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# CHESTER PARSONS is NOT a GORILLA

MARTYN FORD



90 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE
FABER & FABER

First published in 2019
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House, 74–77 Great Russell Street
London, WC1B 3DA

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

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

ISBN 978–0–571–33223–6




2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martyn Ford is a journalist from Hampshire. His debut, *The Imagination Box*, received huge critical acclaim, and was followed by *The Imagination Box: Beyond Infinity* and *The Imagination Box: A Mind of its Own*. This is his first standalone title.

Dear Harry,

# Chapter 1

# Scary Things

'Who are you?' the man asked.

That's a fairly big question, I thought.

Who are *you*?

Like, are you your brain? Or are you a thing that lives *in* your brain? Are you that little person who talks in your thoughts – if so, who are they talking to? Or is your entire body you? But then, if you lost a finger, you'd still be you, right? If your head was in a jar, would *that* be you? Hmmm . . .

I stared back at him in silence, squinting.

'What's your name?' he asked, noticing that I'd disappeared in thought.

'Oh, sorry. Chester Parsons,' I said.

The man ticked a box next to my name and told me to go and sit at the back with the others. Taking a deep breath, I strolled towards the empty chair at the end of the row. I was auditioning for a TV advert – the role I had been given was 'Potato 1'. Yeah, that's right. A potato. I was playing the part of a potato. I think we should repeat that, so we're completely clear: I was playing the part of *a potato*.

The audition was being held at a proper theatre in London too, the real deal. Even though all the characters would be different vegetables, they were taking it very seriously. A few of the others stepped out onstage and read their lines. Carrot went first – she was a girl around my age – and then Broccoli, who must have been about fifteen, and finally Beetroot, who seemed to be the only adult here.

Then it was my turn.

The stage lights were bright as I stepped out of the shadows, past the thick red curtain. Above me there were ropes and more lights and that sort of backstage theatre stuff, which is all messy and covered in bits of tape. Smells of dust and lofts. And wood. Makes you

somehow itchy after a while. Anyway, I walked into the centre of the stage, stood on a small cross on the floor, cleared my throat and began to read my line.

'Stop, Mrs Carrot,' I said, throwing my voice like an absolute pro. 'Stop this madness, stop in the name of the—'

'No, no, NO!' the director yelled from his seat in the middle of the stalls.

I lowered the script and looked into the darkness.

'You're moving wrong,' he said. 'You're a potato. *Walk* like a potato. Go again.' He clapped twice.

Frowning, I stepped out of sight, exhaled, then walked on to the stage again – this time waddling slightly with straight legs and my arms at my sides. Really, he'd given me an impossible task. Potatoes, as I'm sure you're aware, can't walk. Never have. Almost certainly never will.

Then it happened. Bang. It arrived. The Fear. That's the problem with criticism – it throws me off balance. Suddenly my heart was pumping, my mouth was dry. I felt like I was at the top on a rollercoaster and I'd just spotted a gap in the track.

Why would anyone want to put themselves through this? Well, the answer for me is: ever since I can remember I have wanted to be an actor. If you think about it, it's the only real job a kid can do. It doesn't matter how old you are – in fact, being young is sometimes an advantage. When they need someone to play a child in a TV show or a film or, in this case, an advert for a sandwich shop, the best person is an actual child. I can't think of another job you can start doing at any age. You want to be a policeman? Well, bad luck, kid, no one's going to hire an eleven-year-old policeman. You want to be a doctor? You obviously need to go to university first. You want to be a dragon tamer? No such job, you idiot. Get out of my office. But you want to be an actor? Well, crack on. Go to an audition. I *dare* you.

It's also the *best* job because it's something I do anyway – it's like getting paid for sleeping or eating. I love pretending to be other people and when we were younger it was pretty much all me and my sister did. Dressed up and pretended we were pirates or robots or characters from one of our favourite TV shows. Never been a potato though.

The only downside to acting is that auditions are totally, utterly, completely scary. Like, imagine the scariest thing you've *ever* done and then times it by fifty. And times *that* by sixty. And then add ghosts.

Stage fright is actually common – even famous actors you've heard of get it. For me it can be pretty serious – I freeze up, go all rigid like those goats that faint when you shout at them. (That's a real thing. Google it.)

So, there I was, standing all potatoey (or apparently not, according to the director) under the spotlight, trembling. All the confidence I'd pretended I have was gone. My armpits were damp. My face was hot. My stomach was making weird noises. And, worst of all, my thoughts were wandering, which happens a lot sadly.

Stop being nervous, I said in my head. This *isn't* scary.

Bears. Now *bears* are scary. Dying too, that's pretty scary. Crazy to think isn't it – that everyone is going to die one day. What other scary things are there? Guns – they'll kill ya. Bombs – blow you to pieces, terrible things. Spiders are fairly awful. Bees, let's not forget

them – delicious vomit, sure, but they'll mess you up with that sting. Not as bad as wasps though. They're sugary terrorists, buzzing about bins and apple cores like little stripy nightmares. Imagine a wasp the size of a dog.

Dog-wasp.

'Um, Chester?' the director said.

I refocused and realised I had been standing silently on the stage for quite a while, listing scary things in my head.

'Sorry,' I said, coughing. Get it together, Chester, you clown. I tried again. 'Stop, Mr Beetroot—'

'Wrong!'

'Uh, I mean Mr Carrot. Sorry. I'm just nervous. Can I do the line again? OK . . . Stop, uh, stop, Mr . . .'

'Remove yourself from my field of vision,' the director said, waving a slack hand.

I did not get the part . . .

'How did it go?' Amy was waiting for me outside the theatre. She had given me a lift in her new car – which was an interesting experience as she only passed her test last week.

'Not good.'

'Nerves?'

'I think so.'

'You should go to that guy. The one Mum was talking about.'

'What? No. I don't need therapy. I just get stage fright sometimes, it's totally normal.'

We walked round the back of the building to the car park. It was sunny – I still felt hot from The Fear.

Amy slowed down and turned to me. 'You said that sometimes you get so nervous you feel like you're on fire and that the entire universe is trapped inside your stomach and your blood has been replaced with boiling jam.'

'So?'

'Well, Chester, that doesn't *sound* normal,' Amy said. 'If you get this worried about a rubbish advert for a sandwich shop then how— Hang on, who puts potatoes in sandwiches? And broccoli too?'

'Oh yeah, good point.'

'Anyway, hypnotherapy might help.' Amy unlocked her car door. We both climbed in. It was like an oven.

'My point is,' she said, 'if you get this nervous about an audition you don't care that much about, how are you going to handle something like *Sword of Steel and Stone*? A role you really, really want to get?'

'I've told you, I've already got the part,' I said, winding down the window. 'Pretty much.'

Believe it or not, playing a potato in a sandwich advert is not the best role a budding young actor can get. The *best* role a budding young actor can get is a main character in the *Sword of Steel and Stone* movie.

The truth is, I have had two auditions for the part and there is a third next week. There are only two of us left: me and this other guy who is so obviously bad at acting it's actually embarrassing. Like, it's mean to let him in front of the camera. So I've basically got the part.

In fact, I am so sure that I've already told everyone at school I'm going to be in the movie. And people are excited. Of course they are – everyone loves the TV show, the games are awesome, the books are super popular and now finally it's going to be a film too. It'll be great. Next week's audition is just to make it official.

I guess the producers at Screentwist have to pretend it's fair, even though they've probably already made up their minds.

That evening I found Mum sitting at the dining table, drinking white wine and looking at letters. They were bills. We get a lot of bills lately. She seemed worried until she realised I was standing in the doorway.

'Hey hey, there's my little potato,' she said.

I shook my head.

'Oh well, their loss.' She swept up all the pieces of paper, stood and put them on the counter. 'Where's your sister?'

'Who knows? She drove off somewhere – said she was getting something for a video. Wasn't really listening.'

'Did she mention—'

'*Yes*, she did,' I huffed. 'And I told her – I don't need it. People who kidnap seagulls and speak to clouds need therapy, you know, like *crazy* people.'

'Chester, that's not true. All kinds of people need a little bit of help from time to time – there's no shame

in it. You are so talented. It'd be awful if nerves held you back.'

'You know what makes me nervous?' I said. 'People constantly talking about me being nervous.'

'The final audition is *next week*. Dr Vladovski can teach you some really simple—'

'*Fine*, I'll go and see your amazing mind man, although I doubt it'll do any good.'

Really, if I was honest, I was actually kind of hoping this Dr Vladovski *could* help – because feeling anxious does suck.

And so that's what I did. I went to *therapy*. Mum booked an appointment for the following day, and Amy dropped me off in her stupid little car, which was still scary. In fact, it was getting worse, because she was getting *confident*. We jolted to a stop, my seat belt catching me as my head flung forwards.

'Hurrhhhhgghh,' I gasped. The engine stuttered and stalled. 'Thanks. I'm feeling calmer already.'

'It's the pedal, this one here – it's getting stuck.'

'You mean the clutch?'

'The squishy gear one. Whatever it's called.'

'See you in an hour or so,' I said. 'Drive . . . better.'

I stepped out of her car, feeling instantly safer, and strolled across the road. The tall building, number forty-three Sandy Street, looked like an office block. But I double-checked the address – definitely the right place. Inside there was a narrow corridor and then some steep steps – it was silent. The air swirled with incense smoke, a bit like Amy's room smells sometimes.

The wooden stairs creaked under my feet and, at the top, I went through another door and into a small reception area. Some gentle background music was playing – a twinkly harp mixed with the sound of waves. It was probably meant to be relaxing.

'Hi there,' I said to the woman behind the desk. 'I have an appointment.'

'Who are you?' she asked.

I thought of a head in a jar and then said my name.

'Go on through.' She pointed her thumb over her shoulder.

Approaching a tall wooden door with a shiny bronze handle and a window, I noticed the name Dr

Vladovski printed on the frosted glass. I pushed it open. Inside, sitting cross-legged in the middle of his desk, a man was making a strange humming noise. He was wearing a brown jacket, smart trousers and had a completely bald head. As he was facing away from me, I coughed to get his attention. Lifting his knees, he spun round on the desk, knocking some paper on to the floor in the process. He had glasses with perfectly round lenses, a waistcoat and a huge beard, a grey bush – it looked like his face was on the wrong way, all his hair on the bottom instead of the top.

'Oh yes, hello, I am Niko Vladovski,' he said in a strong Russian accent. He kicked his feet forwards and leapt off the desk. 'Very good welcome to you.'

'Hi. Uh, thanks.'

He stepped past and closed the door. 'Come, come inside. You come to see Vladovski for therapy?'

'Yeah, but, I dunno if I, like, need it or whatever.'

'Well, let's have a little talk time and then we can— Hey, it's you.' He pointed, his face lighting up, his beard stretching with excitement. '*Put a little honey on a puffy*

*wheaty puff-puff*,' he sang. '*Hey, puff-puff, wheaty puff puff. Yum-yum puff-puff, tasty-tasty-tasty time.*'

'Hmm, close enough.' I sighed.

Vladovski was singing the incredibly popular, catchy jingle from an advert I was in last year and he was getting it quite wrong. I played the part of a kid eating Puff Puff Wheat Puffs and had to sing a little song at the end. If I had known that *everyone* in the country would see and remember the advert, I probably would have said no. I can't tell you how often someone shouts '*Yum-yum puff-puff*' at me in the street. And at school it's non-stop – even the teachers do jokes from time to time. I can't wait to be famous for something better than that.

'I love this commercial, my friend,' Vladovski said. 'We do not have delicious cereal like Puff Puff Wheat Puffs in old country. In my village we eat only sawdust and water from very brown pond.'

'Sounds horrible.'

'It was pretty bad, but they say wood porridge, it put hair on chest. Anyway, you make yourself comfortable. Sit on whichever chair you like.'

There were three chairs. A blue one, a red one and then a brown sofa. I felt like even this choice would say something about me.

'So you're a hypnotherapist?' I asked, stepping towards the sofa on the other side of the room.

'Yes, among other things. I like to focus on the mindfulness.'

I wandered across his strange office, noticing all his unusual books – many were leather-bound with oriental-style words on their spine – and on the wall was a black and white photo of him standing next to a huge bear.

'Hey, cool bear,' I said, looking over my shoulder.

'Ah, yes.' He strode up behind me. 'This is my old partner. We had circus show. I ride on his back, we jump through fire hoops, swing from rope – very good fun times.'

'That sort of sounds quite cruel . . .'

'Cruel? No. Bear, he likes it. We feed him the tuna legs and he perform very nice.'

'Strange career change? Circus trainer to therapist?'

'Ah, well, circus closed down after my bear, he, he go crazy and bite off my hand.' Vladovski held up his

arm – only then did I notice he had a hook coming from his left sleeve.

'Wow.'

'But I forgive him. Many years ago now …' He stroked his beard and sighed at his memories. 'Please, sit, sit. Let Vladovski fix your mind. What is this problem? You need to quit gambling? Smoking?'

'I'm eleven.' I sat back into the sofa.

'Then you really should not be gambling and smoking. You did right thing to come to Vladovski.'

I explained that I just got nervous, normal stage fright, and he said it was easy to sort out.

'Two sessions, maybe three, you never feel scared again,' he said. 'So, to start, you must close your eyes and take a long, slow, deep breath in through your nose and gently out through your mouth …'

An hour later, right there in that room, it happened. The strangest experience of my entire life.

The doctor got me to lie down on the sofa and imagine I had floated out of my body and gone off to next week's audition. He told me to create a vivid image in my mind of what it would be like – the smells,

the sounds, the fear I might feel. I pictured it so clearly, it felt real – or at least as real as a dream. Then he told me to imagine I was confident – like a bright, tall, beaming film of the best acting I'd ever done.

Once we'd finished all this, he counted down from ten and said that, when he gets to one, I should wake up and be 'back in room'.

'. . . four, three, two and . . . one.'

Slowly I opened my eyes and saw the office. The books. The desk. The empty blue chair. But something was wrong. Glancing down, I could see a brown blazer and a shiny silver hook instead of my left hand. There was a notepad on my lap – or *his* lap – my name was at the top and I read the words 'Money concerns?', 'Pet dog?' and 'Identity issues (understandable)?'. He'd also drawn a small doodle in the corner of the page – a little stickman with three eyes, one in the centre of his head.

And there, across the room, I saw *myself*, Chester Parsons, lying on the sofa with my eyes shut tight. I was . . . I was someone else now. I was Dr Vladovski.

Remember when I said auditions were the scariest things of all time? Well, I was wrong.

*To be continued...*