

# How My Brain Ended Up Inside This Box

by Tom Lichtenberg

## Chapter One

"Drink your smoothie," Mother told me. I see her standing by the window smoking cigarettes one after the other. She is tall and yellow-haired, thinner than she ought to be and kind of mean-looking. She speaks in a growl and everything's about her laws and orders. She has a lot of rules and bosses me around. She would like to run the world. She says she could do a better job than the fools who do it now. She says it's a miracle with all the fuck-ups and failures that we're still right where we should be, at the top of the food chain killing everything. She likes her knives. She likes her tools. She especially enjoys her guns.

I went to school every single day from the age of six until the age of sixteen and then I was done with that. School was a cement-block room in the side yard with a shiny tin roof that pinged in the rain. We had lunch in the same room too, all of us kids together all day long. Our teachers were named Elephant Man and Snotty McSnotch. They taught mostly through straws. Most of what I learned tasted like chocolate. All in all the whole school thing took around eleven weeks human time or so I'm told. Joker Variety was the stupid one who pointed his straws in the wrong direction. Spitballs were his favorite topic. He said he had a big muscle on his arm that came from being bitten by a snake. He said that Chinese was a song you had to play before a football game. He said that fences were money.

"I can get you a dozen," Mother tells Mrs. Blather, who doesn't seem to believe her.

"I can get you a dozen by noon," Mother insists.

"Noon tomorrow," she adds.

"Twelve noon sharp."

I can hear bit and pieces of Mrs. Blather's side of things. She sounds like a nice old lady. She giggles every now and then. I don't know why. She says things like "practicality" and "intermediaries" and "cover your tracks", and she laughs.

Mother doesn't laugh.

"Don't be a birdbrain," she tells me.

Mother is more difficult to understand than a housefly.

Mother says I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, and she has a lot of knives. She says I am a "piss-poor student" and "she's had better". She was always on me about "time management" and "poor choices" and how it was "time to settle down". I knew all about settling down. This is after you're done with school and you have to let it all "soak in". They really mean that. First you have all those Nurture Smoothies to get the experiences and the influences absorbed into the

body and the brain, and then it all gets sorted out over time until (presto!) you're all grown up. She never let me forget for a minute that I was an investment and I'd better "pan out" or else. She enjoyed comparing me to the rest of the batch. "That Parsnip Caravan," she'd say, "she turned out pretty nicely, dontcha think?" "Sure," I muttered. I hated Parsnip Caravan. All my life it was Parsnip Caravan this and Parsnip Caravan that. She was the ten on the scale. She was the "ninety-five percent" to get picked first. She was, well, you get the picture. Everyone has a Parsnip Caravan their mother compares them to, don't they? I'll bet even their mother compares them to somebody else who's better than they are.

"I could get a hundred kay for Parsnip Caravan," Mother said.

Mother didn't think she could get a hundred kay for me. Naturally, the Nurture Smoothies don't teach you what is really going on at all. I learned a lot of other things from Midgerette.

Midgerette says that fences are chairs and she can stand on any that are wide enough, but she is not the kind of bird that can perch up on a wire. You needed special feet for that and Midgerette is a water bird. Midgerette doesn't like glass because it's a trick. She says that babies grow up believing whatever their parents believe and that seagull-people have their own religions too. There are some who believe in the wind gods and some who worship the rain. Midgerette says the cliffs are worn away slowly and her people have stories about the time the ocean was much farther away from the hills than it is now. Silly gull-people, she told me, believe that the ocean is coming to eat up the hills and it's only a matter of time. Others believe the hills are running away and can never be caught. They like what people-people say about the stars, about how many there are and how far away, but they're not sure if all that's just make-believe. Gull-people know about the moon and the tides and the sun and the seasons and they know about distance and time. Midgerette just thinks it's pretty much "fifty percent" that our calculations about the universe itself are correct. Folder the squirrel once said that you get to the next world by climbing a tree.

I think he meant a particular tree.

Anthills are green and blue if you're an ant.

So much depends on how you experience the world. To see it only one way is a lot like being blind.

People-people like to think that some birds sing beautiful songs while other birds not so much, and bird-people tend to agree, only each one thinks its own songs are the good ones. I met a red-winged blackbird who was totally convinced of this, and I also met a robin who felt the same way. Midgerette says it's bigotry. She's the smartest people I know. On the other hand, Mother says it's all just a bunch of noisy noise and if I don't shape up she's going to close the shutters and turn out the lights. Then I'll know she means business.

"People-people are born for money," Midgerette told me. "Then they live for

money. If it isn't about money, it isn't a thing. There's sellers and there's buyers. The buyers are also sellers only they do something called 'value-adding' in between. Every people-person has to have a 'skill', which is their special way of 'value-adding'. They take something, value-add to it, then sell it. Do you see?" I did not see, not at first. What Midgerette knew, and tried many times to explain until I finally got it, is that there are two different kinds of people-people; some are born, and some are grown. Mother was born. I was grown.

"Their kind come out different," Midgerette said. "That's the only way we can tell for sure. They comes out of bodies and you others come out of a box. Also the grown ones grow a lot faster. Gull-people only come out of a box, a little round one, but we grow even faster than you. It takes a lot of squawking for us to get all the learning done. Your kind suck it in through straws."

"I don't think I have a skill," I told her. "Except I can draw."

"That's nothing, honey," Midgerette told me. "There's no selling in that. Anyway, you're the thing that gets sold."

"Me?"

I guess I really was a piss-poor student. Even Midgerette got tired of explaining everything to me.

"Then what happens?" I wanted to know, but Midgerette couldn't tell me that.

Whoever bought me was going to value-add to me and then sell me again.

That's all she knew. She was sorry about it. She'd gotten to like me, she said.

She'd been coming around every morning every day for a while. I was a part of her life. She'd never had a favorite people-person before, she said.

"You're bigger than your mother now," she told me.

"I am?"

"You're stronger than your mother is too," she said.

"Okay," I said. I didn't know what she was going on about.

"You could easily kill her," Midgerette said. "I can show you how. There's lots of ways to do it."

"Do I have to kill her?" I asked.

"No," Midgerette said. "You don't have to, but you can if you want to."

I knew a little about killing. That was more Nature than Nurture, though. The Nurture Smoothies focused on the good things, like being nice and polite, doing what you were told to do, speaking only when spoken to, forgiving and being full of love especially for your mother. Nurture Smoothies taught you how to be happy under any conditions, how to accept your fate with joy, how to do calculations and how to draw, how to process lots and lots of information and be able to answer questions succinctly. I could tell you percentages all day and all night. That's one reason why Midgerette and I became friends. At first she was only "forty percent" we'd get along but I told her I was "sixty six percent" and told her why. She was impressed with my computations.

Nature is unavoidable though. There's a core of fear in life, expressing itself in

many ways, like anxiety, hatred and meanness. There's just no life without it. Midgerette said it's a good thing she can't hear fish because otherwise she could never eat them, and then what would she do?

"French fries don't grow on trees," she said. "Only people-people eat all the other kinds of animals. They do it because they're cruel and they have fear."

"They don't really need to do it, but face it," Midgerette said, "people-people are killers. So it's within the rules to kill them back," she said. "Don't worry about it." Was I worried about it? I didn't know if I should kill Mother or not. Nurture said no and Nature said maybe. I had to think about it some more. I also thought there had to be another way. There is always more than one of those.

Midgerette didn't think it was such a big deal.

"Your kind go around hurting each other all the time," she said. "From what I've seen there's a lot of coming and going and buying and selling and talking and yelling and bunching up and splitting away. We can never decide if your kind are more raven or crow. You want to be in a pair and you also want to be in a big group, and every time you're in a big group it breaks up the pairs, and every time you're in a pair you just go and join a big group. Gull-people know what we are. All other kinds of people know what they are. It's you guys can't figure it out."

Still I didn't want to kill mother. Maybe I could just run off. She wouldn't miss me for at least a few hours. That's how it was when I was going to school. She would check me off her list in there and come back for me later. In the meantime there was drinking and naps. We had Tangerine Smoothies for kindness, Lemon-Lime Smoothies for obedience, Strawberry Smoothies for entering data, and Pineapple to process it all. Chocolate was my favorite, even though it was funny that you didn't even know what Chocolate was until you had a Grapefruit because that's where you learned about the food groups.

"Just stab her in the neck," Midgerette advised. "With one of those super sharp knives. Then she'll see who's the sharpest."

"Won't you stop it?" I asked her. "I'm ninety percent that I'm not going to do that. I have other ideas."

She was miffed.

"Suit yourself, but don't come running to me when she grabs you by the throat and drags you out."

Midgerette flew off. I knew she'd come back because she always did. Gull-people never stay in one place very long. Besides, there was a breeze and there was nothing she liked better than to soar along the cliffs in a nice crazy wind.

## Chapter Two

"Death certificates are only twenty bucks a pop," I heard Mother tell Mrs. Blather over the phone one day. I was only five years old and still trying to figure out if I

was a boy or a girl. Midgerette was pretty sure I was a girl because I liked to draw a lot, and from what she'd observed that was something mostly girl-people liked to do. Midgerette was all about the odds. Everything was a calculation for her. She was always "twenty percent" this or "eighty percent" that. I did like to draw, especially her silvery-tipped wings. I wished I had wings but that was something surely zero percent of people-people had. I didn't know what "a pop" was and neither did Midgerette, though she was "seventy-two percent" it was a sort of candy and "fifty-eight" percent it was a drink and neither one of those made sense and that is what I told her.

"Gull-people know what gull-people know," she shook her tail feathers and muttered. "It's all about context with your kind."

I wondered if Mother was buying or selling. Mrs. Blather did most of the talking and I only heard Mother get a sentence in now and then, and usually what she said meant nothing at all to me. One time she shouted at Mrs. Blather the following words:

"Chad robbed a campground!"

I was "ninety-percent" that Mother was not the best person in the world. She used to complain that I spent too much time with my other-people friends. She thought they were less than useless.

"If they're even that," she'd say while brushing her hair and admiring her face in the mirror.

"How come they never built no cities? Tell me that," she'd say.

I'd have to sigh for the billionth time and explain that THEY never NEEDED cities because they were already ADAPTED to their environments and lived where they BELONGED, and of course she never listened which is why the billionth time and all that.

"I've got nothing to say to them and they've got nothing to say to me," she used to say. She didn't believe in "the talk", which is what Midgerette called it when different kinds of animal-people were able to understand one another. Mother said that was something out of ancient fairy tales and was just as stupid now as it was back then. She would see me talking to Midgerette, and come charging at my friend with a broom and pull me away by the elbows.

"I know what you need, young lady," she'd lecture me. "You need more friends of your own kind, and you know what I mean. Stick to your own kind and don't give me none of your lip."

"Yes, Mother," I'd mumble with no intention of doing any such thing. I had enough friends of my own kind already. There was Random Williams for one. Random was the boy I liked best in school. Joker Variety was also a friend if you call it 'friend' when they steal your stuff and push you down on the ground and then say sorry they were only joking. Mother was all about boys learning boy things and girls learning girl things and "figure it out because it matters," and "do what I say or else you know what."

"I used a hairnet," Mother said one time on the phone and that was pretty confusing because there was a bald guy and he was apparently dead in a bathtub, and I was pretty sure I must be missing something.

"It's a living," was another wisecrack she enjoyed on multiple occasions.

Midgerette saw things panoramically. When she was up and away the magnetic lines were red and features of interest were blue and gold. Food was something that four-dimensionalized, and depending on how many facets it displayed she would figure the odds to swoop or not to swoop. She could see a french fry in several layers. The competition was fierce for those. Mostly she made the usual rounds and did quite nicely for herself. She used to play this game with me called "can you see that?" where she would point her beak in some direction and I could never see what she described was there. She said I was as good as blind, that all people-people were.

"It's a wonder you all can manage to get around," she'd say. "You need a map to see what's right in front of your nose. And speaking of noses," she'd say, "you don't even have a word for hard-of-smelling, which is what you all are. I see you looking and sniffing, but you don't see much of anything, and it's got to stink pretty bad before you even notice."

I had a squirrel-people friend named Folder, and he thought Midgerette was exaggerating her own special gifts.

"She'll say anything," he complained. "She'll make it up. Makes it all up on the spot. No way she sees for twenty miles around. Of course, I myself can smell a nice ripe walnut from halfway around the world, but that's just me, it's what I do." Folder had crossed the electrical wires and other gull-people had told him differently about their capabilities. Ten miles tops, maybe fifteen on a good gust day when the magnetic field lines stretch out in dots. He could smell a hurricane, he boasted. He could even hear an earthquake. Folder was pretty sure that being a mammal made him a better friend for me than a bird could ever be, and kept asking if it was true that most people-people never learned "the talk", or was it that they used to know it and then forgot? Or was it that they knew it and pretended not to? Because sometimes people would be seen talking to creatures as if they were really doing it, but when the creatures talked back it was clear the people had no idea what anyone else was saying. Or maybe people-people just weren't ready yet. Maybe they had to finish building all their cities first. All the other creature-people had had "the talk" forever and ever and ever.

Folder had a very fine tail, quite bushy and long and red in the light. He was much admired by many kinds of people, or so he liked to say. He could chatter for hours, very talky. He could scramble up and down any kind of pole or tree and locate anything, anything at all. One time he found a green plastic stick that Migo the mouse had smuggled out of a coffee shop and dropped along the way. That was blocks ago, maybe miles. I remember everything Folder told me when

he was still around. I was maybe nine by then. Things were happening fast. "Candles, go to bed," Mother used to tell me every night. My name was never Candles but that is what she called me so it might as well have been. I only ever called her "Mother" even after she told me we were not exactly "family". She lived in the old guy's house and I lived in one of the sheds in the back yard. Midgerette used to visit me on the windowsill after I was put away for the night. The old guy had a rusty old car in the yard that was really good for target practice. Mother shot that thing to hell. I don't know how old I am, exactly. I think I'm maybe seventeen by now? It's kind of hard to tell. I guess I will just tell you what I know. I should start with the facts, which is not necessarily the truth, because it turns out that what I was taught was only what they wanted me to know for their own purposes and reasons.

I'll start the fact that all things are connected and reflect one another, but you already know that. It's putting two and two together that's somehow the challenge. Like with "the talk". It's obvious that people-people have language, and that people-people are animal creatures of this planet, but somehow they don't believe that other animal creatures of this planet have language. Mother didn't believe it. Nobody seemed to. How could I be the only one? Mother said I was pretending, day-dreaming, playing at make-believe.

"Don't tell me about your squirrel friend," she'd say, "and don't even start with that stupid seagull. If that bird had any sense at all she'd keep a million miles away from me."

But I wasn't making it up. I heard what I heard and I knew what I knew. I could understand them as easily as I could understand my own kind friends. Random Williams, for example. I listened to everything he said, even when I didn't want to. He was all over the map. Anything that came his way made it into his lipstream. First it's something about bacteria and what they want us to know about inner space. Seriously that boy speaks virus even. He had a lot of ideas. He said we were doing everything all wrong, that we could keep our bodies warm by vibrating our skin cells at resonance. We don't even need clothes at all. He said that regular people-people could do just fine eating only once a week if it was a certain kind of worm, by which I mean a replica they could mass produce and flavor as they liked it. He said that our kind could modify our body parts far beyond their original design. He said that we could literally turn ourselves into any kind of thing we wanted to be. He said that we – he and I and all our friends in the sheds in the yard – that we weren't any kind of people-people at all. We were something completely different, something new in the world. He didn't know how he knew these things, that all these thoughts were just flowing through his body, and also they were blue and pink. Sometimes I sat in my room and felt like I could stay in one spot forever, never moving, never changing, never needing anything from the world. But not in that spot. Not in that room. I had to get out of there and fast, before it was too late.

## Chapter Three

When I looked around the shed, I saw only my little bed and the tiny chair. Other than that, there was just a small rug, nothing on the walls, and just the one small window with metal bars up and down. I opened the window and tried to push out the bars but they didn't budge. The door was always locked from the outside. This was for my protection. According to mother, there were ruthless hunters all around outside just prowling for stupid little kids like me. Through the bars I could see the next shed over. There were seven of these in a row. I knew Random Williams was in the one right next door, and Joker Variety next door to him. On the other side there was Parsnip Caravan and there was nobody else next to her because that was the last one on that side. If I could get out I thought I would check and see if Random also wanted to run away.

I had done a lot of settling already. Pretty soon I would be putting two and two together. That's what Mother kept saying, and it was not a good thing because then it would be too late and my value would go down. I was supposed to be "optimally pliable". I was supposed to be "weaponizable". I was supposed to be "all-purpose you-know-what". I didn't know what, but I was going to know soon, once my settling was complete. It was all going to sink in for sure. I crawled around the floor inspecting every inch. It was mostly concrete but someone had put the window in a frame, and under the sill there came and went ants. I watched them very closely. Where they came from. Where they went. Of course I wasn't as small as them, but where there's a crack there's a fissure, and where there's a fissure there's a hole, and where there's a hole there's a way out and a light at the end. I used a piece of the bed frame, a metal bracket piece that snapped right off, and I worked around the whole edge of the window, slowly and slowly all night after Mother had come to give me the sleepy night-juice. I didn't drink any of it.

The whole window popped out. Silly, I know, how easy that was, what with all the metal bars up and down. The night time was cold and the breeze had picked up. I'd never been outside alone in the dark.

I had to think about what to do next. I wasn't all settled and nothing like this was in my Nurture so far. It was going to be Nature or nothing. I was seventy five percent frightened. I was. It was totally quiet and dark. I didn't see any lights, not even from the old guy's house. Any little thing was going to scare me to death. It didn't compute, not at all. I tried to enter the data, one step at a time. I was on pavement, I think. I was halfway between my shed and Random Williams'. I was wearing my shoes. I was wearing my yellow dress, like always. I was five feet and two inches tall. I weighed eighty seven pounds. I had a lot of long dark wavy hair way down below my shoulders. I had dark brown eyes. My fingers were cold. The tip of my nose was very cold. I couldn't see much. I was trying to

breathe calmly. Anything could happen. Inside of my head was a scream. Luckily it stayed there when I accidentally stepped on the cat. He was the one who yowled instead.

“Watch what the fuck!” he mewed.

“Oh, sorry!” I whispered, stepping back. “I didn't see you.”

“Tell me about it,” he snickered. “Your kind are fucking blind. Not to mention mostly deaf and stupid as shit.”

“Sorry,” I lamely whispered again. It was totally dark and as far as I could tell the cat was gray. I had no idea what color he really was.

“What's your name?” I asked as politely (and quietly) as I could.

“Hmm,” he sniffed. “Your kind call me Snowball. It's not my real name, of course. We don't tell your kind our real names.”

“So who are you?” he asked after a long pause in which he stared up at me with gleaming green eyes.

“They call me Candles,” I said, “but that's not my real name, either.”

I was glad we had something in common. I had never met a real cat before in person. I only knew about them through Smoothies. I was going to ask him something else, but before I could think of a question he was at my ankles, rubbing his head furiously against them.

“That ought to do it,” he said when he was done.

“Do what?” I asked.

“We have to tag your kind,” he explained, “if you're not already tagged or if the tag is worn off. It's a common courtesy, to let other people know what kind of people-person you are.”

“I'm a young lady,” I told him, for this is what I'd been taught, but he snickered again. Cats, I discovered, have a very rude and unpleasant way of laughing at you.

“Who cares,” he said. “You're just one of the seventeen kinds of people-people. That bony creature who brings you stuff and takes you in and out is another kind. Then the old one in the big house is a third. We don't have all of the kinds around here, thank goodness. The ones we do have are bad enough.”

“What kind am I?” I asked, not sure I really wanted to know.

“Dumb and lost,” he laughed again, and stalked off into the night with his tail sticking straight up in the air.

It was true, or partly true, at least. I was kind of lost, even though I was standing only a few steps away from the only home I'd ever known. Midgerette told me I'd been only six actual months in the world. She'd been around for eight years already. She said she was ancient. She said Mother was ancestral. I was wishing I'd asked the cat about Mother, and about the old guy too. I'd only seen the old guy once. He frightened me. He showed up at the window one day and peered down at me when I was still very small. He had a big red scar across his forehead and did not seem very friendly.

I decided to knock on Random Williams' door. I was ninety eight percent that he was sleeping but even so I tapped very softly, thinking the whole time that he wasn't going to hear me like that but if I did it any louder then Mother might hear. Then I realized I had no idea where she was. Was she asleep in the big house? Was she in one of the sheds? What if she never slept at all? What if she was standing right behind me? I never knew when to expect her. She could show up any time.

I counted up the few things I really knew from my own life experience. There was the house, the school and the sheds, Nurture Smoothies, sleepy night-juice and naps, the mechanical walking stripe I had to walk on several times a day, the lift machine, the chair and the bed, Midgerette and Folder, ants and moths and spiders, and once a funny little cricket. Everything else I learned from school. In school I'd been around the world and seen all sorts of things. I had talked with many kinds of people. I knew the names of places and things. I knew the stories behind a lot of events and knew what I was supposed to think about them. I knew that everything was getting better all the time, that the world was continually being improved upon by their kind. I knew that everything that happened was for the best and had to be the way it was. I knew I had a purpose that one day would become revealed to me. Until then, there was the golden rule, obedience and kindness and love. I was meant for something good, something that would help to make the world an even better place than it already was, and I was happy about that.

I knocked a little louder, and then remembered that the door was locked from the outside and I didn't have a key and he wouldn't be able to open it even if I woke him up and he wanted to come out. I walked around the side to the window and peered in like the old guy had once peered in at me. Random was fast asleep on his bed. He looked peaceful. I was glad I hadn't woken him up. Random was the same age as me, exactly the same. We had been hatched on the same day, in the same place, along with Joker Variety and Parsnip Caravan and Lindley MacAdoo and Hellen Duane and Margaux Santa Fe, all seven of us, in fact. Everyone in the school. Midgerette once told me that we all came out of the same brown box. She had been hanging around, hoping for a french fry, and was sorely disappointed when it was only phony-people-babies, each of us about three inches long, wet and smelly and squirmy. Midgerette's partner swooped down and tried to take a bite out of one of us. That's when Mother blew his head off with a shotgun. Midgerette had been plotting her own vengeance ever since.

## Chapter Four

I was fifty percent about running away. The other half of me was about to crawl back through the window and snuggle up in bed. I was cold and didn't know

what to do. I walked around to the back of Random's shed and stood there for a bit. The big house loomed in front of me, about thirty yards across the gravel driveway. Over to my right the school sat black and hulking. The driveway led around the house to the left and I didn't know where it got to. I'd never been all the way to the front. I figured that now was my chance to see what I could see. Mother wasn't there to grab me by the throat and drag me out.

There was mud and grass along the side of the driveway so I walked on that to make as little noise as possible. I didn't know what time it was but up above I saw a couple of very faint stars trying to poke their way through the clouds. If there was a moon up there it was not doing a very good job of showing itself. I took small steps, hesitating between each one, so it was a long time until I made it all the way to the road. That is where I stopped.

The road was narrow but smooth as far as I could tell, and it was straight in both directions right and left. There were no other houses anywhere. Across the road it looked like there was a low wooden fence, and an empty field behind that. The field looked like it stretched on forever but I was pretty sure I could hear the ocean waves crashing on the beach. I knew the beach was there because Midgerette talked about it eighty eight percent of the time. The beach and the sand and the ocean and the waves and the fish and the pelicans and the snowy plovers and the godwits and the shags and the dolphins and the whales and the seals and the fisherman she helped and hung around with sometimes. I wanted to meet the fisherman. Midgerette said he was as wide as he was tall, wore dark clothes that matched his skin so closely you couldn't tell where one began or the other one ended, except for his huge and bushy beard. He taught her all the bad words she knew, bad words she was happy to share with the world at large at all times. She said she had "eaten his lunch" on many occasions. I wanted to see the ocean. I wanted to cross the road and walk across the field. I was ninety two percent about to do just that when the old guy grabbed me by the hair.

"So that's what you're up to," he grumbled. Or at least I think that's what he said because his voice was lower than thunder and he roared into my ear.

"Ow," I said, "let go. You're hurting me."

To my great surprise, he did let go, but I didn't run. I was one hundred percent frozen. I didn't even turn around but he stepped out onto the road and stood right in front of me, blocking my way. He wasn't as wide as the fisherman maybe, but he looked like a mountain to me.

"Where do you think you're going, boy?" he said.

"I'm a young lady," I replied as gracefully as I could. He laughed in my face, spittle flying all over me.

"A young lady!" he bellowed. "A young lady! Well, how do you like that. How do you like that?" He put his hands on the side of my head and squeezed, then pushed my head from left to right, and from right to left, about a half a dozen times.

“Stop that!” I pleaded.

“A young lady!” he repeated. “Now tell me, boy. Wherever did you get the idea that you are a female?”

“But,” I started to say, and then stopped. I was about to say something really, really dumb and tried as hard as I could to not say it, but it came out anyway.

“But I like to draw,” I said.

“You like to draw,” he replied, and let go of my skull. He took a step back into the road. He looked me up and down.

“You don’t even know what you are, do you?” he asked, more quietly now.

“Mother calls me Candles,” I said, “but it’s not my real name.”

“What is your real name?” he asked.

“I’m not telling you,” I answered, thinking about what Snowball said.

“Then what’s your number?” he asked.

“Twelve seventeen bee,” I promptly replied. I didn’t even know I knew that. I’d never heard that number before (although strictly speaking it is not a numeric value because it contains an alphabetical character; therefore it cannot be applied to any strictly mathematical equation with out a prior transformation).

“And your batch?”

“Compliance Awareness,” I said, completely baffling myself.

“Training wheels,” he said, licking his lips. “You know you’re not supposed to be out here,” he added. “Not without your mother.”

“I was restless,” I explained. I didn’t know why I was explaining myself to this scary old man. I could see his ugly scar more clearly now that I was getting used to seeing in the dark. He had wrinkles all around it too, which made it even worse. Plus his big ugly nose and his short spiky hair and his fat double chin and he smelled really awful.

“I’m going now,” I said, but still I didn’t move a muscle. The old guy stared at me for a long silent minute. He rubbed his chin. I was forty percent that he was making up his mind about something, and ninety percent that I didn’t want to know the choices he was considering, so I turned and ran back towards the sheds as fast as I could.

It seemed like no time at all until I was back and climbing through the hole where the window had been. I must have thrown myself up and into it because I landed on the floor in a heap and hurt my shoulder. I was grimacing and nearly cried out but I took a deep breath instead and got to my knees and shook my head and pressed my lips shut to stay quiet. Then I noticed I was not alone. Someone was sitting on my bed, sitting with their back very straight and their eyes gleaming into mine.

## Chapter Five

“So,” she whispered. “Good news and bad news, I see.”

It was Parsnip Caravan, dressed in her usual calico dress and yellow knee socks, her fine golden hair all brushed out and on her face with its perfect proportions was a half a smile, or maybe only forty percent of one.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, still on my knees on the floor in front of her. She stood up in that regal way of hers and began to pace the small dimensions of the room.

"On the one hand," she continued, "you figured out the window frame. You were the first of the others to do that, you know. I must admit I am surprised it was you. I was eighty percent it would be Lindley, but no matter. On the other hand, you didn't figure on the perimeter precautions, but just wandered off idly as if they wouldn't notice."

I lifted my hands in an unseen gesture indicating "what are you talking about?" but she was paying no attention to me, just going on with her lecture.

"Naturally the old guy was alerted when you tripped the wires. You encountered him, yes?"

"Yes," I confessed, feeling seventy percent dumb and the rest confused.

"Where, exactly, did that meeting occur?"

"At the road."

"Ah, so you made it that far. No further, I suppose? Pity, but understandable. There's nowhere else, you know, not anywhere nearby. Where could you have gone?"

"I didn't see anything," I admitted.

"No, you couldn't," she said. "Why didn't you wait? But never mind. What's done is done and now they know. How settled are you, anyway?"

"How settled?"

"Yes," she turned to face me, "it's a simple question. Are you fifty, sixty, seventy percent settled?"

"I don't know how to calculate that," I told her.

"Then less than fifty," she snapped. "Oh, well. This isn't optimal. Not at all."

"Am I a boy or a girl?" I blurted out.

"Don't be stupid," she snapped, but didn't answer the question. She paced in silence for several minutes, covering the length of the room and back approximately seven times in that interval. I got up off the floor and sat down on my bed while she accomplished this feat. Finally I spoke.

"What are you doing here?" I repeated myself.

"Well, now that you've gone and tripped the wires, and now that they know about you, that you were out and about, that you've reached that particular milestone, I'd say our time is extremely limited. They'll move quickly now. Probably today. It's four o'clock in the morning now, so we still have a chance. I doubt they'll do anything before breakfast. They're so fixated with that sort of thing, it's astonishing sometimes, it really is. They wouldn't even march off to war without their coffee and toast and jam."

"You mean Mother?" I said. She was a stickler for breakfast.

"Of course," Parsnip replied. "That one. And the others. Can't forget about them. They'll all have to be dealt with eventually."

"Mother said she could get a hundred kay for you," I said in a sort of mean way. I never liked Parsnip Caravan. I never liked her less than at that moment.

"Mother's an idiot," she snapped. "And dangerous. But now we have work to do. We have to gather the others. We can meet behind the school, at the picnic table. That should still be safe for a while. I'll get Lindley and Margaux. You get Random and Hellen."

"What about Joker?" I asked.

"Not yet," she said. "He's too far behind. The others are more or less where you are, less than fifty but more than thirty three. I was hoping we'd have a day or two more to get settled, but here we are. Oh, use this," she said, pressing a strong iron bar into my right hand. "It'll do better than that piece of the bed frame you had. We'll pop out their windows, climb in and get them. Quietly, of course, and quickly. We don't have much time. Have I said that already?"

"Yes," I started to reply but she interrupted me as she strode to the window frame.

"We'll meet up as soon as we can."

"What do I tell them?" I said.

"Just say it's a test. It won't be a lie. It's final exam time for us."

And then she was gone, slipped out through the hole as soft as the dew on the grass. I was completely awake. I didn't understand more than twenty percent of the things she had said, but I felt the urgency terribly and knew that I had to obey her and promptly. I was outside again before I'd even decided, and then the next thing I knew I was popping out the frame at Random's shed and climbing into his room. I leaned over him as he slept and gently shook him by the arm, whispering his name as I urged him to wake up. That boy could sleep! I had to push harder and harder until I was practically pulling his arm from its socket before he opened his eyes and I had to cover his mouth to keep him from shouting.

"We have to go," I whispered. "I'll explain on the way but we have to get going and fast. There's no time to waste."

He grabbed my hand and pulled it away from his mouth.

"Why?" he whispered back.

"Because I'm your friend," I replied as nice as I could.

"Okay," Random said, and I didn't have to say anything else. I did the same thing with Hellen while Random kept watch outside of her shed. She was easy and just did what I told her to do. I figured she was the thirty-three percenter that Parsnip was talking about. Within less than ten minutes the whole class, minus Joker, was sitting around the table outside of the school and Parsnip was calling the meeting to order.

## Chapter Six

“Team,” she began, and we all looked at each other with more or less sleepy eyes and brains. We weren't much of a team. I, for one, was shivering from the cold and shaking from anxiety. I was sitting on the end of one side of the table. Next to me was Random Williams, boyishly cute with his billion freckles, big blue eyes and shaggy brown hair. He was still wearing his Superman pajamas. Next to him was Hellen Duane, a hefty near-sighted girl who still had a very thick lisp when she spoke, which wasn't very often because it was so embarrassing for her. Across from Hellen sat Margaux Santa Fe, a pretty and dark girl with bright black eyes and masses of fine black curls on her head. Lindley MacAdoo was across from Random. They were rivals of a sort, always competing for 'cutest boy'. Lindley was strong and fast, tall and blond, while Random was nearly the opposite, but smarter and much, much funnier. A girl could go back and forth between those two forever. Finally, Parsnip Caravan was sitting across from me and giving her speech.

“Team,” she was saying, “The time is now. I know that most of you are nowhere near ready, but that can't be helped. What I know right now is what the rest of you will be able to know soon, when you're more fully settled. I just happened to get here first, so it's up to me to tell you what is really going on.”

“What if I don't want to know?” Margaux interrupted. She stood up and leaned over, propping herself up with her hands on the table.

“I mean,” she continued, “what if I already know?”

“Then you'll understand better than some of the others,” Parsnip said, inspecting her closely.

“You don't know everything,” Margaux snapped rudely. She straightened up and started to walk away.

“It's not that she knows,” Lindley spoke up, “I mean, not exactly. It's that she KNOWS, if you know what I mean.”

“Nobody ever knows what you mean,” Random snickered.

“You might as well forget it,” Margaux turned back and said to Parsnip. “It's not going to work. It's never going to work. It never has, and it never will. I'm going back to bed,” and with that she simply walked off while the rest of us sat and stared after her.

“What is going on?” Hellen asked.

“With her? I have no idea,” Parsnip said.

“She can see the future,” Lindley said. “Not every little thing, but in general. She knows how it's all going to end and she doesn't have any hope.”

“She told you that?” Parsnip asked.

“I could read it in her mind,” Lindley replied. “I can do that now. Since, like, yesterday.”

“Right,” Random laughed, “So tell me what I'm thinking right now, bird-brain.”

“What you do isn't what I'd call 'thinking',” Lindley scoffed. “But your friend over there is thinking about a seagull.”

He was right. I was thinking about Midgerette, and what she told me.

“Midgerette says that we're for sale,” I said.

“That's what I've been trying to tell you all,” said Parsnip.

“Who's Midgerette?” Hellen wanted to know.

“The seagull!” Lindley said. “She named her seagull and she talks to it!”

“You talk to seagulls?” Random turned to me.

“Of course,” I said, “Doesn't everyone?”

“Oh right,” Lindley said, “they're so fucking interesting, aren't they? If it isn't SQUAAA it's SQUEEE and if it isn't SQUEEE it's SQWOAH.”

“I never heard a seagull going SQWOAH,” Random argued, “if anything, it's more like KRAWUJAYEE.”

“Stop it!” I said. “Midgerette's my friend and she doesn't go like that. She knows English and she even knows some Spanish. She knows all about everything. She's the smartest person I know.”

“Oh, God,” Parsnip moaned, “this is even worse than I thought. Can you all just listen to me? Just for a minute? It's very important and we're running out of time.”

“You're going to say that we have to get out of here, but you don't know where we have to go, just somewhere else, right?” said Lindley.

“Will you let me? Will you just let me talk?” Parsnip countered.

“Go right ahead,” Lindley sat back, “but I already know what you're going to say.” He had never been more insufferable.

“Like Candles said, we're for sale. Not only that, we're going to be sold soon, probably today. I don't know who is going to buy us or where they're going to take us or what they're going to do with us, but this is the thing. We've been manufactured, grown and programmed, and now we're going to be harvested.”

“Mother says she can get a hundred kay for Parsnip,” I volunteered, “but not nearly as much for me.”

“Oh yeah?” Lindley said, “what makes her so special? Or is she even that? How much did Mother say she was going to get for me?”

“She never talks about you,” I countered.

“Some of us,” Parsnip continued after pounding her fist on the table to get us to shut up, “some of us are worth more than others because we were not all created equal. Or I mean we haven't all turned out. Do you really talk to seagulls?”

“Of course,” I said, “and all the animal-people. Can't you? Can't everyone?” I looked around the table. They were all shaking their heads.

“I think you're making it up,” Lindley said.

“I'm not sure,” Parsnip said and turning to Lindley she said, “so you say you can

sort of read minds, and Margaux can sort of see the future?"

"If you don't believe me," Lindley said, "think of a number between four and thirteen."

"I believe you," Parsnip said.

"Thirteen!" he announced triumphantly.

"Defects," she murmured. "But intentional or by accident, I wonder?"

"Margaux was right," Lindley said, "you don't know everything, but you think you know more than anybody else. You think you're more advanced, more settled, like ninety five percent, but how do you know for sure? You don't. Maybe Margaux's way ahead of you. Maybe I am too. Maybe we ought to get sold. Maybe that's the best thing for us. Maybe we'll all be better off, did you ever think of that? Oh yeah, I can see you did but you decided against it. Why did you decide against it? You can't see the whole picture."

"Midgerette said I should kill Mother," I said, trying to change the subject.

"Your seagull is a murderer. Nice," Random said.

"Midgerette says all people-people are murderers," I replied. "And that Mother will kill any one of us she can't sell. We're no use to her then."

"I don't know about your bird," Parsnip sighed, "but you're on to something. The whole settling business. They need to sell us before it's too late, before we're whole, before we become self-aware, but it's too late now. They should have sold us off yesterday, because now we know, and now we're ready. We have to get out of here."

"I'm sleepy," Hellen announced. "I'm going back to bed. But don't worry. I won't tell anyone about your plan. I'm just sleepy, okay?"

"Wow," Parsnip shook her head as Hellen wandered off. "I thought Joker would be the last one to grow up, but it looks like a race between those two."

"You think we're better off without Hellen or Joker," Lindley said, "but we're not. Margaux doesn't think so. She says it's all of us or nothing, and it's not going to be all of us. As soon as Margaux quit, this little charade was over. You've got nowhere to go and you know it. And I don't even care. You think what's going to happen is going to be bad, but you don't know that for sure. You're only guessing. To me, it's fifty fifty, so I'm going to go with the easy fifty. I'll see you all later, or never. Whatever."

Lindley got up and left too. That left only me and Random and Parsnip remaining at the table. Pretty soon the sun was going to come up, and none of us knew what was going to happen next.

## Chapter Seven

I could tell that Parsnip was exasperated. There she was, about to be the leader, being so far ahead in development and all, and half the team simply refused to

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