

Finn Button and the Discovery of Adria

by Lakshmi-Raj Jesa

For my son, Ishaan – my whole world.

Reading stories with you is my favourite thing to do. Now here's one I wrote for you.

Love, Mummy.

Chapter 1: The Strange Man

It was only four o'clock in the afternoon, but darkness was crawling through the street, swallowing up street lamps and ushering everyone indoors. As he waited for the bus with his parents, Finn's eyes moved to a glowing cafe opposite the bus shelter, where a short woman was on tiptoes arranging trays of fat rascal fruit scones in the window. The wind whistled eerily around them, drowning out the sound of his parents' squabbling and causing little tornadoes of leaves as they twisted and turned through alleys.

Finn looked up at one of the few remaining lit street lamps and saw the rain blowing in its light. The sky snored above him as a few grumbling clouds scudded across it. Then, a furious gush of rain pelted across the street, forcing Finn to look down again. He wriggled his toes in his soggy trainers and listened to the drain gurgling next to them.

When he looked up again, through the wild torrent of rain blowing into his face, he spotted an unusual man, pushing past people and walking rather determinedly in their direction along the street. He wore a long grey coat with a black flat cap pulled down very low over his face, so that Finn could only catch fleeting glimpses of his darting eyes. His choice of clothing seemed to make him look like a pair of curtains being slapped around by the wind. In his hands, he carried what looked like a fish tank with no lid. As he came closer, Finn's eyes moved to the man's pale fingers, all of which looked like they were suffocating inside metal rings. Thick hairs curled themselves around the rings like small black spiders.

With each step he took, water bounced up into the air and back down again into the tank. The three small fish inside seemed to withstand every jolt across the tank, quite gracefully. They surfaced occasionally, as if to test their luck, and then dove right back inside with every heavy dollop of rain.

The man almost knocked Finn off his feet as he stopped abruptly in front of him, but Finn was so taken aback by his arrival, he couldn't bring himself to move. The man moved closer and then bent down so that his face was now facing Finn's. He smiled widely, revealing two rows of very white but very wonky teeth. Raindrops rolled down to the tip of his nose and his wet hands squeaked uncomfortably against the glass fish tank. At moments, it seemed as if it might slip free from his hands.

"Would you like to keep these three fish, young man?" he asked softly, still smiling.

As the rain began to stop, these words bounced around Finn with a magnetic energy, which seemed to drown out the noise of everything else around him. Finn's parents paused their conversation, too, and turned to look at the man. The busy street also seemed to fall quiet, as if everyone had heard the strange man's equally strange offer. Finn looked up into the man's yellow-tinged eyes.

With the fish tank in closer view, Finn could see that it was no ordinary one. Inside it, among other things, was the most magnificent fortress. Behind it, the green fish were hiding and peering out occasionally to steal glances of Finn. Watching Finn, watching the tank, the man quickly threw one side of his long coat around it to shield it from view.

"They don't like the rain," he said, wrinkling up his nose and smiling again.

"You're... you're giving away your fish?" Finn asked, unable to quite believe the change in his fortune. No day had ever been different from any other day in the lives of the Buttons. Finn's father, Mr Button, had a job in the local supermarket as a manager, which meant that he knew the price of just about everything inside the shop and outside of it. Occasionally, Finn's mother would take Finn shopping after school and spoil him with a special treat, which was almost always a bag of the very popular Exploding Gobbombs. They didn't taste very special at all, but the wonderful excitement Finn got from twisting open their fluorescent wrappers made something quite ordinary seem fairly fabulous. He learned that – beyond sweets – this was a good way to look at many things in life. Indeed, it was now quite out of the ordinary that the Buttons found themselves in such a position of luxury that they might own not one fish, but three.

"I am."

"I'll take—" Finn started.

"What do you mean? Why are you giving away your fish?" Mrs Button interrupted, wiping the rain from her face with her wet sleeve.

Finn saw their bus arrive, but his parents were so stunned by the sight of this man holding a fish tank on the street that they didn't seem to notice. He kept quiet. People, with raised eyebrows and open mouths, walked onto the bus, twisting their necks around to keep staring at the commotion.

“Well, Ma’am, that is a wise question,” the man said, now standing in a tight spot, surrounded by a few nosy ladies that had got off the bus. “You should never take something from someone without making full enquiries first. Am I right?” He smiled at Finn.

“I wouldn’t take them at all,” an old lady croaked behind them, looking at Mrs Button with raised eyebrows.

The strange man turned around and gave her a deathly glare, and she hobbled off nervously down the street. He waited until she was sufficiently in the distance and the rest of the crowd had dispersed. The Buttons waited awkwardly, staring at him. Then, he spun around with the same, big smile. Finn felt his own face beginning to ache as he wondered how the man could hold a smile for so long.

“Aren’t they tropical fish? Shouldn’t they be in a heated tank?” Finn asked quietly.

The man ignored him and continued, “It just so happens that I’m moving to a new house and I don’t have the space for them anymore. I was on my way to the pet shop to hand them in, when I saw this young man here and I just thought he might fancy their company. What do you say?”

“But there isn’t a pet shop around here,” muttered Finn, squinting through the drizzle and the light of the street lamp. He turned around to look at his father and then at the man again, as he wiped a raindrop from his eyelashes.

“No. No, thank you,” said Mr Button, shaking his head and waving his hand about in the air. “We can’t keep three fish. That’d be three extra mouths to feed. Terribly kind of you, but I shall have to politely decline.”

“But Dad...”

Mr Button fired an angry look at Finn, which silenced him immediately.

“I understand but I assure you they don’t eat a lot. Really. Tiny little things, they are. See for yourself. And I tell you what, I’ll throw in a few pennies for your troubles. I guarantee it’ll last you years.”

“Fish that size would need at least 200g of fish flakes a year and then you multiply that by three—”

“Quiet, boy. This isn’t the time for your smart talk,” Mr Button snapped. Finn gritted his teeth and Mrs Button placed a comforting hand on Finn’s shoulder. “And you! What are you saying? Last years? What do you mean? Nothing comes that cheap,” continued Mr Button with a laugh, looking up at the man and then back at his bewildered wife.

Finn looked up at all the adults, one by one, and examined their expressions. Each looked equally uncomfortable. His father looked both intrigued and irritated. The strange man’s face kept alternating between a smile and a look of worry every few seconds, but each time his gaze landed on Finn, a rather insincere smile curled around the corners of his mouth. Before Finn or his parents could say any more, the man shoved the tank into Mr Button’s hands, leaving him little choice but to grab hold of it quickly or risk dropping it onto the ground and it smashing into a million pieces.

Mr Button stood with his mouth hanging open, in sheer shock at the nerve of this stranger. For the first time in his life, he didn’t have an immediate response. The man, by this point avoiding all eye contact, swiftly pulled an envelope out of his front pocket – presumably with money inside – and shoved it into Finn’s hand. Then, almost as quickly as he had arrived, he left.

“I didn’t say yes!” Mr Button cried after him, blinking furiously, but his voice drowned away into the pitter-patter of rain.

For a few moments, Mr Button, holding the fish tank, and Finn, holding the white envelope, and Mrs Button, holding a soggy newspaper, stood in disbelief. Another bus arrived and whooshed past them, throwing up bits of slushy mud onto their coats and leaving a trail of unbearable stink. Still, they didn’t move. None of them knew what to say. Every inch of Finn’s body tingled with an electric excitement that he was finding difficult to contain. Mr Button spoke first.

“What was that all about?” he said, grimacing. “I’ve half a mind to leave this thing right here.” He held it at arm’s length as if it were a newborn baby about to vomit on him.

“No, Dad, you can’t!”

Mrs Button looked back at her husband. Mr Button’s temper had permanently shaped his eyebrows into little caterpillars, pushing up the many lines of sagging wrinkles on his forehead. He had a gleaming bald head, but a full and perfectly trimmed moustache, which

often cushioned the blows of his harsh words. At this precise moment, though, nothing could hide his irritation.

“Edgar, we’re taking it home. We can’t drag it to the supermarket and we certainly can’t let these poor fish just sit here in the rain. We’ll have to take it back home and then you can go out again,” Mrs Button replied.

“What kind of a person walks down the street with a fish tank? And one without a lid? Then just hands it over to someone, just like that,” he said, balancing the fish tank as best he could. “I mean, this thing looks expensive, don’t you think, Jen?” he said, dropping to a whisper.

Mrs Button mumbled something.

“Dad, you’re not holding the tank straight. They might fall out!” Finn called from behind them.

“And nobody gives anything away for free these days,” Mr Button went on, as he followed his wife, ignoring Finn.

Finn walked behind them, still carrying the envelope and stealing glances at the tank, with happiness fluttering inside him. Today was becoming a day like no other.

“Edgar, really, I’m as puzzled as you are, but Finn deserves a little something like this. He spends so much time reading about all these creatures in his books – isn’t it nice for him to actually get to see them in real life for a change? In twelve years, he’s been to the aquarium once and that was on a school trip. Let him enjoy it. After all, they’re just fish.”

“Well, if it keeps him in his room a little longer, that’s alright by me,” Mr Button mumbled.

Chapter 2: The Residents

“Finn, find a place for your father to put this tank,” said Mrs Button, as she hung up her damp coat.

Finn stuffed the envelope into his father’s pocket and rushed ahead of him to a little table in the corner of the living room. He scooped up a pile of old newspapers and a mountain of bills.

“No, darling, not there. I think we should put it in your bedroom, don’t you?” said Mrs Button, dabbing her face with a handkerchief, as Mr Button pursed his lips together and whistled out an air of frustration.

“Really, Mum?” Finn asked, beaming.

“Absolutely. Besides, there isn’t a tremendous amount of room here in the living room. Go on.”

“Oh yes and I can just go on holding this all day while you two decide.”

Finn raced up the stairs to his bedroom, while his father trudged up behind him, muttering and moaning. He quickly moved all of his books from his desk and his father came clamouring in and dropped the tank onto it with a giant thud. There was a big splash, but surprisingly no water fell out. The fish looked a little annoyed, as they flurried back behind their hiding places.

“Now, you listen to me, boy, if you want to keep these fish, they’re your responsibility. That means it’s your responsibility to clean the tank and whatever else that comes with it. I don’t want any extra work because of this. And I don’t want to hear about any problems either. So much as a sniff of something going wrong here and the tank’s out the window! Understood?” Mr Button snarled.

Finn didn’t want to let on too much about how happy he was, in case his father used it as a reason to get rid of the tank, but he could feel himself smiling from the inside. Extra company in the house also meant one more layer between him and his father – the thought of which thrilled him just as much as keeping the fish tank.

“Yes, Dad. It’s not like I’ve ever given you any problems before, so it’s unlikely I’d start now,” Finn mumbled, feeling a little braver than usual.

“What was that?” Mr Button asked, turning around so fast that he almost pushed Finn over.

Mrs Button poked her head through the door, combing her damp hair with her fingers. “You know, I think it’s brilliant. One way to get Finn’s head out of his books and doing something different. The sense of responsibility that comes with taking care of something too... I think it’s just wonderful,” she gushed.

Mr Button shrugged, eyed the tank and then Finn with a mixture of wariness and grumpiness, and mumbled, “The ungrateful little brat...” as he walked out.

“Darling, I’ll call you when I’ve heated the dinner up. Enjoy.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

As experience had taught them to do, both Finn and Mrs Button ignored Mr Button’s complaints. Mrs Button winked at Finn and left the room, closing the door behind her. Finn crouched down, so that he was kneeling just in front of the tank and inched closer until his nose was pressed against its cold wall. He felt a shudder across his spine. He didn’t know whether he’d caught a chill from standing in the rain earlier or if it was just down to excitement, but – for the first time in a long time – he could feel his body twisting inside him with an impatient curiosity.

The room fell silent. It was as if a magical net had been cast over Finn and the tank, and the rest of the room dipped out of focus. Finn looked up briefly at the walls around him, which were now soaked in an ominous yellow hue that seemed to be drawing him further and further into the tank’s grasp. All that could be heard downstairs was Mr Button turning the television on and the distant sound of Mrs Button clattering pans in the kitchen. Finn could feel his heart pounding inside him. Despite all the noises, he couldn’t peel his eyes away from the tank.

He trailed his index finger across the front of it. There were little brown doors dotted along the bottom of the fortress, several windows along the top and some black steps leading up to a large door at the front. The base of the tank was scattered with small blue stones that glistened with every motion of the water, which Finn realised he hadn’t noticed before. He

looked away momentarily, racking his mind trying to think, but he couldn't remember. From the moment the strange man had arrived, things had felt like a blur.

He looked back at the tank. Plugged into one corner of the bed of blue stones was an orchard of miniature trees with glittering red balls on them. The trees rocked back and forth like little Christmas trees with a heartbeat, growing and shrinking with every motion of the water. He wasn't sure that they'd been there earlier either.

At the front of the tank, there were a few small boats docked on the blue stones, which looked like deserted pirate ships. In the far corner, there was a tall Roman tower and, attached to it, a swimming tunnel. This led to a slide at the opposite end of the tank, presumably so that as you whooshed through the tunnel at speed, you could whizz down the slide at greater speed. Finn hobbled around on his sore knees and noticed, at the back of the tank, that there was a little wooden barrel, a helmet of some sort, a treasure chest and a submarine – smaller than the tip of his finger. He smiled as he looked at all of them; he'd never imagined a fish tank would look like this.

A sudden flicker of a shimmery blue tail behind the wooden barrel stole Finn's attention and, at that very same moment, his mum entered his room, bringing with her the smell of chicken pie. He jumped as the door clicked open.

"Dinner time, sweetheart. Are you coming down? Sorry, did I scare you?"

"Err no – it's OK, Mum. I just got a bit lost in... I'm coming."

Finn stood up, took one last glance at the tank over his shoulder and followed his mum back downstairs. When he first saw the fish, they had looked green. Was there a blue fish in the tank, too? He dropped himself onto a chair opposite his father, who was already scoffing down a roast potato. Finn's mum drifted back in from the kitchen, smiling at Finn and carrying a tray of giant Yorkshire puddings. Mr Button looked up, albeit just for a second, with gravy dribbling from the corner of his mouth onto his white work shirt.

"How're the fish, Finn?" he grunted, puncturing the sliver of silence Finn was enjoying.

Finn continued looking down at his plate. He knew the question was more than just a question – it was a trap to take the fish away from him.