



ISABEL HOVING

Gadgets. It was all because he loved gadgets. When he looked back later on, Josh decided that was how it had started. Which wasn't far wrong: if he hadn't been so intrigued, Josh would have slammed the door in their faces right from the start, and then probably nothing would have happened. Why did they have to pick on him, of all people, to be the hero of their lousy adventures? He was just an ordinary boy — except for four things.

Four things. First, he was a collector, and quite a good one. He knew exactly how to organize all his stuff so he could find things easily, and so his parents didn't want to dump it all in the dustbin every few months. Mostly he collected useful things, like solar torches that also worked as a compass, whistle and penknife; but he also had shelves piled high with rusty bits of metal, skulls and skeletons, bunches of locks, picklocks and keys, computer games that no longer worked, and all sorts of tools and electrical devices. Second, he could fall asleep wherever and whenever he wanted. Third, he could always remember his dreams. Which could be a pain, especially when it was a nightmare, and then he'd go around all day with a sinking feeling there was something after him. And fourth: he was a thief.

A thief. No wonder he never showed his collection to anyone. Because it also contained jewellery: earrings, gold brooches and girls' rings. Why would a boy of twelve have things like that? He'd stolen them: half by accident, half on purpose. You might drop an earring when Josh was around, or put your ring on the edge of the washbasin when he was there and it would disappear while you were drying your hands. Or you might carelessly lose a bracelet, as a lady in a fur coat once did, when she let her gold snake bracelet (with genuine ruby eyes) slip off her wrist in a packed bus. If that bracelet accidentally got caught on the buttons of Josh's jacket, at the next stop you'd suddenly see him standing outside the bus, with something bright flashing in his hand, and you could say goodbye to your bracelet. But at least Josh never stole from his friends, and usually he'd only nick something if it was there for the taking.

Otherwise, he was an ordinary boy: lanky, pale, with tousled hair and shining eyes. There was nothing so special about him that would explain why he should have been called. With hindsight, perhaps his unusual birth may have had something to do with it. But that's hindsight, and every child's birth is different. There really was nothing special, then. But called he was. And not just called, but called to the phone.

The telephone rang in the middle of the night. Such a thing rarely happened, but when it did, his parents would normally leap out

of bed to answer it. Their startled, hushed voices would wake Josh up, not the actual ringing. This time, though, Josh heard the noise shattering the silence. He groaned and struggled to the surface from the heavy depths of his sleep until he realized what the sound was. He sat up. What time was it? He listened to the shrill sound, his heart pounding. The ringing stopped for a second, then started again, making him jump. Why didn't Liz, his older stepsister, wake up? He lay down again, pulling the duvet over his head. Then he made up his mind, leapt out of bed and went down to the living room.

The room seemed larger than usual: empty, cold, full of shadows. Josh stared at the phone, his heart in his mouth. It must be something really awful; there was no other explanation. Death, or an accident, perhaps.

'Hello?'

'Am I speaking to Joshua Michael Cope, of 170 Pepys Avenue, Kentish Town, London?'

'What?' Who was this stuffy-sounding man, Josh wondered. 'Who is it?'

'Gippart International here. My name is Marmeduke Fawcett. I'd very much like to ask you a few questions. Would that be convenient?'

'Well, OK, but —'

'Good, thank you so much. I have five short questions for you, for a youth market survey. First, may I ask you how old you are?'

'Twelve,' Josh stammered. He was getting cold. 'Mr...'

'Thank you. That is excellent. At present you reside with your parents?'

'Yes, I mean, with Mo, I mean my mother, and Edwin. My father lives down the street, and I go to —'

'Very good, thank you. Now for the third question. In what year did Christopher Columbus sail to America?'

'Huh? We haven't — oh, wait — 1492. I know it because of the rhyme about sailing the ocean blue.' Josh began to think that this might be a competition and he might win something. A quad bike, he hoped.

'Yes, that is correct. Well done, I'm so pleased. I'll just jot it down. Now for the next question: what caused the dinosaurs to become extinct?'

Josh smiled. OK, it was a meteorite, everyone knew that; but he was getting cold and he wasn't old enough yet to ride a quad bike anyway, so he said, 'They killed themselves laughing.'

There was silence at the other end.

'Yeah,' Josh explained, 'because a meteorite landed on top of one of them, and the others killed themselves laughing. Something like that.'

'I see.' The man was quiet for a while. 'Yes, of course. I understand. Just a moment...'

Josh hopped from one foot to the other. He heard whispering on the other end. He wanted to go back to bed. Sometimes they awarded a prize for the funniest answer. The one about the dinosaurs killing themselves laughing wasn't his joke, it was Baz's; he'd let Baz have a go on the bike too.

'Joshua?'

'Yes. Still here.'

'Now, the final question — please think it over carefully, and answer as accurately as you can, will you?'

'OK.'

'Think carefully before answering, now: how does one get into, or out of, a dream?'

'Pardon?'

'By what method, or methods, does one enter a dream? And, more importantly, how does one exit?'

'I don't understand. By going to sleep, of course. I mean —'

'Aha!' There was a deep sigh on the other end of the line, and Josh heard the man say to someone in a loud, excited voice: 'Max was right!' Then: 'Might I ask you to be just a little more explicit?'

Josh laughed. 'I don't understand! You just go to sleep, that's all.'

'Right,' said the man eagerly, 'but would you be able to demonstrate this, for instance?'

'Yes, of course, but —'

'Wonderful, thank you very much, that is very kind of you. Right then, we have come to the end of our interview. Location, time, history, technique. And your helpful co-operation. Shall we say two or three days from now? Thank you so much, and might I wish you a pleasant rest of the night! Goodbye for now.'

Clutching the receiver, Josh listened to the dialling tone, non-plussed. Slowly he hung up the phone. He stretched. What was that man really after? Suddenly he started shivering in his green T-shirt and his pyjama bottoms that were too short for him. He padded back to bed and peered at his alarm clock. Half past two. He crawled under the lukewarm duvet, and replayed the conversation. How did you get into a dream? And out of it? Had the man been pulling his leg? Josh felt as if he'd told the man something important without understanding it himself, and that he should have just kept his mouth shut. After a while, he turned over on his side and fell asleep.

FROM **THE DREAM MERCHANT** (WALKER BOOKS, 2006)
TRANSLATED FROM THE DUTCH BY HESTER VELMANS

ISABEL HOVING (the Netherlands, 1955) began her career as a secondary-school teacher, during which time she became active in the Dutch women's movement. She eventually gave up her job to study literary theory full time, and spent some months in Senegal, West Africa for a research project – an experience which gave her a completely different perspective on the world and which she describes as a turning point in her life. She is an academic and lecturer at the University of Leiden. Hoving's first book, *The Dream Merchant*, was a runaway success in the Netherlands and won the 2003 Golden Kiss award, the most prestigious young adult book prize. It's a thought-provoking and epic fantasy adventure. To quote Michael Morpurgo, Britain's Children's Laureate: 'Here is a dreamtime so intense, so dangerous you don't want it to end, ever.'

PROGRAMS

LEAVING HOME AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

APRIL 25: SMALL PRESS CENTER, 6 PM-7:30 PM

CHILDREN'S READING: FINDING PEACE

APRIL 28: THE RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART, 1 PM-2 PM

TRANSLATIONS

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