ALEX AND THE AMAZING

TIME

MACHINE

RICH COHEN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY KELLY MURPHY

Christy Ottaviano Books
Henry Holt and Company • New York
A NOTE TO READERS

One day, when I was ten and just back home after a long day at the beach, my best friend, Todd Johnston, and I fell upon the freezer like Vikings. We planned to devour and be happy with the devastation we caused. But when I looked in the freezer, and this, like many things in my life, was the fault of my mother, there was but one Dreamsicle. The rest of the bounty—pops and drumsticks, pints of ice cream—was gone, all gone.

“Who gets it?” asked Todd, fixing me with a cool blue glare.

“There’s also a banana,” I told him. “One of us can have that, and you know, it’s good for you.”

“Who gets it?” Todd repeated.
I proposed a best-of-three series: Rock, Paper, Scissors. Todd agreed. The games commenced. Though I normally fare well in such contests, this time, with the treat in the balance, I went down in a sweep. Todd took the Dreamsicle. I took the banana, humbled by my loss. But when I pulled back the peel, an amazing thing revealed itself: not one banana but two, side by side—a freak, an oddity, a miracle.

“My God,” I said, “twins!” Todd cried foul. He’d won, but now, suddenly, his victory did not seem so clear. It was a key moment for me, and I’ve remembered the lesson ever since: no matter how it looks, you just can’t tell the losers from the winners while the ball is still in play.

—Rich Cohen
When people ask Alex Trumble where he lives, he is always careful to tell them not just the number of the house and the name of the street and town, but also the date and the year: 1062 Bluff Road, Glencoe, Illinois, March 29, 2012.

“If you want to find me,” he explains, “you need to know where I am, but also when I am.”

The kids in Alex Trumble’s school thought he was a little funny. Not ha-ha funny—though he was—but just sort of different. He spent a lot of time reading books, very old books filled with drawings and words few people could understand. He spoke of hidden
dimensions and time warps. He did most of this talk-
ing with just one kid, his best friend, Todd Johnston.

Here’s the funny part. With a kid like Alex, who is
happy in a library, you expect his best friend to be
another kid like Alex. There were not a lot of those, of
course, but a few kids came close. Tommy Ryan, for
example, who sat in the front row in math class with
his hand raised. Or Debbie Bernstein, whose hair
coiled like red springs. A founding member of the
model rocket club, Debbie was famous for the voyage
of Big Bertha, which carried six eggs into the strato-
sphere behind North School before parachuting into
the sandbox next to the jungle gym.

Todd Johnston was nothing like that. He was big
and sunny and always outside. In the summer, his hair
got so blond it was white, and his knuckles were tanned
and cracked. He was the best athlete at North, but not
the sort of best athlete who is arrogant about it. He
didn’t think because he hit the softball over the fence
fifteen times that year that he was better than anyone
else. Maybe that’s why he was such great friends with
Alex. They were different, but they were also a lot
alike—each in his own way was special, and each in
his own way thought there was nothing very special
about it. In fact, Alex was constantly troubled by fears of his own ordinariness. “When will I distinguish myself?” he asked Todd.

“When you stop trying,” his friend told him.

They were in fifth grade, which they agreed was the best grade so far. In kindergarten, they treat you like a baby, and you are a baby. In second grade, they treat you like a baby, but you’re not a baby. You’re something else. No one knows what for sure, but you are not a baby. You can cut and paste and glue, but you can also charm and trick and fool. Not a baby. In fifth grade, the assignments take shape, and the teacher talks in a clear, straightforward way.

Alex and Todd walked home together from school unless Todd had a practice or a game, which, to be honest, was a lot of the time. If Todd did have a practice or a game, Alex would sit in the bleachers taking notes. He often had ideas for plays or suggestions for ways Todd could improve his swing. Todd listened to these ideas, nodding. He knew Alex well enough to know that was just the kind of kid he was. Full of ideas, schemes, plots, and plans. He wanted to help.

On most days, they followed Vernon Road into
town, which consisted of a dozen streets on a hill above Lake Michigan.

Like a lot of average-seeming American towns, there was something strange about Glencoe. An odd, otherworldly energy crackled beneath the surface. And that’s not even taking into consideration all the people on the outskirts who believed they’d been abducted by aliens. Every now and then, a kid would go to sleep in his bed in Glencoe and wake up in a house halfway across Cook County. Whenever this happened, people just figured the aliens had goofed, beamed someone up for examination, then accidentally returned them to the wrong house. It was not the kidnapping that bothered the locals so much as this sloppy inattention to detail.

When Alex and Todd got beyond the last sidewalk, they hopped a fence and cut across backyards, a private world of ponds and gardens that could be followed, without touching cement, all the way to the beach. If Alex was with any other kid, his mother wouldn’t let him walk home without an adult. But Alex was not with any other kid. Mrs. Trumble knew Todd would look out for her son and make sure he got home safely, no matter the obstacle.
The Trumbles’ house, depending on your point of view, was either a wreck or wonderful. It had been a fancy mansion once, owned by a powerful businessman, a tycoon, but the tycoon had been involved in a scandal. He lost his money, and the house fell apart. It was a glorious ruin, a maze of sitting rooms, sunrooms, libraries, parlors, and secret passages. From the top
floors, you could see Lake Michigan crashing onto the rocks below.

The Trumbles were not wealthy. Mr. Trumble was a writer of books that few people read, but he wasn’t sad about it. “Time is funny,” he would say. “I could be writing the right stories, just writing them at the wrong time.”

When Alex asked about this, Mr. Trumble would shrug and say, “Maybe I have a huge audience, and a lot of people love my books—they just don’t know it yet.”

“When will they know it?” asked Alex.

“Later,” said Mr. Trumble. “A lot of things that don’t make sense now will be clear later.”

The house was like that, too. It was a mess in the present, but Alex’s father was able to see what it would look like in the future, after it had been restored.

Mr. and Mrs. Trumble had bought the house for next to nothing. It was owned by the bank and had been empty for years. When Alex talked about the sad history of the house, his mother told him to forget about it. If he asked why, she said, “Because you can’t do anything about the past.”
Mrs. Trumble had short brown hair and big green eyes. She was a lawyer and worked in the city. She defended innocent people wrongly accused of terrible crimes. She often worked for free, because it was the right thing to do. Alex was proud to have a mother like that.

Todd and Alex came in the back door, threw down their bags, then went into the living room, where Steven Trumble, Alex’s brother, was watching baseball on TV. Steven looked like Alex, only older, bigger. If you made a Silly Putty copy of Alex and stretched it, you would have Steven. He was mean, too, and cynical. He said things like “It takes a sucker.” Or “If you are fooled, you are a fool.”

Steven questioned Alex about the baseball season ahead.

“How do the Cubs look?”
“What do you think of the division?”
“How does the pitching stack up?”

All the Trumbles knew Alex was a genius, and they used his gift to their own ends. Alex’s father used it to help him pick stocks in the newspaper. Nothing was certain, said Alex, but much could be guessed, so he
guessed on stocks, and mostly he guessed right. Mr. Trumble felt guilty using his son this way, but he needed the money. Alex’s brother used Alex’s genius to figure out the winners of baseball and basketball games. That’s how, each spring, Steven Trumble won the NCAA pool at school.

Even so, Steven found his brother annoying. Some of this was classic big-brother-little-brother stuff. The fact was, Steven had a vague memory of the world before Alex, when he had it all—the toys, the parents, everything—to himself. As far as Steven was concerned, Alex was now using up air, time, and love that really belonged to him.

Of course, none of this was said out loud. Maybe Steven didn’t even know about it, not in a front-of-the-mind way. Instead, it was sublimated, which is a nice way of saying it was stepped on and covered up and squashed down until it popped out in all sorts of unexpected ways—the charley horse, the shoulder squeeze, the nasty remark: “I know you are, but what am I?” “That’s so funny I forgot to laugh.” “Shut up, doofus!”

What’s more, Steven and Alex, though in some
ways a lot alike, had different interests. Steven, for example, was obsessed with sports. It was what he cared about more than anything. Alex loved sports, too, but he was also into books, ideas, made-up things, and schemes. He was a dreamer. Steven did not get this side of his brother at all. He often heard people call Alex clever, but he never understood what this cleverness amounted to: did it ever save a life, win a game, impress a girl? Whenever Alex walked into Steven’s room to tell him about some new invention or idea—Alex never stopped trying—Steven would roll his eyes and say, “You should stick with baseball.”

Worst of all was the way Alex seemed to feel about Steven’s occasional scorn. He didn’t care. When they were younger, in the heat of an argument, Steven once shouted, “I hate you, Alex.” And the way Alex responded, well, it captured everything that drove Steven crazy: “That’s okay—I love you enough for both of us.”

The best part of the house was the turret, which was like a tower in a castle. It was fifty feet high, a needle of brick with windows scattered along a spiral staircase that went up and up. There was a big, round, glassed-in
room at the top from where you could see the lake clear to the horizon.

When the Trumbles moved into the house, an inspector from the town examined the turret. He took measurements and made notations before calling the structure “unsound” and putting a board over the entrance on the first floor. This did not stop Todd and Alex. Late one night, when the wind was blowing, they loosened the board with the claw end of a hammer and climbed the tower. It was shadowy and strange at the top. The windows rattled; the floorboards creaked; the room swayed like the deck of a ship.

The tower became their clubhouse. Alex had books up there, flashlights, sleeping bags, and a radio. The walls were covered with posters, pictures, and articles Alex had cut out of newspapers and magazines. If you were a detective, you’d be able to get a good sense of Alex just by studying the walls of this room.

There were stills from his favorite movies, *Twelve Monkeys* and *Time Bandits*. There were copies of his favorite books, *The Outsiders* and *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*. There were photographs of his favorite baseball players, but since most of them did not play for the Cubs, he had cut Cub uniforms out of the
paper and taped them over the pictures. Stephen Strasburg, Joe Mauer, Robinson Cano—in Alex Trumble’s mind, they were all Cubs. There were pictures of animals, too. Not satisfied with the animals that existed, Alex cut and pasted the pictures into hybrids. There was an eagle with the body of a bear, a dingo with the claws of a lion, a giraffe with the head of a Tasmanian devil. Laughing at these, Todd said, “Dude, you’re turning into a mad scientist!”

Todd and Alex spent hours in the turret, talking about baseball, school, nothing at all, but, sooner or later, Alex always gave in to his obsession, the nature of time. “It’s a real thing,” he told Todd, lying back, staring at the ceiling, “just like the sidewalk from here to town is a real thing.”
“Then where is it?” Todd asked.
“It’s all around.”
“So why can’t I see it?”
“Why doesn’t a fish see the water?” Alex said, sitting up. “Because he’s in it. Hours, minutes, days. You’re in them like a fish is in the water. It’s where you live, and you don’t even know it.”

That night, Alex had a strange dream. Well, he had many strange dreams. In one, he was wearing a cape and flying low and fast over a city. In another, he was falling from a tower, falling and falling in a way that made it seem like he would never stop. But in the dream I’m thinking of, he was on solid ground in his best clothes, a jet-setter, traveling not from country to country but from age to age, from present to past.

He was a time traveler, sailing via a device of his own creation. It was made of a laser pointer and an iPod, and it opened a warp in space through which Alex could skip across time. He saw time tunnels and planets and good people and bad, his parents, of course, his dog, his best friend, his brother—something terrible was happening to his brother—but there were other people, too. He kept seeing two faces in
particular, but they were never clear enough to identify. These were men from the future, he could feel it, themselves part of a cosmic plot, a conspiracy Alex had gotten tangled in as you get tangled in the sheets just before dawn, when you can no longer tell the difference between what has happened, what will happen, and what you’ve only dreamed.
Alex went to the public library early the next morning. The building was on Park Avenue, the main street in town. Alex took the front steps two at a time, then pushed open the front doors. He would normally nod to the librarian and head to the science reading room in back, where he sat by himself, paging through ancient encyclopedias. Sometimes people learned something, something important, which was later forgotten. It had been discovered and written down, then lost. Some of these things, secrets that had not always been secret, can still be found in the oldest books. That’s what Alex believed, and that’s what he searched
for in the reading room. But this morning, before he could even get his bag off his shoulder, the librarian pulled him into a closet off the entryway.

She was a nice woman with gray hair and so old it was hard to calculate her exact age. Her name was Ms. Reagan. One thing about her was unusual for a librarian. She was incredibly loud. Maybe it had to do with her hearing aid or her wish to be understood, but she was one of the loudest people Alex had ever met. This always made him uneasy, but it made him especially uneasy now, as she was telling him about a strange thing that had just happened.

“Two men were in here asking about you,” Ms. Reagan yelled. “They did not seem like nice men. In fact, I was thinking of calling the police. Or your parents.”

“Who were they?” asked Alex, his heart pounding.

“There was a tall one,” Ms. Reagan said. “He was skinny. And a short one. He was fat. The tall one spoke a lot, and the short one spoke even more.”

“But who were they?”

“I don’t know who they were, but they know who you are.”

“What do they know about me?”

“They know you live in that big house near the
lake, they know your name, they know what you read. Yes,” she added, as if speaking to herself, “I should call your parents.”

“What do you mean, they know what I read?”

“They know you read in the science room, that you’ve been looking at old books about space and time.”

“How do they know that?”

“I don’t know,” said Ms. Reagan, “but they wanted a list of all the books you’ve checked out in the last year.”

“Did you give it to them?”

“Oh, dear, no. Being a librarian is like being a doctor or a policeman. It’s a trust. What you read is your business. What do you think they want?”

“I don’t know,” said Alex, thinking. “Maybe I stumbled across something in one of those books, something I wasn’t supposed to see.”

“Well, they did go back and poke around the science room,” said Ms. Reagan.

“Are they still there?” asked Alex, fear in his voice.

“No. They left about fifteen minutes ago.”

Alex thanked Ms. Reagan and told her he was going back to the reading room himself. “Maybe I can figure out what they were looking for,” he explained.
“Be careful,” said Ms. Reagan. “Those were bad men.”
 “Bad how?”
 “When I said you had not been in and were not coming in, the short, fat, slow one grabbed my wrist and gave it a hard squeeze. There was a lot of anger in that squeeze.”

Before Alex left, he turned and said, “Please don’t call my parents. I’ll tell my dad when I get home. I’m sure there’s a simple explanation.”

“I think I really must tell someone, perhaps Sheriff Bonneville,” said Ms. Reagan.

“No,” said Alex. “Don’t do that. I just remembered: it’s all a game.”

“A game?”

“Yes, part of a scavenger hunt for the Boy Scouts. We’re supposed to find the clues without getting tagged by the bad guys. That’s who you saw: parents who volunteered to be bad guys.”

“Really?” said Ms. Reagan. “Well, that is a hoot. But I wish they would tell us of these things in advance. It gave me a scare.”

“If they told you,” said Alex, “it wouldn’t seem half as real.”

“I suppose that’s so,” said Ms. Reagan.
Alex was pleased with his ability to come up with this off the top of his head. It would keep him in control of the adventure that was beginning to unfold. He was nervous about the bad men, but excited, too. It seemed like a chance to finally distinguish himself.

Once Ms. Reagan had calmed down, Alex went back to the science reading room, which was a mess. Books had been pulled off the shelves and scattered across the floor. As soon as Alex got over his initial shock, he began digging through the piles, searching for a rare and precious text called *Light Beams and Indians*.

How did Alex first come across this book?
Well, that’s a story.

Over the previous few months, Alex had become obsessed with a scientist named Shari Ali Ben Shaprut. To be fair, he was obsessed less with Dr. Shaprut than with a book she had written to make sense of her own terrible life. It was called *Cosmic Redo: How to Build a Machine So We Can Go Back and Fix All the Things That Went Wrong, Wrong, Wrong*. There was a lot of math and science in the book, but what interested Alex most was the motivation behind the doctor’s quest to break the time barrier.

When the doctor was still too young to reason,
her family went to see a circus in a field outside of Shreveport, Louisiana. Someone had forgotten to secure the latch on the elephant pen. The blast of the human cannonball sent the elephants running, and the doctor’s entire family—save the doctor herself, who was safe in the concession tent—was crushed in the stampede. For years, decades even, the doctor had been trying to build a time machine so she could return to the past and secure the latch on the elephant pen. A sad and beautiful quest, thought Alex.

Alex found Dr. Shaprut’s e-mail address online. She was a teacher at one of those ivy-covered schools in the East. She was a strange woman, driven by a single desire, who, in the course of all her searching, had run into an obstacle, a problem that could not be fixed. She was like a speedster with a blown tire and was stuck on the side of the road, waiting for help that might never arrive. As a result, she welcomed Alex’s interest. They were soon e-mailing, spitballing, problem solving. It was several weeks before Dr. Shaprut realized that readytotrumb@aol.com was neither a retired professor nor a half-crazed time travel aficionado, but a kid from a town near Chicago. By then, the doctor was so deep in the nitty-gritty with Alex, she didn’t care.