all six glasses were full, it turned out that I had gathered up the whole cloud with one spoon, just the way you collect the skin from hot milk, and the sky became sunny again.

I just didn't know what the seventh glass was for. I quickly ran down the ladder to the very bottom, but in the spot where I had left Professor Inkblot's train I couldn't see anyone, seeing as all the boys had by then turned into silver forks, laying on the ground in tidy rows.

Only Professor Inkblot was left, still busy with his kettle, using his finger to block the spout.

I placed the tray with the seven glasses on the grass and covered it with a cloth in the same fashion as do circus performers and magicians.

“What have you done?” Professor Inkblot finally exclaimed. “You've stolen the cloud. From now on, we won't have any more rains or snows, not even winds. We will all have to die of drought and heatwaves.”

And indeed, in the sky overhead there was nothing but translucent blue, and I suddenly realised that it is a blue enamel kettle, quite similar to the one Professor Inkblot was sitting on, but big enough to occupy the whole sky. Sunlight flowed from the kettle down to the ground, or rather something akin to golden boiling water, which burnt us all mercilessly.

Professor Inkblot, being unable to stand such a heatwave, began to quickly undress, but he was wearing so many overcoats that the process of removing them seemed to be taking forever. When I saw that his head was starting to smoulder and smoke started to rise up from his hair, I grabbed a glass with water from the tray and poured it over Professor Inkblot. At this precise moment, a heavy rain began to fall, only this time it was not falling from top to bottom, but from the ground up.

It looked like a fountain was shooting up from the earth.

“Snow!” Professor Inkblot called out. “Snow, else I will burn up completely!”

I then grabbed the glass containing snow and, scooping it up with the spoon, I began to use it to cover Professor Inkblot's head.

The effect was remarkable, seeing as the snow began to multiply with such incredible speed, it covered the whole park. Just then, all the silver forks jumped up from beneath the coat of snow and, spinning like crazy, they started to throw snowballs at each other. The forks reminded me of various boys – Arthur, Alfred, Anastasius, and other friends.

Whirling round in the snow, the forks danced up such a blizzard, we couldn't see anything any more. I then had the idea of using the wind to blow the snow away. I therefore took the glass containing the wind, which looked like thin, bluish cream, and scooped it out with one movement of the spoon.

I have never seen such wind before that moment. It blew in all directions all at once, picking up everything it met along the way. The wind picked up instantly, and the silver forks, lifted into the air, hung in the sky like stars. It became very cold. I looked at Professor Inkblot and at first couldn't recognise him at all. He had turned into a snowman and sang merrily:

“Freeze is coming, freeze is coming. Bringing a whole cart of snow!”

I thought Professor Inkblot had lost his mind in the blizzard, so I picked up the boiling kettle and poured its contents over his head.

The snow instantly melted, the temperature once again rose and Professor Inkblot began to bloom.

At first, he sprouted leaves, then buds, until finally his whole head and hands were covered with primroses. He kept plucking them from his skin and eating them with relish, singing to himself:

“Once I have my fill of flowers, December will turn to May in bowers.”

Soon enough, however, his mood worsened, and this was because bees, attracted by the flowers growing on his head, covered him from all sides and quite a few must have stung him, because he began to moan miserably.

When after a while the bees flew away, Professor Inkblot's head looked like a giant bubble, and his eyes were running with large drops of thick honey.

That was when I took the fourth glass from the tray, the one containing hail. It looked like someone had put a handful of thick buckshot into the glass.

I poured a few grains of hail into my hand and rubbed them into Professor Inkblot's head. He must have instantly felt some relief, because he took his head off his shoulders and threw it to me like a ball. I tossed it back to him, convinced that he likes playing football as much as I do. Meanwhile, Professor Inkblot, unable to see his own head flying towards him, held out his hands so awkwardly, the head rolled in a different direction, bounced off the ground a few times and vanished in some bushes.

I asked Professor Inkblot how he felt to have no head, but he didn't answer, seeing as had nothing to answer me with.

Just then, the enamel kettle up over our heads turned upside down, its burnt up bottom pointing down, and darkness fell instantly, only a few silver forks twinkling merrily within it.

Professor Inkblot stood up without his head, waving his hands helplessly. I then took out some lighting from the fifth glass, curved it into the shape of a walking cane and, using it to light the way, set off to find Professor Inkblot's head.

I found it among some stinging nettles. It was all sore, which did not stop it singing:
“The nettles have burnt me up. I am now ever so sad!”

I returned Professor Inkblot's head to him, then stuck the lighting stick into the earth next to us.

It gave out so much light, it seemed as if it was still daylight.

“I would like to eat something,” Professor Inkblot said.

Unfortunately, the only thing in my possession was the glass filled with thunder.

“Excellent!” Professor Inkblot shouted. “I know of nothing more tasty than thunder. Bring it here.”

I took the thunder from its glass and handed it over to Professor Inkblot. It was a beautiful, red ball, reminiscent slightly of a pomegranate.

Professor Inkblot took out a penknife from one of his pockets, sliced the thunder into quarters, peeled the skin away and ate it with real delight, licking his lips.

A moment later, however, there came a terrible clap of thunder and Professor Inkblot, exploding from within, was torn into a thousand tiny pieces.

Actually, each little piece was a separate tiny Professor Inkblot, and all of them danced happily in the grass, laughing merrily with very faint voices.

I took one of those laughing bits, put it into the seventh, empty glass still sitting on the tray, and carried it into the kitchen. Suddenly, the silver forks forced their way into the kitchen with a loud noise, surrounded me from all sides, and two of them (I think it was Anthony and Albert) tried to get into the glass holding the tiny Professor Inkblot.

Trying to save him from the forks, I quickly set the glass down inside a sideboard and shut the doors tightly...

This was the very moment at which I woke up.

I saw the real Professor Inkblot over my bed, staring into my dreaming mirror, plucking at his eyebrows and saying to himself:

“A dream about seven glasses... Dream of seven glasses... Well, well!”

CHAPTER NINE

ANATOLY AND ALOSYIUS



The whole of September was rained off. We didn't leave the Academy, all our games in the park and on the sports field completely suspended, Professor Inkblot saddened and grown rather unwilling to chat, in a word – something had begun to go wrong in our Academy.

One evening, Professor Inkblot announced to us all that life with butterflies and flowers had become tedious and as a result he had to begin going to bed earlier than usual.

We then said goodnight to our teacher and went off to our sleeping quarters.

“I am bored,” one of the Alexanders said.

“And I will tell you something,” Arthur suddenly announced. “Professor Inkblot clearly has something on his mind. Did none of you notice that he has become a little smaller than usual?”

“Indeed!” one of the Anthonys called out. “Professor Inkblot is shrinking.”

“And what if his magnifying pump has broken?” Anastasius asked.

I took no part to this conversation, seeing as I was very sleepy. I therefore got to bed and fell asleep almost instantly.

I dreamt that I was a hammer and Professor Inkblot was using me to smash apart all of my buttons, one by one. The hammer hits rang out throughout the Academy building and disturbed me so much that I finally woke, but the hammering didn't stop. I started listening carefully. There could be no doubt that the hammering was coming from our park and that someone was hammering on our front gate.

I instantly woke Anastasius, we threw on our overcoats and, lighting our way with torches, ran off to the park. Philip the Barber was standing on the other side of the closed gate, accompanied by two boys we had never seen before. All three of them were soaked to the bone, rain running off of them in streams. Anastasius opened the gate and let these remarkable nighttime guests inside.

“New students for Professor Inkblot!” Philip shouted, rolling about in laughter. “Future stars of the famous Academy, ha-hah! One is called Anatoly, and the other Aloysius. Both names start with an A, ha-hah! Anatoly, introduce yourself to our friends, would you be so kind!”

The young man who went by the name Anatoly bowed, saying:

“My name is Anatoly Cockadoodle. And this is my younger brother Aloysius.”

Saying that, he pointed to the second boy – both he and Philip were holding him up by his arms.

“We are very happy to meet you, gentlemen,” Anastasius said with dignity. “Yet there is no need for us to stand in the rain. Do please follow me.”

We all went off towards the Academy, leaving our wet overcoats in the hallway, after which Anastasius led the guests to the dining hall and sat them down at one of the tables. They were very clearly tired, seeing as Aloysius instantly fell asleep and wobbled in his chair like a Chinese figurine.

Philip stopped laughing and announced that he intended to bring Anatoly and Aloysius to our Academy before the evening was over, but he had gotten lost along the way and only managed to find Chocolate Street after midnight.

“You must certainly be hungry, gentlemen,” I said. “I will have to wake Professor Inkblot and inform him of your arrival.”

“We must certainly wake Professor Inkblot!” Philip called out, laughing out loud once again. “I have some fresh freckles for him, ha-hah! You would very much like to see Professor Inkblot, ha-hah! Isn't that right, Anatoly?”

“It would be a great honour for me,” Anatoly answered politely.

I therefore ran as quickly as I could upstairs and knocked on the door to Professor Inkblot's bedroom. Because no one answered, I knocked again, and then once more. But Professor Inkblot was evidently sleeping very soundly, or else he didn't want to wake at all. I pushed down on the door handle. The door was shut from the inside. I thought that maybe Matthew would hear my knocking, but it did no good to knock on the door any more than that – no one was going to answer.

I decided to go alone to the kitchen and prepare supper for the boys and for Philip. I found a jug of milk, along with some bread, butter, cheese and cold chicken in the pantry.

I set it all down on a tray and reached into the sideboard for plates and glasses. Suddenly, I saw something grey in one of the glasses. Convinced it was a mouse, I covered the glass with my hand and brought it closer to the light. What I saw then filled me with horror. Professor Inkblot was sitting at the bottom of the glass. A tiny Professor Inkblot. I clearly recognised his head, his odd garments, even the freckles on his nose. He was sitting at the bottom of the glass, sleeping.

I gently picked him up with two fingers and laid him down on a plate. Coming into contact with the cool porcelain woke Professor Inkblot. He jumped to his feet, quickly looked around, then took a magnifying pump out of his pocket and placed it to his ear.

Soon enough, he began to grow larger, jumped from the plate onto a chair, then onto the floor, and soon after he became our normal, ordinary Professor Inkblot.

I was completely stunned by what I was seeing, and had no idea how to respond.

Professor Inkblot looked at me carefully for a while, until he finally said harshly:

“You dreamt all of this! Do you understand? An idiotic, stupid dream!”

Simply nonsense. I forbid you to tell anyone about this dream. Professor Inkblot forbids you! And don't you let dreams like this happen ever again! Remember!"

I apologised to Professor Inkblot, because what else could I do, and then I announced to him the arrival of Philip with the two boys.

"Manage without me," Professor Inkblot retorted. "Give them supper and let them go to sleep, and in the morning I will talk to them. Philip can go lie down on the sofa in my study. Goodnight."

Having said that, he left, having slammed the doors behind him.

I ran out after him and saw as he slid up the bannister to the first floor.

"Something is going wrong in our Academy," I thought, then returned to the kitchen, picked up the tray with the supper and carried it to the dining hall.

Aloysius was still sleeping. Philip and Anatoly got busy eating, without paying any attention to him.

"Can I wake your brother?" Anastasius asked Anatoly. "He must be very hungry."

"Oh, no. It is unnecessary," Anatoly replied. "Such a bracing sleep will be just as filling for him as food. Aloysius really dislikes it when you wake him."

"You will see, boys, he will be the glory of your Academy, this sleeping prince!"

Philip laughed, eating his chicken.

After supper, Anastasius escorted Philip to Professor Inkblot's study, while I went off to the sleeping hall, in order to prepare beds for both boys.

Once I had finished my preparations, Anastasius and Anatoly appeared in the doorway. Anatoly was carrying his sleeping brother in his arms.

"He really doesn't like it when people try to wake him," Anatoly explained once again. "This is why we won't be undressing him at all. Let him sleep in his clothes."

And so we laid him carefully down on the bed, undressed ourselves quickly and finally fell asleep after all the strange events of this night.

The next day, I woke very early. The arrival of new students to the Academy represented an extraordinary sensation.

I nudged Alfred, who was sleeping in the bed next to me, and told him in a whisper about Anatoly and Aloysius. Alfred woke Arthur, who slept next to him, Arthur woke Alexander and soon enough our sleeping quarters were buzzing like a beehive.

Matthew's morning reveille found us all on our feet already.

The boys studied Anatoly with interest, after he was woken with our moving about, as well as Aloysius who was still lying motionless on his bed.

Suddenly, the door opened and Professor Inkblot walked in.

“Good morning, boys!” he called, standing on the doorstep. “Where are your new friends?”

Anatoly was sitting on his bed and said politely:

“I am here, dear professor. I am called Anatoly Cockadoodle, and this is my younger brother.”

He pointed to Aloysius, who did not move a muscle.

Professor Inkblot looked at Anatoly in silence, then approached Aloysius.

He stood over the boy for a long time, lost in thought, finally he leant over and shouted right into his ear:

“You're called Aloysius, right?”

Aloysius did not budge.

“Can you hear me, Aloysius?” Professor Inkblot shouted again. Aloysius remained still.

Professor Inkblot lifted his eyelids and looked into his pupils, rubbed his cheeks and forehead with his hand, then patted his hands.

But not even that was enough to wake the boy.

“Look, lads,” Professor Inkblot addressed us next. “Aloysius is not a living person, but a doll. I was always against allowing dolls into my Academy. But now there is nothing to be done. Aloysius was smuggled in under the cover of night. I will have plenty of trouble with him. I have to teach him how to feel, think and speak. I will try, maybe I will succeed. Adam, get Alfred and two Anthonys to help you to carry Aloysius carefully to the Hospital of Broken Things. We will have no lessons at all today, seeing as I will be busy. If there is no more rain, you can take Matthew to the park with you.”

Having said that, Professor Inkblot seemed to shrink a little and left the room.

Without delay, I took my three selected friends and got busy transporting Aloysius. And yet imagine my surprise when it turned out that I needed no help at all and was able to lift the doll up all by myself. He was as light as a feather. When I held him in my hands, the boys surrounded me from all sides, wishing to take a much closer look. If it wasn't for the surprising lightness and deadness, Aloysius would really seem no different than any other human being. The shape of his head, hair, the expression on his face, the set of his lips, the damp surface of his eyes, the shape of his forehead, nose and chin, hands and nails, all of it was so natural, so deceptively real, that very few people would have realised Aloysius was a doll.

Even the materials his face and hands were moulded out of was as elastic and warm as any human body.

In short, the way in which this fantastic, remarkable doll had been produced demanded

the highest form of admiration.

Our delight knew no bounds, and besides – we were tremendously curious to see if Professor Inkblot would be able to bring Aloysius to life, and how his relationship with the doll would develop, as it went about the business of becoming a synthetic human being.

Anatoly finally interrupted our conversation and very politely began to explain to us the way in which the doll had been constructed, a creation he loved as much as he would a real brother. I took advantage of this, tearing myself free of my friends and running with Aloysius to where Professor Inkblot was waiting impatiently in the Hospital of Sick Things.

“Lay him down on this table,” he said to me. “We will get to work straight away.”

“And so I can stay here?” I asked meekly.

“Indeed,” Professor Inkblot answered. “I will need assistance.”

Because we hadn't yet had breakfast, for the first ever time Professor Inkblot offered me some hair growth pills, and then he asked me to undress Aloysius.

It turned out that only the head and hands of the doll boy were made of the fleshy material – all the other parts of his body were covered in a thin layer of soft metal, glistening with a pink polish.

Professor Inkblot took out a large jar with some cream from a trouser pocket, then said:

“You will rub this into Aloysius as long as it takes for some bloodlines to appear beneath the metal surface of his body. You have to arm yourself with patience, seeing as the rubbing will take a very long time. Let's start with the legs, and I will then get busy with the lungs and the heart.”

Our work took several hours, without breaks. Professor Inkblot loosened the screws of the metal surface which covered the doll boy's chest, and relentlessly poked about the insides. My hands were extremely weakened from all the rubbing, and yet I managed to get to the point where beneath Aloysius' metal skin I noticed the appearance of numerous networks of very thin veins.

“The legs have had enough,” Professor Inkblot said to me after a while, without actually looking at me. “Now, get busy with the hands.”

And so I busied myself rubbing the ointment into Aloysius' arms and hands. At the very moment when tiny bloodlines began to appear beneath his skin, the lunchtime bell rang.

Professor Inkblot, purple with tension and effort, straightened his back, screwed the metal plate back down on the boy's chest and said to me with pleasure:

“Excellent! Brilliant! Now, go get some lunch, and in the meanwhile I will work on this lad's brain.”

I was sad to leave the Hospital of Broken Things and set off for the dining room. Anatoly ran up to me first, and then the remaining friends, bothering me with thousands of questions:

“Was Aloysius walking already?”

“Was he talking?”

“What was Professor Inkblot doing?”

“When would he come downstairs?”

“What was inside Aloysius' head?”

“Was Aloysius able to think already?”

I answered them in great detail, telling them about all that took place in the Hospital of Broken Things, and then quickly got busy eating, in order to return to my work as quickly as possible.

Once we were on dessert, the doors to our dining room opened suddenly.

Twenty five pairs of eyes turned in the direction of the doors.

Professor Inkblot was standing there, propping up Aloysius. Taking awkward, timid steps, he moved slowly forwards, looking around with interest and making exaggerated motions with his left hand.

“There you have him!” Professor Inkblot shouted triumphantly. “Now meet your new friend.”

“Good day, Aloysius!” Anatoly spoke first, moved by the doll's appearance.

“Good da-y!” Aloysius answered, struggling to pronounce every syllable.

“Tell us your name!” Professor Inkblot shouted into his ear.

“Al-oy-sius Co-co-co...” Aloysius got stuck, trying to repeat the first syllable of his surname.

Professor Inkblot opened his lips, stuck two fingers beneath his tongue and quickly twisted some kind of screw.

“OK, try to speak now.”

The doll boy inhaled deeply and said with a little more fluency:

“Al-oy-sius Co-cka-doo-dle. I am called Aloy-sius Cocka-doodle.”

“Wonderful!” Professor Inkblot clapped his hands. “Wonderful... Sit down now at the table, and you boys give him something to eat.”

With the same slow, careful walk as before, Aloysius approached the table, sat on a chair and said in a dull voice:

“Give me some-thing to eat.”

One of the Anthonys slid a plate of pasta towards him and handed the doll boy a fork.

Aloysius grabbed the fork awkwardly and got busy eating. A key part of each forkful of pasta fell from his lips, and the rest he chewed and swallowed with difficulty.

“Tasty,” he said with a pale smile once the plate was empty.

He was learning how to eat with surprising speed, as well as how to move and to speak.

After an hour, he began to formulate longer sentences, and by the evening he was discussing the Academy with Professor Inkblot.

The next day, we took him for a walk round the park. He was walking quite ably, and even tried to chase Anatoly, though he tripped over his own foot and fell over.

His eating was more and more accomplished, as he had learnt to hold a knife and fork, and on the third day he washed, combed his hair and dressed all by himself.

After a week, no one would have been able to recognise that Aloysius was an ordinary doll boy, brought to life by Professor Inkblot.

CHAPTER TEN

THE FABLE OF THE MOON PEOPLE

When in the morning, as was our custom, we brought Professor Inkblot our sleeping mirrors, he said to us with great seriousness:

“Listen, boys! Tomorrow, at precisely 11.00am, a great celebration will take place in our Academy. I imagine you know what is going on. I will then tell you what my right eye saw up on the Moon – the fable of the Moon People. I have invited some of our neighbouring fables to join us for this occasion. I have enlarged the school hall threefold, in order for everyone to fit in there. I am devoting all of today to preparations for this event. I would like you all to look tidy and clean. Besides, I would like you to take care of cleaning the park and our Academy. Matthew will give you all the essential pointers. Meanwhile, I will prepare an appropriate reception for our guests. Please, do not interrupt by coming into my kitchen. Can I depend on you for that?”

“That's right, dear Professor!” we cried as one.

We got to work without a moment's delay.

Some of us dusted the armchairs and carpets, others wiped and polished the floors, washed the windows, cleaned the paths, polished our shoes, bathed – in a word, the Academy was literally buzzing.

Matthew kept on floating overhead, looking into the tiniest nooks, chasing us and checking all that we had done.

It seemed that everything was going swimmingly, and that nothing could interrupt the harmonious order in our Academy.

And yet, things turned out differently...

A puddle of ink appeared, out of nowhere, on the freshly polished wooden floor of Professor Inkblot's study. Clouds of feathers began to float around the pillows and cushions which had been left to air out on the courtyard. It covered our carpets, furniture and our clothes, so that we were hardly able to clean them afterwards.

It turned out that someone had, in secret, cut open all the cushions with a knife. But that wasn't the end. Large amounts of soot suddenly appeared in our sleeping hall. It flew about the room, falling on all our freshly laundered bedsheets and underwear. When one of the Adams sat down on a settee, his trousers were ripped open, seeing as sharp nails were now sticking out of the seat. Someone had covered all our chairs with glue.

In the bathroom, someone had also opened all the taps and the water overflowed, flooding not only the bathroom but also the kitchen. Professor Inkblot had been forced to don some wellies to wade in there.

We were unable to in any way find out who was responsible. We were furious to see all our hard work going to waste, and looked at each other with growing suspicion.

Come the afternoon, however, the bomb blew up.

Arthur, going upstairs to the first floor, saw Aloysius through a door that was left ajar, as he was cutting some electric lines with a pair of scissors. He quickly ran to get me and we both jumped into that room. Aloysius laughed stupidly, but didn't stop what he was doing. I grabbed the scissors from his grip. This made him so mad, he kicked a table which was stood nearby, knocking it over along with all the things which were set out on it.

“Aloysius, think about what you are doing,” Arthur warned him.

“I don't want to think,” Aloysius called out. “I will wreck everything, because that is how I like it! It was me who spilled the ink in the study, it was me who holed the cushions, it was me who spilled soot in your bedroom! And what will you do to me? Nothing. And if you go against me, I will set this whole barn on fire and that will be that!”

Terrified, we ran off to the kitchen to get Professor Inkblot and tell him about Aloysius' vandalising ways. Professor Inkblot dropped the gateaux he was holding and became very worried.

“I could tell we were going to have trouble with this Aloysius,” he said, concerned. “Tough. Leave him, my boys, in peace, it's not his fault, but the fault of his mechanisms. Just as we set our alarm clocks to go off at a certain hour, you can also set a mechanical doll to carry out certain tasks. I can sense Philip's hand in all this. But I am completely powerless. Do you understand? I am powerless.”

For a while, we were all silent, and then Professor Inkblot went on:

“I don't know how Aloysius is constructed. That is Philip's secret – he built the boy. That is why we have to be understanding and patient with him. In essence, he has surpassed us all. He is simply a wonderful invention. He has learnt everything the Academy could teach him, and can even speak Chinese. It seems to me that he literally ate my Chinese dictionary, because I cannot find it anywhere. Go back to your chores. I think Aloysius might calm down all by himself, once he sees no one is paying him any attention.”

We left the kitchen in a very worried state of mind. As much as Anatoly was a very pleasant boy and a good pal, Aloysius had been playing nasty tricks and games with us for a while now. He ridiculed everyone and everything, treated Professor Inkblot with disdain,

refused to let us sleep at night and pulled feathers from Matthew's tail any time he got the chance. At first, we tolerated his misbehaviours, but then we began to avoid him, so that he would have to spend his free time playing by himself or else with Anatoly, whom he constantly harassed, attacked and picked on.

He was a dislikeable, disgusting boy, though in fact we couldn't say that he didn't have remarkable abilities, intelligence and cunning.

We had to disable him somehow, at all costs, and so I devoted myself to this purpose for the good of everyone and asked if he wanted to come with me to the park to catch goldfinches.

Aloysius agreed and so we tore off a few branches of thistle as bait, readied a trap made out of horsehair and set up our trap, then ran off to hide in nearby bushes.

"I am bored," Aloysius whispered to me. "You're all stupid, if you can stand to be around this Professor Inkblot of yours. The first chance I get, I will run away from here and travel to China. Nowhere else, only to China. That is what I have decided."

I didn't answer him, so he continued to confide in me.

"I didn't ask Professor Inkblot to teach me how to think. I could have done without it. I know I'm completely unlike the rest of you lot, although I don't seem to be any different on the surface. In fact, I can't stand any of you, and can't bear to look at Professor Inkblot. You will see what I will yet do. You will remember me for a long time to come."

He kept talking louder and louder, but finally he calmed down, rested his head on his arms and, after a while, fell asleep.

Using this opportunity, I let the captured goldfinch go and, treading softly on tippy toes, I ran off back to the Academy.

The boys were done with their chores. The rooms and halls shone so brightly, it was a pleasure to see.

We ate supper early and went to bed.

Aloysius hadn't come back and no one bothered to worry about him. He had evidently decided to spend the night in the park, which didn't surprise me at all, seeing as I knew his body didn't ever feel the cold.

In the morning, we got dressed in fine clothes and awaited the arrival of other fables. Professor Inkblot donned, for the first ever time, not his usual overcoat but a tobacco-coloured frock with green lapels and paced back and forth across the Academy without saying a word. He was decidedly smaller than before, but the difference was barely noticeable in his new outfit.

At 10.00am, the invited guests began to arrive. The park filled up with a whole host of different creatures, the sort we can today only see in theatres or in cinemas.

Although it was already late autumn, sunshine warmed our park and all the flowerbeds had suddenly blossomed.

Various carriages and golden vehicles kept pulling up at the entrance to our Academy, along with flying carpets and chests which hummed like airplanes. Various princesses dragged along whole entourages of courtiers and pages. Gnomes and trolls crowded round the paths, as numerous as the frogs which escaped our pond after Professor Inkblot drained it of water. There were also animals known very well from various fairytales, including Puss in Boots, the Hen which laid golden eggs, Teddy Bear, Silly Billygoat, Wacky Ducky, Sneaky Fox, the Heron and the Crane, as well as the Grasshopper and Ant. A Water Witch rode along in a glass carriage filled with water, goldfish swimming all around her. There was no shortage of different people too – Arab, Indian and Chinese folks, as well as other varied foreigners from the fairytales and stories told by people all around the world.

Professor Inkblot greeted everyone at the entrance to our Academy, and what was really surprising, he knew them all personally. I also have to state that even the most remarkable princes showed our tutor the utmost respect and considered his invitation to be a great honour. Seeing this, I felt a great sense of pride at being the student of such a remarkable man.

The school hall, after Professor Inkblot had widened it, became so spacious that all the guests could fit in it without problems, and even if there was three or four times more of them, there would surely have been enough room for everyone.

Along with the other students, my job was to look after all the guests. And so we carried round silver trays and dishes loaded with delicacies prepared by Professor Inkblot. These included various gateaux and cakes, chocolates, jellied flowers and fruits, gingerbreads, ice creams, fresh cream cakes, grapes and nuts, delicious sweets from the East for our Arab fables, hot and cold drinks, and even a compote and sweets made of coloured glass tiles, made of butterflies and geraniums.

For real experts and connoisseurs, he had also prepared hair growth pills, dreams in pill form and some green liquid.

The Froggy Shakehand sat behind my ear and told me who I should serve with what delicacies, which made my work a lot easier.

Once all the invited fables had arrived and taken up their places, all the boys stood along the walls of the school hall. At 11.00am sharp, Professor Inkblot stood up on the podium. Wearing his tobacco-coloured frock, Matthew perched on his shoulder, his hair flying and his face covered with many special freckles, he looked magnificent.

The hall fell silent.

Professor Inkblot cleared his throat and began to tell his tale:

“A long, long way from here, behind a wood, behind a river, where nobody lives any more, you might find a narrow path. The path rans upwards through a ragged cloud, through white mist into a high world, where the silvery Moon hangs in a heavenly distance. My right eye has flown high, and all that it has seen it told to me.

The whole surface of the moon is covered with mountains made of copper, silver and iron. The mountains are drilled through and through with long, curved corridors, with many doors leading away from them and into countless caves.

These are home to Moon People, who go by name of Lunna.

A permanent frost has settled on the surface of the Moon, and so the Lunna never leave the inside of the mountains. They wonder endlessly along their corridors, moving from level to level, delving into the heart of their planet, constantly drilling metal walls and leading the lives of hardworking ants.

There are no plants at all on the Moon, nor are there any other living creatures apart from the Lunna.

The Lunna do not possess any bodies nor any bones. They are made of misty fog, resembling clouds, and can take on the most remarkable shapes. This fog is covered in a translucent, flexible skin which is not unlike gelatine. All the Lunna own glass vessels in which they spend their free time. All such vessels have a unique shape, thanks to which the Lunna can tell who is who.

Their homes are filled with very odd items, all made from iron and copper. These include various discs, plates and bowls set up on tripods or else hanging from walls.

The Lunna don't have any lamps, but they themselves light up as and when necessary. They eat green globules, which they extract from copper. They emit sounds similar to silver bells and use them to communicate with great fluency.

The Lunna move about just like clouds, meaning – by floating. They don't use any tools for working and in all that they do they use all sorts of light beams which they emit from their bodies.

This is what the Moon People called the Lunna are like.

On the southern hemisphere of the Moon, on the Great Silver Mountain, the ruler of the Lunna, the mighty terrifying King Notwell has his home. He is the only one who has achieved such a perfect state of being that he has lost his translucent form and shaped his body without the need to pour it into a glass vessel. King Notwell is similar to Earthling beings, possessing arms and legs, and is only missing a face, hence his head is shaped like a smooth ball.

King Notwell never lets go of a narrow, long sword which he has in his hand. When one of the Lunna is seen to be deserving of his wrath, he pierces them with the sharp end of his weapon.

That is when the gelatinous skin releases the glowing mist which then disappears in an instant. King Notwell then takes the empty skin left behind by the unfortunate Lunna and stores it in an iron chest.

One day, King Notwell went against the customs of his people and went out to the surface of his Silver Mountain. That was when something happened, something he could not foresee...”

Professor Inkblot stopped speaking at that point and began to listen intently to something. After a moment, he began to display signs of nervousness, which clearly impacted on us all. Screams, the sound of broken branches and smashed glass reached us from the park. Something odd was happening.

The noise kept on coming closer, until the doors to the hall crashed open with a bang and Aloysius appeared in the doorway.

His hair was dishevelled, he looked dirty, his clothes crumpled up. In his hand, he was holding a heavy, wooden branch. His face was lined with fury.

“What does this mean, Professor Inkblot?!” He called out in a voice which froze and frightened everyone. “You wanted to have a party without me! What? You left me to languish as goldfinch food, while you tell all your fairytales in here! Why are you staring at me, all you lot? Get thee gone! Get out of here, while I’m still in a good mood!”

Saying that, he started to wave the stick about over the heads of all the gathered guests. Professor Inkblot fell silent, staring ahead with glassed-over eyes, tugging nervously at his eyebrows.

Aloysius went unchecked as he ran around the hall, then finally he approached the table loaded with the delicacies Professor Inkblot had prepared and hit it with his raggedy stick with all his might. Everyone heard the terrible noise, shards of porcelain and glass went flying in all directions, while fresh cream and drinks covered all the guests seated close by.

Anatoly tried to disarm his brother, but a single punch from Aloysius had him lying down on the floor.

The chaos which ensued is hard to describe.

One senior princess and two minor princesses fainted, while the rest of the guests jumped up from their seats and began to escape using the doors and windows. Professor Inkblot stood perfectly still, as if he were made of salt, seemingly shrinking a little, looking at Aloysius with some sadness.

“Hey! Ladies, gentlemen!” Aloysius shouted. “Maybe you could hurry up a little? Get going. Wacky Ducky, before I eat you for lunch! Run away, ant, before I stomp on you! Now it is my time to play, ha-hah!”

Suddenly, a beautiful, pale lady with a very regal gait emerged from the crowd, still trying to escape via the doors. She approached Aloysius and said to him in a stern voice:

“I am the Doll Witch. I command you to instantly leave this room!”

But Aloysius was no longer a mere doll, and so the Witch had no power over him. He laughed horribly, right in her face, turned his back towards her and standing with brutal confidence, he called out:

“This is not the end, Professor Inkblot! You will no longer be so keen on all your fairytales! Nothing but shreds will remain of your Academy. Do you understand? Shre-ds!”

Alfred, unable to bear this scene, burst into tears. Other boys stood around, terrified, staring at Professor Inkblot. I was literally shaking with disgust and shame.

The hall was slowly emptying, until it finally fell quiet. We could hear the carriages and carts leaving the park. The princess who had fainted was carried outside by her pages. We were left alone with Professor Inkblot, completely still, staring into the blank space before him.

Meanwhile, the hall shrunk and returned to its ordinary dimensions, the sky became overcast and faint, autumn rain began to fall again.

Aloysius, his face beaming with joy, sat in an armchair directly opposite Professor Inkblot and whistled angrily. Finally, Professor Inkblot awoke. He looked around the empty hall, looked at us, standing all along the walls, then at Aloysius and then calmly said, as if nothing was amiss:

“It’s a shame, boys, that I wasn’t able to tell all of my fable about the Moon People. I will have to leave that for another book! Tough. I think it is time for dinner. Right, Matthew?”

“ight, ight!” Matthew replied and flew off in the direction of the kitchens. Without paying any attention to Aloysius, Professor Inkblot walked past him, rose into the air and flew after Matthew, holding with his hands the flowing coat tails of his tobacco-coloured frock.

That’s the sort of incredible man he was!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Professor INKBLOT'S SECRETS



When I started writing this journal half a year ago, I did not suspect that it would take up this much room and that I would have so many diverse and incredible events to describe. Meanwhile, things of late have developed so rapidly, I am finding it hard to get them straight in my memory.

The most important thing is that the most incomprehensible things have started to happen to Professor Inkblot of late.

Above all, everyone has noticed that something has gone wrong with his magnifying pump. As I've already mentioned, this had an impact on his height: with each day, Professor Inkblot became a little bit smaller and could not reach the height he had been the night before.

This made him nervous, and all the more distracted, forcing him to fall into deep thought at the most inopportune moments. One day, he got lost in thought riding the bannister upstairs and then sat there for a few hours, stuck between floors. Another time, flying over the dining table with his ladle, he forgot he was up in the air and got so immersed in his own imagination, he fell into a dish full of roast lamb, something he actually failed to notice.

For a while now, Professor Inkblot's diminishing stature has really become an issue. Alfred, who was the shortest of all us students, was now taller than his own teacher by a whole head.

"You'll see, if this carries on, in a month Professor Inkblot will be completely gone," Aloysius ridiculed us aloud.

I have to now stress that what Aloysius was getting up to in the Academy was beyond all reason. After the scandalous behaviour during all the fables' visit, no one was able to handle him. Professor Inkblot just let all of his crazy behaviour ride.

Aloysius rose when he felt like it, missed lessons, painted caricatures of Professor Inkblot onto our dreaming mirrors, walked into the kitchen without asking, chucking frogs and spiders into the pots, punctured all of Professor Inkblot's balloons with a needle, and generally made all our lives a misery. We grew to hate him and felt blessed relief whenever he fell asleep or wandered off to the park.

Professor Inkblot allowed him to get away with everything, as if he was afraid of the boy. Not only that - the more Aloysius' misbehaviour got out of hand, the weaker Professor Inkblot's dignity and authority seemed to grow.

He took less and less care of the kitchen, forgot to take his hair growth pills, as a result becoming almost completely bald and losing all of his facial hair.

But the strange transformation included not just Professor Inkblot, but also the Academy building shrank a little, the ceilings in our rooms lower, the furniture and other items becoming smaller, beds becoming shorter. The park which, until then,

had seemed like an endless jungle, grew smaller and thinner on the ground, massive oaks and beeches transformed into small, unimposing trees.

This transformation was of course happening gradually and very slowly, and yet after one month it was so clearly visible that we all felt sadness and fear.

Only Aloysius did not seem to run out of steam, singing at the top of his voice, whistling, slamming doors, smashing stained glass windows with rocks, harassing Matthew and at times really being unbearable.

Professor Inkblot looked at him in silence, scratching his head in worry and dozing off from time to time, forgetting to drink his green liquid after waking.

We understood that our Academy was soon going to close.

On Christmas Eve, Professor Inkblot asked us all to gather in the school hall and said to us with a sad voice:

“My dear boys, there is no way that you have not noticed what has been happening around you. You see how for a while now I have been shrinking. Addressing you, I have stand up in order for you to be able to see me behind the lectern. Everything which surrounds you is growing smaller and shrinking. I think you already understand what is the cause of this. Well, the fable about my Academy is drawing to a close. Prepare yourselves for a time when the Academy will not exist at all, and almost nothing will remain of me too. I will be very sorry to have to be parted from you. We have spent a whole year together, we’ve had a jolly pleasant time, but everything has to have an end.”

“And what will happen to us, dear Professor?” Anastasius shouted, stifling tears.

Professor Inkblot looked at him with sympathy and said:

“My Anastasius, each one of you has a home to which you will return. In any case, remember one thing: today, at midnight, you must open the front gate, and then throw the key into the pond. You will find a hole in the ice which covers it now, close to the shore, which I especially cut for this purpose. At that point, the fable about Professor Inkblot’s Academy will end.”

We all became incredibly sad. We surrounded Professor Inkblot and kissed his hands, which were now as small as those of a child. Professor Inkblot embraced us kindly, nodding his bald head, wiping tears from his eyes. It was a very moving scene, one which has remained vivid in my memory for all my life.

Meanwhile, evening came. Snow was falling outside and many snowflakes shimmered on the windowpanes. Professor Inkblot opened a small window, looked up at the sky and said to us with a gentle smile:

“Anyway, enough, boys, time to stop feeling sorry for ourselves! I have prepared a Christmas surprise for you all, follow me upstairs.”

As light as a feather, Professor Inkblot slid up the banner, while we followed behind him, jumping several steps at a time. Once we had all gathered upstairs, Professor Inkblot took out a bunch of keys and opened the doors to all the rooms which had previously remained closed. Darkness fell so quickly, however, that we could recognise none of the shapes in the darkness.

Professor Inkblot mysteriously removed a candle flame from a fireproof pocket and entered one of the rooms. After a while, more lights appeared in the depths and soon enough a remarkable brightness surrounded us. We were blinded. In the middle of the room there was a fabulous Christmas tree, lit up with hundreds of flaming candles and fabulously dressed with toys, paper chains, gold and silver threads, snowflakes made of glass and many other varied decorations. The tree was surrounded with beautifully set tables, heavy with many dishes, platters and vases.

In this special setting, we sat down to our Christmas Eve meal.

Looking around, I noticed we were in the same room which had previously housed the Hospital of Broken Things. I also recognised the majority of the furniture which surrounded me. These were tables, chairs, desks and clocks which until recently looked like ancient rubbish, and now - having been cured by Professor Inkblot - they shone and glistened with fresh wood polish, looking brand new.

Unlike in times past, Professor Inkblot sat among us and enjoyed sampling the various types of fish piled up on the plates.

After supper, we all gathered round the tree, seeing as Professor Inkblot had prepared for us Christmas presents which he handed out as if he were Santa Claus. When Aloysius turn came to receive his gift, it turned out he was not among us, and we suddenly realised he was also absent during supper.

Professor Inkblot appeared to be very troubled.

“Where is Aloysius? What’s happened to him? Matthew, fly as fast as you can and find Aloysius.”

Anatoly, terrified, jumped up from his chair.

“Dear Professor,” he called out. “I know where he is! I asked and begged him not to do it. He didn’t want to listen to me.”

Professor Inkblot ran up to Anatoly and, as white as a sheet, wrapped his fingers round the boy's arm.

“Speak! Speak! Where is Aloysius?!”

“Aloysius is in among your secrets, dear Professor,” Anatoly whispered in a wavering voice, then fell helplessly back down on his chair.

I instinctively looked up at the ceiling. We could clearly hear someone's footsteps coming from above.

With a single bound, Professor Inkblot reached the window, opened it and flew outside. We understood that something terrible had happened. None of us would ever have dared break into Professor Inkblot's secrets. We knew that such an act would result in, among other punishments, banishment from the Academy. Besides, we respected Professor Inkblot too much to ever fail to follow his severe instructions not to go up there. Only Aloysius could have stooped so low – Aloysius, that universally detested, conceited, arrogant, know-it-all doll.

With bated breath, we waited for further developments.

As we held our nervous breaths, whispering among ourselves, the doors to our room suddenly opened and Aloysius ran inside, completely covered in soot, his hands holding a small, ebony box.

“I have Professor Inkblot's secrets!” He shouted, breathlessly. “We are about to see what they are! Look, these are his secrets, ha-hah!”

Saying this, he placed the small chest on the table, opened it with a crowbar and spilled from them a dozen or so porcelain tiles, covered in tiny Chinese script.

We could not understand what this could mean. None of us had learnt Chinese. We were shocked by Aloysius' awful appearance and his gall.

“I'm the only one here who can read Chinese!” he called out. “I'm the only one who can discover Professor Inkblot's secrets. We will finally learn who that pumped-up weirdo is! Ha-hah!”

Suddenly, Professor Inkblot's pale, grimacing face appeared in the window. As he floated back inside the room, he was half the size he'd been before – about the height of a five year old boy.

Aloysius, seeing that he wouldn't have time to decipher the mysterious Chinese tablets, swept them off the table with one fell swoop of his arm onto the floor, then started to crush them with the heels of his shoes as hard as he could, until they were smashed and ground down to fine powder.

No one was able to stop him carrying out this destructive act in time.

“You have destroyed my secretes, Aloysius,” Professor Inkblot said with a voice which

was calm, but stern. “And so I will now destroy you. My hands created you and now my hands will kill you.”

Having said that, he placed his magnifying pump into his ear, pressed its bottom a few times, swallowed a couple of hair growth pills and a moment later was our old, fabulous Professor Inkblot.

Aloysius’ bravura and brashness vanished without trace.

Professor Inkblot took out a large, leather suitcase from one of the wardrobes, opened and stood it up on the table. Next, he approached Aloysius and, without saying a word, sat him down next to the open suitcase. All the other boys watched with bated breath.

Next, Professor Inkblot placed his hand on Aloysius’ right arm, unscrewed it and placed the now utterly lifeless limb inside the suitcase. He did the same to the other arm and both legs, throwing them into the suitcase. Only Aloysius’ torso and head were left upon that table.

The doll boy was silent, watching Professor Inkblot working with complete horror. Our Professor then grabbed his head with both hands and twisted it to the left. The threaded neck gave way and soon enough Aloysius’ head came unscrewed, separated from the body. Professor Inkblot then unscrewed the top of the boys’ head and poured all the contents out on the table – this included letters, sound boards, glass pipes and many cogs and springs.

Finally, Professor Inkblot dismantled Aloysius’ torso, placing all the parts, along with the head, inside the suitcase and then shut it tight.

We all breathed a sigh of relief: Aloysius – that disgraceful copy of a human being – had ceased to be. Only Anatoly had tears in his eyes.

“My god,” he kept on whispering. “My god, what will I now tell Philip? He ordered me to watch and protect Aloysius. Such a beautiful doll... So beautiful!”

Meanwhile, Professor Inkblot had once again shrunk and diminished. He turned his little childlike face towards us and said:

“Don’t trouble yourselves with all this, boys. I had a feeling our fable would end like this. Soon enough, it will all be over. Aloysius stole all my secrets. The porcelain tablets he trampled and smashed contained all the knowledge passed down to me by Dr Pai Chi Wo. Now, there will be no more cooking with glass tiles, no more floating in the air, no more reading of all your thoughts, no more magnifying things, no more healing broken objects. I have lost all of my skills, the ones I was famous for among all the neighbouring fairytales, the ones which my Academy was renowned for. But instead of worrying, it’s best we sing a Christmas carol. What do you say?”

Before Professor Inkblot could start singing, the doors opened and Philip the Barber stormed in. His hat and fur coat were covered in snow, his face red with cold and fury.

“Why is no one opening the gate?” He shouted, shaking with anger. “I had to climb over the wall to get in here. Idiots! I’ve had enough of your Academy! Anatoly, I am taking you home. Where is Aloysius?”

Anatoly meekly approached Philip.

“Aloysius... Aloysius... there... in that suitcase,” he mumbled, with real terror in his voice.

Philip ran up to the suitcase, opened it, looked in and staggered having seen the doll.

“So that is how things are, Professor Inkblot!” He hissed through gritted teeth. “This is how you honour our agreement? I worked for twenty years on this doll, brought you freckles and coloured glass tiles, gave you all my money in order for you to be able to set up your stupid Academy. In return, you were to turn Aloysius into a human being. And what did you do? You’ve wasted all the effort, all the toil of my life! You will not get away with this, Professor Inkblot, no sir. I will show you what Philip is capable of when he wants to have his revenge. I will show you, sir!”

Saying that, he took a long razor blade from his pocket, opened the blade and approached the Christmas tree. Professor Inkblot watched him in silence and only grew that little bit smaller than he had been before. Philip, with no one trying to stop him, got to work. With the razor blade, he cut off all the flames from the candles burning brightly on the tree and hid them in the pockets of his fur coat.

As the flames disappeared, the room grew ever more dark, until it was completely black. What happened next, I’ve no idea. Overcome with fear, I ran out to the staircase and not knowing when and how I found myself in the courtyard.

It was a beautiful, icy December night. Snow had stopped falling and its whiteness shone brightly in the moonlight.

The whole Academy, its walls and park were visible as if in the palm of my hand. I saw Anastasius run past, then heard the sound of a lock being opened. He opened the gate and, as if in a dream, I saw running before me the long shadows of my schoolmates. I wanted to shout: “See you, boys!”

But my voice seemed to freeze in my throat.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FAREWELL TO OUR FABLE

The moonlight blinded me somewhat, covering me in its mysterious glow. I sat down on a bench, seeing as I was suddenly overwhelmed with terrible exhaustion. It took all of my willpower to keep control and not fall asleep.

This, however, was also the moment when I realised something incredible: the Academy building was no longer the amazing mansion I was used to. I didn't at all notice that it had shrunk by a half and kept on shrinking before me. The same thing had happened with the park and the surrounding wall.

I heard a humming in my ears, and I could see strange red flakes floating about before my eyes.

The Academy building kept on shrinking.

Once it was the size of an ordinary wardrobe, a tiny creature emerged from it and approached me. It was Professor Inkblot. The very same Professor Inkblot I remembered finding inside of a glass not that long ago.

Meanwhile, the sky above me descended and the moon hung as close as if it was a lamp suspended from a ceiling. The wall surrounding the Academy grew closer and closer, and I could now clearly see the various gates leading to neighbouring fables.

Time flew and everything around me kept on shrinking. My eyelids felt glued together and I was overcome by such powerful sleepiness that I dozed off without noticing. When a moment later I opened my eyes, the transformation of everything which surrounded me was complete.

I was inside a room, lit by a round lamp suspended from the ceiling. The Academy building had turned into a cage, inside of which I recognised Matthew sitting there, deep in thought. Where there used to be a park there was now a beautiful green carpet, embroidered with the shapes of trees, bushes and flowers. Where there once stood a wall I now noticed a library, and the gates had turned into the spines of books, their titles written upon them in gold leaf. All the fairytales by Mr Andersen and the Brothers Grimm were there, along with the fable about the Nutcracker, the Fisherman and Fisherwoman, the wolf which pretended to be a beggar, about the dwarves and Mary the orphan child, about Wacky Ducky and many, many more.

I was sitting on a sofa, and Professor Inkblot was standing at my feet. He was now no bigger than my little finger. I could not tell his legs and arms apart at all, only his bald wee head shone in the light of the lamp.

I picked him up delicately with two fingers and set him down in the open palm of my hand. Professor Inkblot spoke to me in a barely audible voice:

“Be healthy, little Adam, we have to now say goodbye. You are a kind and brave boy. I wish you luck in life. Who knows, maybe we’ll meet again in another fable.”

Having said that, Professor Inkblot shrunk by a half again. He was the size of a plum, and then only the size of a hazelnut.

And then suddenly something utterly unexpected happened.

The object the size of a hazelnut that had been Professor Inkblot stopped being him and became a button. An ordinary button, glowing with a pale pink shimmer.

Matthew, it seemed, was just waiting for this moment.

He flew free of his cage, sat on my arm, then jumped down onto my hand, snatched the button up with his beak and flew down with it to the floor.

Have you not guessed yet that this was the button from the magical Bogd Khan emperor’s cap, the wondrous button belonging to Dr Pai Chi Wo, capable of returning Matthew back to his human form? Had you not thought before that Professor Inkblot was that very button, one Dr Pai Chi Wo had turned into a human being?

If you ask me, I realised this was true when I began to notice Matthew slowly changing. He began to swell and grow in size. His wings took on the shape of human shoulders, his legs extended, his beak took on the shape of a face.

Growing ever taller, after a few minutes Matthew became bigger than me. Before I realised what was happening, right before my eyes, I saw before me a forty year old gentleman, his hair dappled with shades of grey.

I bowed before him and said:

“I am most honoured to be able to meet Your Royal Highness. I think that Your Royal Highness will soon take up his father’s throne.”

My speech was not particularly effective, but after all I didn’t really have time to think it over and prepare. Matthew, transformed into a man, listened to my words carefully, and then laughed out loud, stroked my cheek and said:

“Dearest lad! I am no prince. I have simply told you a fairytale, and you have believed it was true. The story about the King of Wolves was something I invented.”

“And the prince? And Doctor Pai Chi Wo?” I asked, shocked.

“A fable is always just a fable, dear boy,” he said with a smile.

“And so who are you, Matthew? What does all this mean?!” I called out, completely lost.

“I am the author of the story about Professor Inkblot,” answered the bird-like gentleman. “I wrote this tale, because I really love fantastic tales and I had great fun writing it.” With those words, he picked up an open book which was lying on his desk, closed it and put it back with other fables in his library.

On the book's spine, I then saw the words:

Professor INKBLOT'S ACADEMY

MORE BOOKS TO COME

PROF INKBLOT'S ADVENTURES

PROF INKBLOT'S TRIUMPH

LATE 2020

THE FABLE IS FAR FROM OVER!