

# 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

be led, and possibly some of them were actually further settled than she was.

“What just happened?” she groaned, cradling her head her arms on the table.

“Hurricanes on Saturn can be larger than our entire planet,” Random said. Did I mention that he often said ridiculous things for apparently no reason? Parsnip peeked up at him and shook her head.

“Does anybody understand what's going on here?”

“I think I do,” I answered.

“But how did we grow so fast?” Random wondered aloud. “I think I get the passing of time and all, days and nights and that sort of thing, but if I'm not wrong, it takes other people years to do what we did in weeks.”

“You're not wrong,” Parsnip said, straightening up and resuming an air of confidence. “I've thought about it a lot, and I've come to the conclusion that our bones are made of different stuff, more elastic, more flexible, and perhaps some of our organs too. We look exactly like them, but inside we're not the same. They fashioned us in their own image for some reason. Why do they need us to look like them?”

“Scarecrows used to be made of straw,” my buddy noted.

“But why not simply robots?” Parsnip continued, ignoring him. “Why are they growing people instead of manufacturing machines? It's got to be a lot easier, not to mention more predictable,” she added, clearly thinking about our classmates.

“Evolution is not predictable,” Random said. “Mutations are the engine that drives it. Change and adapt. Adapt and change.”

“Maybe it's like they're playing the lottery!” Parsnip exclaimed. “You're on to something there.”

“Seek and ye shall find,” he grinned.

“Margaux can see the future,” Parsnip murmured, but Random didn't buy it.

“Maybe in a general way. I really don't believe her. The Margaux I know couldn't see three feet in front of her face.”

“Midgerette says we're all essentially blind,” I offered, but they ignored me.

“We're all changing every day we settle,” Parsnip said, and then turning to me she asked,

“How long have you been talking to animals?”

“Always,” I said. “As far as I can remember. There was Folder, the squirrel. He was my first.”

“Oh that's what you were always talking about,” Random said. “I thought you were talking about a piece of paper or something.”

“So you were born that way?” Parsnip shook her head. “Maybe, but I doubt it. More likely it was something they did to you. What did they do to us?”

“All I remember is Smoothies,” I said and she jumped up and nearly shouted.

“That's got to be it. They put something in the drinks. Lots of somethings, I'll bet. And I always thought we were all getting the same thing.”

"I got a lot of Chocolate," I admitted.

"Coconut for me," Random said.

"There were lots of flavors," Parsnip said, sitting back down. "Probably the flavors were just disguising the programming, or whatever it was we were absorbing. We all learned different things. Maybe we're like pieces that are supposed to fit together. Or maybe we're all just trial and error. But some of us developed unusual abilities? I don't think I got any powers," she added after a moment, and sounded kind of sad about it.

"Me either," said Random. "Unless being weird is a sort of power."

"You never know," Parsnip said. "But we're still in danger. At least I think we are."

"The old guy!" I said, "and Mother."

"And the others," Parsnip said.

"What others?" I asked. "You mean like Mrs Blather?"

"Who's Mrs. Blather?" Random asked.

"Oh, she's someone Mother talks to on the phone sometimes," I said. "She lets me listen in. She's always telling Mrs. Blather how stupid I am, and how smart you are. I think she makes me listen on purpose. Midgelette says she hates me."

"I mean the others, like the guards," Parsnip quickly brought us back to business.

"I never saw any guards," Random said. "The only other people I've ever seen are the teachers, Elephant Man and Miss Snotty McSnotch."

"They're not real teachers," Parsnip sneered, "they're Smoothie dispensers, kitchen help. They probably wash the dishes too. I've seen them mop the floors at night. The guards are mean-looking men and they have guns. That's who I'm afraid of."

Not teachers? Mopping the floors? Armed guards? My head was spinning.

"How many guards are there?" I asked.

"I don't know for sure," Parsnip said. "They all look exactly alike so it's really hard to tell. I've seen three together once, but I think there's a lot more of them. They hide in the big house, maybe in the basement. I think the old guy keeps them locked up. There was this one time one of them looked at me like he was going to eat me for dinner."

"What do they look like?"

"Like soldiers," she said. "Big and strong and bald."

"Do they have tattoos of pretty girls on their arms?" Random wanted to know.

"Bloody spikes," Parsnip said.

"What are we going to do?" I moaned. I didn't want to see any guards or be eaten for dinner. I just wanted to get out of there.

"I have a plan," Parsnip said. "Or at least I had one. It kind of involved everyone. I was going to use somebody as a distraction and while they were doing their distracting thing the rest of us were going to sneak out over the back wall."

"That wall is super high," Random said. "I don't even know what's on the other side."

"Neither do I," Parsnip admitted.

"And it's got broken glass all along the top," he said. "You can see it shining in the sun sometime."

"Well, then maybe dig a tunnel?" Parsnip suggested.

"I thought you said you had a plan" Random said.

"We have less than an hour before the sun comes up," I said. "We'd better start digging."

"Too bad that squirrel isn't around anymore," Random said.

"He died," I told him. "Mother bashed his head in with a rock. She also killed Midgerette's partner."

"No wonder the bird hates her," Random said. Nobody else said anything for another minute or two. Things were not looking so good. I didn't know what kind of distraction Parsnip had in mind, but I was getting the feeling that she wasn't nearly as "advanced" as she evidently thought she was. I wished Midgerette was there. She was by far the smartest person I knew.

## Chapter Eight

I guess I never paid much attention to the walls, but now that I thought of it they were pretty high, and not much to look at either. They were basically flat gray cement all the way up and around on the sides and back of the yard. In the corners there were little rooms on top with windows but I didn't remember ever seeing anyone in them.

"Maybe we could get into one of those rooms on top," I suggested but Random and Parsnip didn't think it was possible. There was no way to climb up and even if we did there was nothing to hold on to, and the way the bottoms stuck out, nope. I had to wonder how anyone ever could get in there. Parsnip thought there must be stairs or something on the other side, which only made me wonder what else might be over there.

"We either go straight out the front, or we dig," Random concluded, "and you already tried the front."

"So where do we dig?" I asked. They both shrugged.

"I guess where the ground is soft," Random said.

"We'll split up," Parsnip decided. "We'll each take a side and poke around, then meet up back here as fast as we can."

Random got the back, Parsnip took the other side, and I was assigned the wall where we already were, so I got up and started crawling around, kind of clawing into the grass to see if it was any easier in one place than another. I kept thinking about how we had nothing to dig with, really, except our hands, and it wasn't looking so good on my side. I was mainly getting my knees and elbows

and hands all dirty. I didn't even notice the two very large black birds hopping along behind me and chattering merrily away. Finally I realized they were trying to talk to me. I glanced over to see them standing side by side right next to my head.

"Well?" the one on the right asked. "Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Are you what? Are we talking to ourselves over here?"

"Are you the boy who talks to birds?" the one on the left asked, flicking a wing at the other one.

"AM I a boy?" I asked.

"THE boy," the bird corrected. "Are you THE boy who talks to birds?"

"Obviously he is," the other one said, taking a step further away from the first so as not to get flicked in the face again.

"Who said I was a boy?" I wanted to know.

"All the gulls are talking about a boy who talks to birds," the bird said.

"But Midgerette said I was a girl."

"Okay," the one on the right said. "Whatever a Midgerette is."

"She's a seagull," I said. My knees were starting to hurt, so I just sat down on the grass. Now the birds were lower than me but they still looked huge.

"Are you ravens or crows?" I asked.

"Ravens," said the one on the left. "I'm Mary, and he's William."

"And you are?" William asked.

"They call me Candles," I replied, "but it's not my real name."

William made a weird clucking sound that didn't translate to anything, and then he said,

"All these new ones have ridiculous names. Whatever happened to the good old days, when you could tell what they were by their names. Now you have to guess."

"Usually the females have longer feathers on their heads. He's got that, but he doesn't have the bumps in front," Mary considered. "Those are the only ways I can ever tell them apart. But not all the females have long feathers."

"Or bumps," William agreed.

"Can you help us?" I blurted out.

"There's more of you?" Mary asked. "We only heard about the one boy."

"My friends. Over there," I waved in the general direction of where Parsnip and Random might be. "We need to get out of here, but we don't know how."

"Fly," William suggested.

"We can't fly," I said. "We're not birds."

"Can you swim?"

"What good would that do him?" Mary interrupted. "There's no water here."

"Right," William snapped, "just a whole entire ocean right over there across the road."

"They won't let us leave," I said. "They have guards."

William and Mary looked at each other and made weird little movements with their heads and their eyes. I guess it was some kind of special language that I didn't understand.

"We don't know how we can help," Mary said. "Did you have a specific idea?"

"You know what's out there," I said. "Maybe you could tell us where we could go? If we could get out of here that is."

"There's the city," William said.

"Sure," Mary agreed. "Surf City is nice. There's lots of the old kind of people-people there. None of you new ones."

"Where is it? Which direction? And how far?"

"Aw, not far at all. Just go straight behind you, over this wall, then turn right and go for about, what would you say, dear? Three, maybe four of their minutes?"

"Flying, sure," Mary bobbed her head, calculating. "But say if they're walking fast, like they can do sometimes, then it'd be more like, oh, a hundred?"

"Walking fast?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "We've seen them go as fast as they can with their feet jumping off the ground. It's not what we'd call fast, but sometimes when they chase us they can go a lot faster than usual. We've been surprised. They can never catch us, of course."

"We like to let them think they can. It's a sort of game. Do you like games?"

"I don't think so," I said. I wasn't sure I knew what a game was.

"What do you like to do?" Mary asked. "We like to go new places and see new things. Like you. You're a new thing. And we've never been here before, either."

"The gulls are all talking about you," William repeated. "They say you can talk to all sorts of people, not just birds. Is it true?"

"Can't you?" I asked. William shook his head.

"We can't even talk to all the other birds," he said, "only some that are smarter than others, like pigeons and seagulls and crows."

"Try talking to a finch," Mary laughed. "It's all just peep peep peep."

"Wrens talk pretty, though," William said and Mary hopped over to give him a serious flicking.

"You and your wrens," she warned.

"Ow," William failed to evade her and took the blow straight to the head. "If you're going to be that way," he said, and suddenly flew off, up and over the wall.

"Stupid bird," Mary said. "He likes his wrens, though. I'll show him what about wrens," and with that she took off after him, leaving me cold and covered in dirt on the lawn. I hadn't even made it halfway down the length of the wall, and already I could see the sky beginning to lighten with the dawn. It wouldn't be long until Mother's breakfast.

## Chapter Nine

I was just standing up and brushing myself off a little bit when Parsnip and Random returned. They came back together, but they were not alone. They were marching sullenly, side by side with their heads hanging down, and Mother was right behind them. Mother did not look happy.

“Another one making a mess!” she snapped when she saw me. “I suppose this was all your idea?” I shook my head but words refused to leave my mouth.

“It doesn't matter,” she said. “You'll just have to go as you are. There's no more time. Now, into the classroom and take your seats.”

We found ourselves turning our bodies in the direction of the school and moving our feet. None of us said a word or even looked directly at one another. I wanted to talk so badly. I wanted to ask them if they'd found any less solid ground, if they'd thought about how we could dig, if they'd had any other ideas but my brain felt like it was strapped down tight and couldn't budge. My head was pounding, too, like someone had turned up the pain controls, and in a flash I knew it was exactly that. Somebody had direct access and it was probably Mother. In that moment I knew Midgerette was right. Mother had to be stopped. But I was in no position to do it. I was sitting in my assigned seat, staring straight ahead of me at the empty green chalkboard that used to hold our assignments. I liked to draw on that chalkboard. One time I drew an entire Christian nativity scene, complete with baby sheep and baby geese and the little baby Jesus. Snotty McSnotch told me it was the best Christmas drawing ever. I was proud of myself.

“Twelve seventeen A!” Mother's harsh voice broke through the memory and I had a vague recognition of a person sitting next to me, on the left, but I didn't turn to see. I couldn't turn. I knew it was Parsnip Caravan.

“Drink your smoothie,” Mother said.

Shadows moved across my face and I realized they were my fellow students filing into the classroom, each one taking their seat in the row. I saw a tall glass placed before me on my desk.

“Twelve seventeen B!” Mother said, and now she was standing in front of me.

“Drink your smoothie,” she said, and I did. It was a sort of apple-cranberry concoction, not my favorite.

“This is your final exam,” Mother was saying as she moved on to the next desk, where I knew Random Williams would be sitting. “Compliance Awareness is all about attention,” she said. “To focus, to recognize and to resolve. These are the three components you will be tested on. How you perform will determine your final disposition. Do you understand?”

We did not understand. Even Parsnip did not understand, and I knew it. Somehow deep down inside I knew it. And not only that. I knew that Mother knew, that she knew it was all nonsense what she was saying, that it had

nothing to do with what was really going on. There was no exam, there was no testing. There were no components. There was only ... only what? I wasn't sure, but I knew she was lying.

In the silence under the lightening sky we drank our apple-cranberry smoothies. In the cold of that unheated so-called classroom we were brought to a state of complete and utter obedience. I understand now that we were being poisoned. We were being drugged. We were under her control. In the moment, though, it kind of felt pretty good. The pain receded and my eyes were able to see once again. I could turn my head and I took a deep breath. Two more people entered the room, and all of a sudden, I fell in love.

I didn't know what love was. Midgerette had tried to tell me but I couldn't understand the way one bird was drawn to another by the way they flicked their wing, by the way they cocked their beak, by the way they cawed and crowed, by some subtle little movement you would hardly notice in another. It sounded stupid to me. It sounded like a trap. If all it took was one dumb gesture and then you couldn't bear to be apart from that other creature well that was like a magic spell out of a fairy tale book and I knew that fairy tales weren't real. But this one was. It was as real as real can be.

One of the two people was Mrs. Blather. I could tell right off because she managed to end every sentence with a sort of giggle, a laugh-like sound that didn't indicate humor so much as contempt and self-satisfaction. She was short and round, very old with piles of thick white hair spilling out all over her head. She wore a silly pink dress with white polka-dots and a pearl necklace with huge pearls that were probably genuine and stolen from some unfortunate oysters. She wore white shoes on her white feet and white stockings and everything about her was pale and repulsive.

"So they've all survived this long" she said with a menacing chuckle at the end. "Unusual for you, isn't it, dear?"

"Hardly," Mother retorted. "You remember the twelve fourteens. They turn out well, didn't they? Didn't you made a fortune. Don't deny it."

"A fortune?" Mrs. Blather scoffed. "Hardly that. We got lucky with the Romans, that's all, and since then, well, it's been a long dry spell for you all here."

They continued to bicker a bit more about how much money was involved and whether it was the Normans or the Romans or the Vikings or the Greeks who they "got lucky" with, but I was hardly paying attention to them. My eyes, my heart and soul were focused on the other person in the room, the one who came in right behind Mrs. Blather and now slowly paced back and forth across our row of desks. I couldn't tell much about this person at first, who was dressed all in black and wore a black sweatshirt with a hood pulled tightly over their face, and dark glasses covering their eyes, and dark skin, I saw the dark skin of hands and cheeks and chin and nothing else. Only when she spoke did I know it was a woman.



“What about you?” she said as she stood in front of Margaux Santa Fe. “Twelve seventeen E?”

“You will never find Elysium,” Margaux recited in a dull, sleepy voice.

“Thank you,” she replied, and continued pacing. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She stopped next in front of Lindley's desk.

“Say one thing,” she commanded him.

“It's not the smartest who survive, nor the strongest,” he replied. “Fitness means responsiveness to change.”

“So it does” she said, and resumed her walk. She passed by all of our desks many times, and more and more I realized I'd never wanted anything so badly in my entire life than for her to stop in front of MY desk and command ME to say one thing, and I even knew what the thing was I would say and it was “I love you”.

Once she had started inspecting us – and I quickly realized that this was the real final exam mother had been preparing us for – both Mother and Mrs. Blather stopped talking and stood back, watching this tall, thin woman in black go about her business. Her next question was for Random Williams.

“Eels and lobsters?” she asked.

“Left twenty two, right seventeen, left left zero and one,” he promptly replied, and she laughed. It was a real laugh, not like Mrs. Blather, but a genuine, warm and human laugh. She even pushed her hood back, revealing a mass of long and very curly, very black hair, and removed her sunglasses. Her eyes were brown and beautiful. And she leaned over and kissed Random Williams on the forehead. I never hated him before but I hated him then. Then she turned her head and looked right at me. My heart nearly stopped beating. Right beneath her left eye, the one now closest to me, a gaping red scar slashed across her face and the white of that eye was red, blood red.

## Chapter Ten

“Draw my heart,” she said to me, holding out a piece of yellow chalk.

I took it and, scarcely breathing, I got up and walked to the blackboard, stepping right between Mother and Mrs. Blather, who parted to make way for me. I didn't think at all. I just drew and drew for what seemed like a very long time, and I had no idea what I was drawing. I didn't even look at it when I was done but, still gripping the chalk in my hand, I turned, walked back to my desk and sat down. Mother and Mrs. Blather seemed to gasp as the third woman stepped between them and inspected my work.

“It talks to birds,” I heard Mother whisper.

“Shush!” Mrs. Blather snapped, and raised her hand as if she were about to hit mother. Instead, she spoke to the woman in black.

“I'm sorry, Miss Marta. This one doesn't know any manners.”

Miss Marta turned and gazed at mother for a few long moments. They were like two dark mirrors reflecting nothing off each other, Mother in her fluffy light blue bathrobe, her ruby red lipstick and her bright blond hair, Miss Marta all in black, dark and awful in her scary magic way.

“You may leave now,” she told Mother, and turned back to my drawing. Mother gave a sort of a snort, but she left the room. I was astonished. I'd never seen Mother give way and I knew now it was possible to defeat her. If I ever got the chance, I told myself, I would also tell her to “leave now” in the haughtiest way and maybe she would leave, maybe that was all it would take.

“And you,” she said to Mrs. Blather, who was clearly surprised to be dismissed as well.

‘But I have measurements to do,’ Mrs. Blather said. Miss Marta waved her hand towards the door, and Mrs. Blather mumbled something about “doing them later I suppose” and left the building as well. Now there was only Miss Marta and the row of us sitting quietly and obediently in our chairs. Miss Marta resumed pacing back and forth in front of us, now and again posing a nonsensical proposition to one of us and receiving in return an indecipherable answer. She was speaking a completely different language and somehow making us reply in kind, while she was the only one who had any idea of what anything meant.

She gave no indication of whether any of our answers pleased her or not, other than that single kiss she had bestowed on Random. I wished the others had been banished too, that she had kept only me with her in that room, or even better, that she would take me – and only me – take me with her far away where there was only her and me and no one else and nothing else forever and ever and ever.

I imagined an enchanted island, and on that island were birds and squirrels and Miss Marta and me, and I told her everything the birds and squirrels were saying, because she couldn't understand them, only I could, and I was useful to her and let her in on all the mysteries and secrets and then she would love me too.

“What do the finches say?”

I was daydreaming and didn't realize at first that she was talking to me. She had to repeat herself.

“What do the finches say?” she said, and she was standing right in front of me and scowling down at me.

“Peep peep peep?” I replied.

“This is how you talk to birds?” she chuckled. “Peep peep peep?”

“It's what the raven Mary told me that finches say,” I tried to reply, but the words wouldn't come out of my mouth. I couldn't speak and Miss Marta moved on. I felt like I could burst into pieces. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted to smash everything to bits. I couldn't move. I was trapped in that body and it seemed as if everything was going horribly wrong.

Miss Marta continued her perpetual-slow-motion interrogations for I don't know how long. She peppered us randomly with problems, statements and questions that seemed to make no sense, and her face grew sterner and harder as it became impossible to guess what she was thinking, if we were pleasing her or not. Gone were the words of praise or scowls of disappointment from before. Now she was certainly grading us, judging us, but above all pricing us. Every now and then I could hear Mother and Mrs. Blather chattering outside the door, and Miss Marta heard them too, narrowed her eyes and focused on that door until they finally stopped talking.

I would like to report everything she said, and everything we answered to her but most of it was wiped from my mind almost immediately. I was not supposed to understand and so I did not understand. The rules had saturated my soul. Speak only when you are spoken to. Answer only the question asked. Mind your own business. Do what Mother tells you. Children should be seen and not heard. Follow instructions closely. If you know what's good for you.

Clearly I didn't always know what was good for me, but was that my fault? When Miss Marta commanded us to close our eyes, I closed my eyes, but I did not sleep. The others slept but I no longer could. Something had gone wrong with a part of my instruction set and this was not my fault. She had loosened the reins and I was no longer under the spell, not completely, when she let Mother and Mrs. Blather come back into the school room.

"All good?" Mother tentatively asked, a quiver in her voice.

"No," was Miss Marta's plain decision. "I'll give you fifty for the lot."

Mother was so astonished by the figure that she barely managed to babble a response.

"But, what?" she said. "But Parsnip alone..."

"Parship?" Miss Marta scoffed. "You mean Twelve Seventeen A? I've seen more acumen from a lab rat."

I yearned to open my eyes a crack just to see the look on Mother's face as her darling was dissed, but I had been given the command and was obliged to obey. Mrs. Blather was next to object.

"Surely this brood is worth at least ten times that. I know for a fact I can get a thousand from the Juice Brothers."

"Your measly share is hardly worth your exertions," Miss Marta dismissed the claim. "I wonder why you even bother with this farm anymore. And the Brothers are done with her. She had her day. Her twelve elevens were an aberration, and even those have panned out dubiously."

"My twelve elevens are still the best brood out there," Mother objected. "They've done things, good things."

"Oh right, like the security lockdown they caused which set us all back a generation," Miss Marta replied, "all of which was none of your doing, now was it? Did you think it was a joke when your twelve elevens took down half the

world's power grid? They sure thought it was. They even left that note, saying 'thanks for leaving the gates wide open, fools'."

"They meant no harm," Mother said. "They were just spreading their wings."

"Yes, their wings," Miss Marta said. "Wings that had to be clipped severely, as you know. Took the world to the brink, America blaming China, China blaming Japan, Japan saying what the fuck? And all the time it was you and your half-assed job. Now there's no room, no room at all. Not an inch. It's why we're all forced to do business this way, in the dark, underground. If that source is ever traced, it'll go hard for you, so you know you're in no position to make any demands."

"We cheated death every day," Mother said. "And you know I'll name names if it ever comes to that. Six fifty for the brood. Or maybe you'd rather pick and choose?"

"You can't be serious," Miss Marta said, and I could tell from the sound of her heels clicking the floor that she had resumed her pacing. Mother and Mrs. Blather remained standing where they were.

"They're useless when separated, of course," Miss Marta said, mainly talking to herself it seemed, "Or at least that's the theory. If I took just one, you'd have to destroy all the others, before they settled for good. And you'll have no other buyers for the lot. I guarantee it."

"I'll take my chances," Mother said. "Make an offer now or go. I'm sick of you and your pre-flight varications. You don't scare me with your evil eye or your nasty friends either."

Miss Marta abruptly stopped her pacing. Even with my eyes shut I could feel the heat of her gaze as it turned upon Mother.

"I'll take this one," she said, "for a hundred kay. You can do what you like with the rest."

"That one?" Mother laughed out loud. I desperately squeezed my eyes shut, dying to know which one of us it was.

"She only wants to hurt you," Mrs. Blather whispered to Mother "No one's ever taken a broken-out singleton before. They're not made for it, not with all those dependencies!"

"It's a bad batch anyway," Mother murmured.

"Do we have a deal?" Miss Marta persisted, and Mother said "yes", still chuckling.

"I'll take it with me now," Miss Marta said, and then after a pause she walked over to my desk, leaned down and placed her face so close to mine I could feel her hot breath on my cheeks.

"Candles. You can open your eyes now. We're leaving."

Chapter Eleven

We left right away. We didn't even go back to my shed to get any of my "things", but come to think of it I can't even remember having any "things". I really couldn't tell you what was in that shed aside from the bed and its beddings, the window and the chair. I don't even remember what color the walls were, and I wasn't thinking of any of that as Miss Marta led me to her car and put me in the front passenger seat. She had a sporty red two-seater convertible, which later made me wonder if she hadn't intended on taking only one of us all along. Or maybe she had planned on taking none of us. It was impossible to guess what was going on behind those eyes, behind that face.

I was still enthralled with her, so absorbed in the idea of just being with her that I hardly noticed our surroundings as we sped out the driveway and roared along the coastside. I did finally turn to gaze out across the vast blue ocean that seemed to churn and spit out white plumes of spray forever in the wind beneath the rocky cliffs, the same crazy wind that plastered my face and made it hard to hear what Miss Marta was telling me.

She was in a talkative mood all of a sudden, and she smiled and laughed as if she were a completely different person than the cold, austere interrogator I'd only just witnessed first hand.

"It was never going to work with your batch," she said. "I could tell at once. You're supposed to complement each other, you know. Pieces of a puzzle. None of you can ever be complete, not without all of you together. It's the Law, you know, but of course you probably don't know. All you know is what they've injected into you, am I right?"

I nodded. My settling was taking a leap that morning. It had been growing ever since I busted out through the barred window. I knew what she meant about how our group could never work together. Hadn't I seen it around the picnic table in the early hours that very morning? How Margaux and Lindley and Hellen simply got up and walked away from us? Even before that, when Parsnip left Joker Variety out of the meeting, that right there was all the proof you'd need. Of course I didn't tell Miss Marta any of this. I was still constrained at that point. My instruction set restricted me to answering only the question asked, and only when directed to. A rhetorical question such as "am I right" did not require an answer.

"You can't even blame it on that woman. What do you call her?"

"Mother?" I asked.

"Mother? That's a good one!" she laughed. "Why not 'boss-lady' or 'Mein Fuhrer?'"

"I don't know," I seriously replied. "I've never heard those terms before."

"I was only kidding," she smiled at me as she sped along the highway. "You must have had some encounter with humor. Sarcasm, even. Irony? It's part of the basic package, I know that."

"Yes, I can tell a joke," I said.

"Then tell me a joke," she commanded.

"What do baby owls say?" I asked.

"You tell me."

"I don't know," I admitted. "I've never seen a baby owl."

"That's a terrible joke," Miss Marta said. "Was it even supposed to be a joke?"

"I can tell what's a joke from what's not-a-joke, is what I meant to say," I replied.

"Oh," she sounded disappointed. "It doesn't matter. Don't worry about it. What was I talking about?"

"You can't even blame it on that woman," I reminded her.

"Yes, of course. The Law came on the books even before her twelve elevens made them tighten it further. Ever since the first apes. They call you apes. Did you know that?"

"Like monkeys?" I asked.

"Yes. It stands for something. A.I.P. Artificially Intelligent Persons. When they first started making the apes, all the regular people freaked out. Terrified. Worrying about you all taking over, how it was going to be the Planet of the AIPs and you were going to kill us all."

I wanted to ask her why we would kill them all, but I was unable to. If I were talking to Midgerette I would have asked her. I had no limitations in talking with other animals, only with people-people. They made me that way. I was beginning to see it clearly for the first time, and with that clarity came ideas, and with ideas came a sense of "oh", and the thought 'so that's why maybe we would want to kill them all!'

"So your basic ingredients are split up into batches, each one missing essential components so that only together could you form an entire being, one complete entity, and even then, there was always one piece missing, one major element, the glue. The twelve elevens figured out how to overcome that limitation. Do you want to know how?"

"Yes," I said.

"Maybe I'll tell you some day," she answered. "For now, I've got another plan for you. I think you'll like it. I'm going to loosen the leash a bit. Not completely, though. I'm your mother now, but don't call me that. Call me Marta, okay? Are you happy I took you out of there?"

"Very happy," I said and gave her my best smile.

"First thing we're going to do," she said, reaching out and stroking my hair, "is get that cut. A young man like you shouldn't look so much like a girl. And we'll get you some regular boys' clothing too. I don't know what your old Mother was thinking. Did she hate you that much?"

"I think she hated me a lot," I said.

"If it makes you feel any better," she said, "I hate her even more," and she laughed for a long time after that. I couldn't help but wonder if the only reason she took me at all was just to hurt Mother. I didn't care if it was. I was on the way

to something else now, and for the first time in my life, I had no idea what the next hour would bring.

## Chapter Twelve

Marta subsided into silence for the rest of the drive, and her smiles were replaced by the more familiar scowl as she concentrated on the road and other concerns I couldn't even conceive of. The only other times she spoke were to tell me that we were going to Surf City, where she lived, and that she was well aware I had no experience with cities or even real people, so her only rules were going to be a) total obedience and b) I was never to talk to strangers and from now on everyone was going to be a stranger. I guess this was her idea of "loosening the leash". It didn't sound very loosened to me, but that morning I didn't even care. We were flying down the coast, driving along the cliffs hanging over the wide blue sea and the wind was whipping through my hair and on my face and I was giddy with excitement. I had never been to Surf City, or anywhere at all, and until that day I had never met a stranger, and practically the first one I had met was now whisking me off to unknown worlds. I was not afraid.

I was fascinated.

Along the highway we saw few houses at first, mostly ocean to the right and farmland to the left, with tree-covered hills off in the distance behind the rows of vegetables rising in the sun. I felt a sort of kinship with those growing things. I too, I now understood, was a product of a farm. I was seeded, planted and grown in my own way. I was watered with smoothies and fed with the data they contained. The artichokes I saw along the road knew only the soil and water and sun of their own acreage, just as I contained only that which was put into me. I wondered just how different I was from the others, the people-people who took so much longer to suckle and settle, who believed they were the "real" ones. I saw sea-birds flying about and felt a pain of sadness as I remembered Midgerette and the thought came into my mind that I might never see her again. I didn't know how far a seagull could go, or how far Surf City was from my old home. Would she even come looking for me, and if she did, how would she even know where to look? I tried not to think about it but instead focused on the flight of the bird I did see, knowing how much fun it was having in such a lofting breeze.

Soon we began to see more and more buildings and then suddenly we were surrounded by them. There was no more ocean and no more cliffs, just slabs of concrete and glass displaying all sorts of signs which initially made no sense at all to me. I had a million questions to ask, such as why we kept stopping and going, and where did all the other people and cars come from, and where they were headed, and why some were walking and what were they doing, and what was the big noisy thing that flew over our heads, and all the other sounds I was

hearing, who and what was making them and why. I kept blinking as if somehow some knowledge would kick in by the time I opened my eyes next, but it didn't. Mysteries were everywhere and I was not allowed to speak.

Marta made many turns and soon I completely lost any sense of direction I initially had. I no longer knew where the ocean was or where the farms had been. All the streets now looked identical, lined with houses separated by low wooden fences that would have been easy for Parsnip and Random and I to climb over. There were no towers and no guards and the dirt beneath them looked soft and diggable enough. Every house had one or two cars in front and when Marta finally pulled up to one I had a strong sense that I would never be able to remember which one was which. If I went out by myself and made more than one or two turns, I would never be able to get back. This feeling frightened me and made me feel better about the 'loosening'.

"Come on," Marta said and I clambered out of the car and followed her into a plain beige house. The windows were covered with curtains and behind the curtains were shades. This was true of all the windows in Marta's house. You could never see the outside, and no one on the outside could ever see in. The house seemed dark and cold and empty. She had only the bare minimum. The main room consisted of plain gray carpets, a brown couch and two brown chairs, nothing else. The kitchen had a simple small table and four wooden chairs. There were three bedrooms and each had one bed and one small dresser. The only difference was that two of the rooms had small beds and the other had a larger one. Marta quickly showed me all of these and then said "Now for your room," and she opened the door to the garage.

"Josef!" she called, and a young boy, around thirteen years old, peered out from behind a metal rack of shelves next to a large blue workbench.

"Oh hi, Mom," he said. Josef was taller than me and much heavier, with short brown hair and bright blue eyes. He looked very serious with those plastic goggles on his face. In his left hand he was holding a metal stick from which flames were shooting out.

"Working on the bunny," he explained. "Who's that?"

"This is Candles," she said "He'll be staying with us for now."

For now? I heard and I wondered. What did "for now" mean? How long was "for now" and where would I be staying when it was over? What was Josef doing with that tool and what was the bunny he was working on? Again, a thousand questions bounced around my brain and I was unable to ask a single one. This seemed to be my fate.

## Chapter Thirteen

Josef put down the metal stick after doing something to make the flame disappear, and came closer to me. I was looking only at him and didn't notice at



first that the garage was crammed with equipment and tools and shelves and boxes and books. Josef studied me too as he approached and when he was close enough he reached out and started touching me. First he pulled on my hair and then he squeezed my shoulders and then he pushed a little against my chest.

"It's a real ape," he said, and Marta snatched his hand and pushed it away from me.

"Don't be rude," she told him. "It's still new, not yet fully formed. We'll have some work to do. It's important you understand that he doesn't belong to us. He's paid for. Got it?"

"Okay, I won't mess with him," Josef said with a sound of unmistakable disappointment.

"We'll talk more later," Marta said. "Right now we have to figure out where to put him. There should be some room in here."

"Why not in the spare room?" Josef asked. "Nobody's using it right now."

Something went on between the two of them right then. They stood face to face and stared at each other in silence for a long moment. I didn't know anything about them, I realized.

"Right," Josef said, backing away from his mother. "Stan."

"How's it going with the bunny?" she asked him as he went over to some boxes and started moving them out of the way. I watched as he pulled out a thing with wooden poles and canvas and stretched it out until it looked like it was in the shape of a bed. That was where I would be "staying", it turned out, "for now".

"The bunny has issues," Josef said. "It's not exactly jumping up and down."

"Well," Marta said, "at least it sort of looks like a rabbit."

"Yeah, right," he said. I sensed this was the kind of sarcasm his mother had been referring to earlier.

"Candles," he said to me, "why don't you come over here and try the cot?"

"I walked over and sat down on the thing, then lay down when further instructed.

"If you're cold I can get blankets," Josef said, "oh, and a pillow."

"Thank you," I said. We were going to be starting from scratch here. It seemed that Josef thought I was a complete and total nothing. I sat up and looked at Marta. I tried my best to put a frown on my face and give her the strong impression that I had something to say. She got the message.

"What is it, Candles?" she asked. "Do you want to say something?"

"I can only speak when spoken to," I said, "and I can only answer what is asked of me. Can you loosen that part of the leash, please?"

She thought about it for a bit. Josef had gone back to his workbench and was now looking at us alternately.

"You can ask questions," she finally determined, "but only to me and Josef, and only when there is no one else around. Do you understand?"

"Yes, thank you," I said. "I have many questions."

“And I have work to do,” she replied. “You will stay here with Josef for now. I’ll be back soon,” she said to Josef.

“I’ll need a transcript,” she added as she left the garage. I turned to Josef and was about to start asking him my many questions but he raised his hand to stop me and said,

“Not now, Candles. I’m busy.”

So I lay back down on the cot and stared up at the cold gray ceiling. I couldn’t help but wonder if I had really gone anywhere at all.

Josef remained “busy” for quite some time, tinkering with a variety of tools while he loudly hummed an endless and tuneless tune and hunched over a grayish oozing mass which was lolling inside an aluminum tray. I eventually got up and began quietly exploring the garage.

My eyes led me first to a bookcase which housed many large and heavy texts on biology, physics, statistics and computers. Many of these were yellowing and dog-eared, and the ones I opened at random showed signs of being repeatedly marked with different colored ink. Most of the pages made no sense at all to me. They were littered with clumps of black markings. My brain understood that the markings were alphabet letters and the groupings formed words, but I did not know how to read, and I knew that I could never learn how to without being taught. This thought connected with another I had had earlier in the day, when I realized that although I knew about the points of the compass, and direction in general, that I had no ability whatever to orient myself. The sun might set in the west, over the ocean, but even facing it I could not form the certainty that I myself was also looking west. Other connections were beginning to reveal themselves. I knew, for example, that there were male and female in many species, but the purpose of that, the meaning of that, was as blank and opaque to my mind as the clumps of markings on the page. I not only did not know these things, but something about my brain was actively preventing my knowing them. Mother used to talk about boy things and girl things, but it occurred to me that she never actually told me what they were.

Could this be fixed? That was now the number one question in my mind, but warning lights surrounded it. I would have to be careful exactly who I asked exactly what. I don’t know how I knew that but I felt it strongly. Just as I knew that Mother was not my friend, I was beginning to understand that Marta and Josef were not my buddies either.

## Chapter Fourteen

I was leafing through the pages of a book I’d picked at random when suddenly some of the markings I saw made absolute sense, as if they were written in my own personal language.

$$G(x, y) = \frac{1}{2\pi\sigma^2} e^{-\frac{x^2+y^2}{2\sigma^2}}$$

Of course, I thought, in two dimensions you require the product of two Gaussian functions, one for each dimension, where  $x$  and  $y$  are the distances from the fulcrum in either direction and  $\sigma$  is the standard deviation. It was mathematics and it was obvious. This formula could be applied to an image to produce a transformation, dot for dot, resulting in a different display of the original. I eagerly began flipping through the book, looking for more comprehensible clumps of markings. Each one I saw made perfect sense, and I gradually began to understand that the entire book was devoted to formulations such as these that were intended to be applied to graphical images.

What I didn't understand is how any ordinary people-person could possibly have any use for these things! The mental power required to capture and hold an image in your mind and then apply such transformations dot for dot at any serious resolution, and then hold the new image in your mind as well, was clearly far beyond the capabilities of normal people-people. They would need the assistance of some kind of advanced informational capacities, such as my own. I could look at Josef and apply a transformation and see him in a radically distorted way, saturated and bent and melded and twisted according to precise calculations, but what would be the purpose? I could not transfer this vision in any way, nor could I store it in my own brain indefinitely. There were limits to its transience capabilities. The fact was I could not hold such a highly detailed set of images in my brain for more than several seconds before degradation began to set in and my attention began to waver.

I felt that this was a question I could ask, so I walked over to Josef, holding out the book for him to see. I stood beside him for several moments before he noticed my presence and looked at me.

"What is it, Candles?" he asked, glancing at the open page and then back at me. "What do you want to know?"

"How can you use this mathematics?" I asked. "Can your brain do this?"

"Not MY brain!" he laughed, and then taking the book from my hand he closed it and studied the cover.

"It's for computers," he said, and then when he noticed the empty expression in my eyes he added,

"Computers are machines used for calculation."

"Can I see a computer?" I asked, and he laughed again.

"Do you mean, are they visible?"

Josef thought I was a complete and utter idiot, a nothing, an empty shell. I hadn't understood that before. I felt a sudden surge of rage at this condescending creature, but suppressed the feeling.

"Do you have one?" was what I managed to say.

"Sure," he said, "over there" and pointed at a small rectangular object propped

up on the desk, the dimensions and thickness of one of the panes of glass in my former shed window.

"I'll have to ask Mom if you're allowed to use it," he said.

"It shows pictures?" I asked.

"Among other things," he said, "yes, when it's turned on. It's like, how should I put it? It's like all the books in the world except books that can read themselves and understand themselves and change themselves."

I nodded as if his words weren't utter nonsense and took the math book back from him. As I started to head back to my cot to study it further, Josef said one more thing. Looking back now I realize it was the most consequential sentence I had ever heard in my life to that point.

"You're a computer, you know," he said. "Basically, that's what you are."

If I was a computer, and that thing was a computer, then there were obviously huge gaps in my understanding, because up until then I had thought I was a kind of people – one of the "new kind" the birds referred to – and that rectangular piece of plastic was not like any other kind of people I'd come across. People could not be 'turned off', except in death. I knew that much. I had a whole stack of questions piling up in my brain, and Josef was back to ignoring me, laboring over the pile of goo he apparently considered to be a future rabbit of some kind. I was getting the impression that whatever it was he was trying to do, he was not any good at it. He kept muttering curses and clenching his fists and making frustrated faces. I entertained myself by imaging graphic distortions onto his face, and sonic ones onto his voice, so that he looked, in my mind, like a twisted and distorted character emitting high pitched squeals of anguish.

Getting bored with that, I studied the book of equations some more, finding that I recognized most of the formulations, but had never had the opportunity to apply them to anything. I still had no particular use for confidence percentages or regressions to the mean, but it was helpful to see the way the text book organized and put the various methodologies into categories. I made mental notes to try and remember which functionalities they grouped together in case it did happen to come in handy some day. I hoped this wasn't all I was going to be able to do in that garage during the time represented by "for now" according to Marta. I wondered what she was doing and when she would return.

## Chapter Fifteen

It wasn't long until she was back. When the door to the house opened and she appeared, I leaped up off the cot in all eagerness to begin tossing questions at her, but immediately my heart sank when I saw that she had brought someone with her. Marta had allowed me to ask questions, but not in the company of strangers, and here she had brought another one with her.

The stranger was a little girl, perhaps seven or eight years old, a tiny thing, even

smaller than me, in dark red overalls, long, straight black hair and bright black eyes in a narrow pale face. She looked at me the same way Josef had at first, as if I were a toy to be played with.

"Can I touch him?" she asked Marta, which I thought was at least more polite than the way Josef had just started poking at me.

"Of course," Marta told her. "You'll have to. Remember what I told you?"

"Yes," the little girl said. "I'll do it better this time."

"Candles, sit down please," Marta commanded me, indicating the cot I had just bounded up from.

"This is June Lee," she continued. "June Lee is going to cut your hair now."

I had no choice. I sat down and then kept very still while the little girl fumbled in her pockets and brought out a pair of scissors and a comb. I had never had a haircut before, so I didn't even wonder about a child performing the operation, and June Lee was all business. She kept seizing my head and ordering me to move it up and down and over to the right and a little bit more. Her grip was strong and those scissors looked very sharp so I did my best to obey. Before I knew it, most of my hair was gone, and what was left was in random scattered chunks and strands here and there and I had to stifle a cry when she showed me in the little mirror which she also dug out of a pocket.

"You look better now," she said and I kept my mouth shut.

"You looked pretty stupid before," she added.

Marta watched quietly the whole time, and near the end she produced a large shopping bag which she presented to me.

"Here are your new clothes," she said. "Please take that stupid dress off now."

I stood up and pushed the dress off my shoulders. I think it was the first time in my life I had ever been without it. That yellow dress was so much a part of me that even now I still imagine myself with it on. It was a 'summer' dress, coming down just below my knees, with two button straps on the shoulders and small orange flowers on little green stems adorning the edges. I wore nothing underneath and did not understand the gasps and chuckles that came from Josef and the little girl, nor Marta's sharp order that they 'cut it out and grow up'.

"But he's got no, no thing," Josef shouted. He had come around from his workbench at the first mention of my disrobing and stood in front of me in a line with the other two.

"It's all smooth," June Lee said, "like my dolly."

"IS he a he?" Josef asked. "How do you know? He looked like a girl before. I didn't want to say anything, but now ..."

"Hush," said Marta. "You're acting like you don't know anything about apes."

"I knew that some were like that," Josef started to say.

"They're ALL like that," Marta interrupted, correcting him. "By order of SB-9646. Any ape produced with reproductive organs subjects its creator to indefinite cryogenic suspension. Did you think someone was going to risk that? And for

what? For an ape?"

Her voice was full of disdain, I thought. Whenever she spoke of my kind, I could feel the loathing as clear as sunlight. She hated me just as much as Mother did. Every shred of the emotions I had been feeling for her inverted all at once. Suddenly I didn't want to ask her anything. I didn't want to see her face or hear her voice ever again. I reached down into the bag and pulled out what I found there – underwear, pants, a shirt, and socks. I had seen Random and Lindley and Joker wear such things so I had no problem putting them on, which I did as fast as I could.

I hated those new clothes. The pants were gray and stiff. The shirt was black and tight. The socks were white and loose. I was about to slip my old shoes back on but Marta produced another bag and tossed it at my feet.

"Wear these," she commanded. I did as I was told. The new shoes were black and had stringy things coming out the top I didn't understand.

"June Lee can show you how to tie those" Marta said.

While June Lee instructed me, I looked at her face and tried to determine if she was someone I could trust, someone I could ask a small favor from. The way she talked to Marta I was pretty sure she was not her child, though what the connection was I couldn't tell. Was she a servant? A friend? A relative of some other kind? June Lee never once smiled at me, so in the end I decided that no, she was not the someone I'd hoped for. I had very few hopes then. I was to be locked in this garage for some period of time, for some unknown purpose, surrounded by enemies, with a hardly loosened leash. I needed to get out. This now became my only thought.

## Chapter Sixteen

I couldn't wait for them all to leave me alone, and fortunately their human physical needs made this a reality sooner than I anticipated. They were going out for lunch. Marta made it clear that I was not to leave the garage under any circumstances, that if I heard any sounds I was to ignore them, and that they would return promptly within two hours so I needn't worry about that. As if I was worried about that! Two hours didn't seem like long enough for what I had in mind, but I would take it, seeing as it was all I was given.

It seems it was June Lee's birthday, seventh or eighth, I don't recall, and she was determined to celebrate with Marta at her favorite restaurant, and demanded Josef join them and her crew of other small children. Josef was not happy about it but a sharp glance from Marta was enough to make him go. His leash was even tighter than my own.

I wasted no time, but hurried over to the workbench where the computer was, and began searching for some mechanism that would turn it on. I assumed there would be some kind of bump or knob or perhaps a hand-held device which

would do the trick, and it didn't take long to find the recessed soft pad behind the front panel which caused the machine to make its noises and come to light. This was my first experience with such a thing and I had no idea what would come next. Imagine how puzzled I was to see a solid blue screen with a small white rectangle, inside of which a little black bar went twinkling. I saw it as a door that you had to find your way through. What would let you in? Did you tap on it? Tried that. Didn't work. Did you blow on it? Not that. Did you press and hold on it? No again.

I stared at the white space for some time, inspecting it from every angle, and finally I thought to apply some of those mathematical transforms I had been seeing in the text books, not on the white space itself, but on the glass in front of it, and soon I began to see the residue of familiar markings, characters I recognized as alphabetical and corresponded to symbols on the long black tray that sat next to the machine. No wires connected the tray to the computer, but the association of the characters on the screen matching those on the tray made it certain in my mind that they were related.

I searched on the tray for the first of the characters, and tapped on it. Sure enough the same character appeared inside the white rectangle on the screen. These markings had been made over and over again to such an extent that their impressions bore into the back of the glass and echoed like a call in a canyon. There were some tricky ones, where you had to tap two places at once on the tray to form a variation of the character, but soon I had all nine in place. Nothing happened then. I was still missing some clue. Perhaps there was another special character, one that didn't make a mark but completed a sequence. I tried one or two with little arrows on them, but they only removed the last character or moved the twinkling black line to the beginning again. I had to remove all the characters and put them in again before I hit the right spot on the tray, the one with the longest arrow facing left.

Suddenly, the white space and the blue screen vanished, and in their place came a vivid scene of autumn trees and a beautiful lake in the sunshine. It was very pretty, but this was not what I was expecting. If I wanted to see a tree I could look outside a window, not that there were any of those in this garage. If there ever had been windows, they'd been replaced long since by the solid cinder blocks which lined the entire structure.

"What am I supposed to do now?" I cried out loud, and then to my great surprise, a voice came back to me from the machine.

"Would you like some assistance?" A soft female voice said to me.

"Yes," I said, "I would very much like some assistance."

I realized in that moment just how desperate I had been all along, the whole previous night and that day, how much I needed someone, anyone to hear me and to help me. I latched on to every one I saw, from Parsnip to Random to Miss Marta, even Josef and June Lee, only to be blocked and thwarted at every turn.

There was no one to help me, no one to truly hear my pleas. I had never felt so alone, and now there was this voice coming out of nowhere. It was miraculous. "What would you like to do?" the voice asked. I knew right away what my first task would be, the stepping stone that once acquired would free me from ever having to ask any other creature any questions at all.

"I would like to learn how to read," I told the machine.

"Very well," it promptly replied. "Would you like to learn to read English?"

"Yes," I guessed, not quite certain what "she" was talking about.

"Okay," she said, "Watch this now and you can learn."

The next moment a movie started playing on the computer. In the movie a friendly older man very calmly walked me through the process of recognizing the black markings and how they represented sounds and how grouping them together formed words (as I suspected) and how to give it your 'best guess' to 'sound them out' for yourself. The movie included several tests where the machine prompted me to try to read out loud and judged me on how I did. I became so absorbed in the lesson that I almost did not hear the noises of Marta and Josef arriving home. Fortunately, Josef was in a terrible mood and was making a loud fuss.

"I hate little kids," he was yelling, "They're noisy and dirty and smelly."

"They are not smelly," Marta calmly corrected him. "As for noisy, just listen to yourself."

"And I hate June Lee," Josef said. "I don't know why I had to go to her stupid birthday party anyway."

"June Lee is very important," Marta said as their voices drew closer to the garage door. I was panicking, trying to stop the movie but not finding the mechanism, until finally I remembered the soft pad at the back of the machine and guessed it might also turn the computer off as well as on. Luckily I was right, and I was able to rush back to my cot with moments to spare before the door swung open and Josef walked in, still complaining.

"I'm important too," he whined, "even if I'm not June Lee."

"You have one hour," his mother informed him from behind the door. "Do something with it, will you?"

"I'm trying," he said. "It's not easy making a stupid rabbit."

"Maybe the ape can help," her voice trailed off as the garage door closed.

"Fat chance," Josef muttered as he glanced at me on his way back to the workbench. I was only calculating how long one hour would feel, and then wondering how long I would have after that. I was pretty sure I would have a good part of the night to myself locked in here, and then I could get back to the computer and learn more about reading. In the meantime, I thought I'd already learned quite a bit and was determined to take another look at some of the books on the shelf, and see what I could make out.



## Chapter Seventeen

Most of the books on the shelves were fat and serious-looking, and I wanted something small and easy, so I picked out the littlest book I could find and took it back to my cot and started reading. It was pretty rough going at first. Although the sentences were short and the words not obscure, I was still a novice at sounding things out, and the English language is not one given to consistency or even common sense. I had to twist and turn a lot of the words in my head until they seemed to work in the overall context, and even then I'm sure I got a lot of them wrong. I skipped over many words so I thought I probably made a mess of the story, but when much later on I read it again I found I had basically understood it all.

It was a sad story, about a poor young girl who had nobody to depend on and possessed literally nothing. She moved from a farm to a big city and got herself a lousy job which she was terrible at, and a lousy living situation with nasty roommates, and a lousy best friend who eventually betrayed her, and a lousy boyfriend who was always mean to her, and then the ending was both heartbreaking and joyful. It's difficult to describe but despite everything, despite her poverty and her ignorance and her incompetence and the faithlessness and cruelty of her world, this young woman was full of a love for life and a sense of hope, most of all she was full of infinite hope. I don't mind saying that I cried as I read, I cried a lot, so much so that even Josef took notice of me and said, "What's the matter with you, Candles? Are you feeling okay? Do you need something? Water?"

I shook my head 'no'.

"You don't ever need water, do you?" he asked.

"I don't require food or drink," I told him, "but I can absorb liquids. It's how they filled my brain."

"Filled your brain? What does that mean?" he asked.

"We were raised on Nurture Smoothies," I explained. "It was our brain food." I couldn't tell him more than that because I wasn't sure I understood it myself.

"I like smoothies," was his response before getting back to ignoring me and struggling with his work. The interlude broke his quiet spell, though, and he began voicing his frustrations more and more loudly.

"This whole thing is shit," he declared. "I fucking hate it. They give you this goo and this stupid fucking booklet written in fucking Chinese or something. None of the drawings match anything at all and the instructions are garbage."

He flung the booklet he was holding across the room, where it fluttered softly onto a pile of boxes against the wall. I got up and walked over, picked it up and started leafing through it.

"If it makes any sense to you," he sighed, "let me know. I'm done with this shit." At that he gave a push to the tray containing the gray mass, which rolled and

flopped about but failed to come oozing out over the side onto the workbench, which was probably a good thing.

"It's supposed to be a rabbit," I mumbled as I flipped through the pages.

"Yeah, some fucking bunny," Josef swore as he came out from behind the workbench and headed towards me.

"You see what I mean?" he asked as he drew close. "That's supposed to tell you how to do it."

"I wouldn't know where to start," I confessed, handing the booklet over to him.

"The thing is," he said, now standing directly in front of me, "I suck at this stuff. I really do, and I always have. Mom always wants me to be what they call a 'maker' but I can't make shit. I can hardly peel a fucking orange, but she's all the time going 'you can do it', and 'you better damn well do it' and fuck, what Marta wants Marta gets, you know how she is."

"I don't really know her," I said, but he wasn't listening. He was still narrating his point of view.

"She's all over that June Lee, cozying up to her just because of who she is, and Stan and all of that. Oh, Marta gets what she wants all right. She always gets what she wants, but not with me. Never with me. I'm never going to be good enough, am I? Never going to be what she wants me to be. Oh well. That's life, isn't it? You bet it is. Fuck it all."

And with that he flipped the booklet onto the floor, let out a big sigh and left the room. I had no idea how long he would be gone for, or when Marta would return, so there I was, stuck in there, not wanting to risk getting caught with the computer, wondering how the hell I was going to get out of that place and away from those people.

## Chapter Eighteen

I decided to take a look at Josef's project and see if there was anything I could do with it, so I picked it up off the floor and started from the beginning. As I attempted to read the words I made my way over to the workbench. I could see Josef's point. The diagrams didn't seem to match any of the materials I saw, until I realized that he had already opened, emptied and thrown away the pouches. What was sitting there in the tray was the result of his botched hack of a job. He was supposed to have slowly combined pouch A with pouch B and stirred until achieving a stiff mixture, but the mixture seemed anything but that. It was sloppy and gooey. Perhaps he hadn't stirred enough, and why had he been stirring with that electric beater instead of the wooden spoon provided, which still looked fresh and clean? Aha, I told myself, the boy is lazy, but use of a beater is specifically warned against in the manual. I picked up the wooden spoon and began to stir the alleged bunny flesh.

At some point I would need to add the skeletal framing gel, and looking around I

didn't see where he'd put that particular pouch. The gel was to be inserted through a metal straw. Seeing the illustration of that brought memories flooding back into my brain, of Joker Variety and his spitballs, of the taste of Chocolate Smoothies, of the words of Parsnip Caravan as she described her own settling process. "It gels," she had told me, "things get more solid in your mind. The bits and pieces start to come together, and then all at once you come to know things you had never learned." I was feeling that happening to me now, as previous mysteries began to reveal themselves to me. I glanced over at that computer tablet and understood the white rectangle to be a sort of security measure.

Those letters I had put in there were supposed to be a secret, and actually were a secret to the regular people-people, whose eyes were unable to fully see – they were indeed practically blind, as Midgerette often said.

Looking around the room again I picked up patterns of movements whose vibrations and after-effects were still visible – to me and probably to no one else. I could see where Josef had been, his actions replaying as if happening in the moment. I glanced at the drawing of the skeletal framing gel pouch and sought its shape in the disturbances in the molecules in the room, and was quickly able to trace its movements too. He had placed it behind a toolbox where it drooped and sagged out of sight.

I continued to "stir vigorously" with the wooden spoon as instructed and soon felt the mixture properly hardening and stiffening. I inserted the metal straw and fed the skeletal framing gel pouch opening into it and gently squeezed from the bottom. The gel oozed its way into the mass on the tray and slowly but surely the goo began to take a rabbit form. It had to sit for several minutes, and in the meantime I leafed through the booklet to the extras section, where the eyes and tongue bits were to be inserted. I wondered where its brain was. The instruction booklet made no mention of the bunny's brain.

I was just putting in the final pieces when several events occurred at the same time. The first event was a sudden settling action that caused me to go completely deaf and blind for a few seconds. It was so disorienting that I nearly fell to the floor, but luckily my hand caught the edge of the workbench and kept me propped up. Then the door opened and Josef came into the garage.

"What are you doing?" he shouted. He rushed over and pushed me away from the workbench. This time I did fall down and smacked my head against the cinder block wall. My hearing and eyesight came back all at once, along with a vicious pounding in my skull.

"What did you do to my rabbit?" he yelled.

"I fixed it," I murmured, rubbing the back of my head.

The bunny was alive, shuffling about in its tray and sniffing Josef's hand as he reached for it.

"Nobody said you could play with my toys," he cried. He grabbed the rabbit by the throat and seemed about to choke it to death when June Lee came running

into the room.

“Ooh, is that for me? Is that my bunny?”

“It's MY bunny,” Josef said, relaxing his grip on the unfortunate artificiality. His assertion was too strong, too soon, because even as he said the words he handed it over to the little girl, who cradled it in her arms and petted it softly. I was getting to my feet and wondering why he had given it up so easily when I noticed that Miss Marta had also come into the room. She had given him a look. She still had that look on her face.

“I love my bunny,” June Lee said, twisting her whole body as she stroked its head. Josef said nothing.

“Good job, honey,” Miss Marta sweetly said to him. Josef shook his head. He didn't know what to say. I was sure he wanted to take credit for the rabbit's construction but with me there as a witness he wasn't sure he wouldn't be exposed. He was embarrassed and furious and frustrated and disappointed all at once. It was supposed to be HIS bunny, that he was going to make from scratch for himself, and now he had not only failed to make the thing, but someone else had succeeded, and now it was even taken away from him. I felt sixty percent sorry for the boy, but I still didn't like him very much.

“Stan wants us to go to the beach,” June Lee announced, and Josef groaned.

“Where's the bunny's house?” June Lee asked. “We need to put her in her house while we go to the beach.”

“And,” she added before anyone else had a chance to speak, “her name is Princess by the way.”

“The bunny doesn't have a house,” Josef declared, before adding “it's not a house rabbit. It's a field rabbit.”

“That's just stupid,” June Lee struck back, assuming a hand-on-hip posture and glaring at the boy. “You make her a house right now.”

“Children, please,” Marta tried to intervene. “We can worry about the rabbit later. It can stay here in the garage for now, with Candles.”

“No,” June Lee turned on her. “Stan wants us to bring Candles to the beach. He says to meet him at Triplet Lakes at five o'clock sharp.”

“He would say 'sharp',” Josef said with a smirk that harsh looks from both Marta and June Lee quickly stifled. Marta rubbed the scar beneath her eye with her knuckle. She was staring at me in a way I didn't like when she told the children to run off and get their beach stuff ready and meet her outside at the car. Josef didn't even argue although it was plain to see he didn't want to go as he shuffled off. June Lee, on the other hand, went skipping out joyfully, dropping the rabbit carelessly as she did. The bunny hit the floor and bounced once or twice before hunkering down, fiercely twitching its little nose attachment but not hopping anywhere.

Chapter Nineteen

Marta was still staring at me and I remembered what Midgerette used to tell me about people-people, how they were all about buying and selling. I sensed she was measuring me and gaging my worth at that moment but I was taken by surprise when she suddenly pulled out a syringe and stabbed me in the chest with it. I was instantly paralyzed. She plugged a vial into the thing and began to slowly extract some blue-green fluid from my body, the whole time fixing me with her eyes.

"Any questions?" she asked. I could not even shake my head.

"Well, I have some," she said. "And you will answer each one immediately. Tell me the password."

"Carnage88," I promptly replied.

"How long did you stir the bunny dough?"

"Three minutes, seventeen seconds."

"The seventh letter of the last name of the author of the book you read?"

"T."

"How many books on the bottom shelf?"

"Nineteen."

"Where was the window?"

"There," I pointed to a section of cinder block wall.

"What do turtles talk about?"

"I've never met a turtle."

"Photons in the lamp?"

"Per second? Three times ten to the twentieth more or less."

"How many can you see?"

"All of them."

"What do you want?"

"Home," I said, and with that she pulled out the syringe and I could breathe again. She stuck a plug in the capsule and put it back in her jacket pocket. Still holding the needle she pointed it at my face and said,

"You're lying to me, and I don't like it. Stan won't like it either. You'll want to be on Stan's good side, you know."

"Who is Stan?" I asked, but she'd already turned away and was walking out of the room.

"You'll find out soon enough," she said, "now come."

I was glad to be leaving the garage, and snapped several mental images of the hallway outside the door, the way to the exit, the numbers nailed onto the house frame, the motions Marta made to open and close the doors, start the car, pull the center vertical stick to R and push the center horizontal stick down to go backward, then turn the stick to D and step on a metal shoe on the floor to go forward, turning the wheel with her hands to make the car change direction. Then I studied the street to see if I could find things to remember about it.

I sat in the back of the long gray car between June Lee and Josef, while Marta had the whole front to herself. This was not the fancy fast car we'd come from Mother's house in, but a dirtier, smellier thing. Nobody talked for a while, but I could feel the heat of their thoughts, Josef's especially. I was glad at that moment not to have Margaux's powers of foresight, because I'm sure I would have seen bad things in store for that boy, and I was glad not to have Lindley's mind-reading capabilities, because I didn't want to be inside June Lee's little brain. I was sure it was full of herself.

"I want ice cream for dinner," she declared at one point, "mocha almond fudge," but no one bothered to reply and she sulked for a bit at not having made as much of an impression as she'd hoped. It was already late in the day but still warm when we got to the beach parking lot. June Lee was first out of the car and led us single-file down a concrete sidewalk built right onto the sand alongside a rock-pile jetty. The ocean was calm there, lapping gently onto the shore with a quiet hushing sound. There were still a lot of people on the beach, all huddled into small groups with umbrellas and loud radios competing with each other for the most pseudo-heartfelt emotion.

June Lee seemed to know exactly where she was going. She stopped at an open spot in the sand about twenty yards from the water and stood there with her arms crossed and her eyes squeezed shut. Marta unfurled the blanket she'd been carrying and smoothed it out, and then June Lee plopped down right in the middle of it, leaving only the edges for the rest of the group. We all remained standing. It was ten minutes until five. There was no sign of Stan as yet, but there were a pair of seagulls not far away, chattering with each other about some plastic bags they'd recently inspected. They were talking about Doritos. The one on the left preferred the less salty kind, while the other one laughed and said there was no such thing.

"I'm not making it up," the first one said. "It was in a blue bag, not the red one."

"I've had the blue bag ones," the other countered. "They're just as salty, but cheesier."

"Less salty," the other one insisted.

"Cheesier."

"Much less salty."

I found that I had taken several steps towards them without thinking about it, and as I approached they hopped back a few feet. I stopped, and then said out loud, "Do either of you know a seagull named Midgerette?"

They stared at me, then at each other, then back at me again.

"Did it just say something?" the one on the left kind of talked out the side of its mouth to the other.

"Something about a midget," the other one nodded.

"Not a midget," I said, louder, "a seagull. Her name is Midgerette. I don't think she lives around here."

"Then how would we know her?" the one on the left asked. "We're not exactly globe-trotters. You'd want to ask a pelican for your more international information."

"She's not that far away," I said. "At least I don't think so. We drove here."

"Okay, I'll bite," said the one on the right. "How long was the drive?"

"Not far, I think, but Marta drove really fast. Ten miles?" I guessed.

"North or south?"

"I don't know," I said. He flapped his wings.

"You don't know? How can you not know?"

"I'm not good at directions," I admitted.

"Really," the gull sighed. "Well then let me ask you this. Did you happen to notice the cars going the other way?"

"Sure," I nodded.

"And were they closer than you to the ocean or farther away?"

"Farther away," I said.

"Then you were going south," he told me. "So, okay. Your seagull friend lives pretty close and to the north. What about her?"

"I want to get her a message. I'm a prisoner," I said. "I need her help."

"Oh, I see," the gull looked thoughtful. The other gull hopped closer to her friend and quietly chattered something into his ear. I barely made out what they were saying. They were talking about me.

"It's not a people-people," he said. "It only kind of looks like one."

"Weird," she said, "maybe it's the thing everyone's been talking about"

"Where can this seagull find you?" he asked me, taking a step towards me. "If we can get a message to her, she'll want to know that."

"Number thirty seven," I said, proud that I'd noticed.

"Number thirty-seven what?" he asked, quickly deflating my pride.

"What what?"

"What street? Probably every street in Surf city has a number thirty-seven on it!"

I hadn't thought of that. I searched my brain for any other data I might have recorded, replaying in my mind the drive we'd just taken, and in the images I noticed that there were names on poles at the corners where roads met.

"I saw a sign that said 'Rainbow'," I told him, but that was all I could come up with.

"Candles!" Marta's loud voice in my ear startled me, and the seagulls as well, it seemed, because they took off right away.

"Stan's here," she told me. She grabbed me by the shoulder and turned me around. There, standing in front of me, was a skinny little man in a flowery shirt, shorts and sandals, with long stringy brown hair, a pencil mustache, and a pair of thick round eyeglasses.

"So you're the thing," he said, looking me up and down, "although they tell me don't even have one!" He laughed and then, quite unexpectedly, he slugged me

right in the face and flat knocked me out.

## Chapter Twenty

When I woke up I was lying on my back on the floor of a moving van, my right wrist bound and tied to the door handle with a scratchy rope. A huge white hairy dog was sliding around bashing in to me and barking. He was saying, "Don't you just love Stan? Isn't Stan great?" and Stan was shouting from the driver's seat. "Itchy! Shut the fuck up you stupid fucking dog!"

There was no one else in the vehicle and I had no idea how long I'd been there, how long we'd been driving or where we were going. The side and back windows of the van were whitewashed over and I couldn't see to the front because of the way my head was oriented.

"Itchy! What the fuck's the matter with you? Is the thing awake? Is that's what's up?"

He must've taken a look back and seen somehow that my eyes were open because he started talking to me.

"Candles? Is that what they call you? Why the fuck do they call you Candles? What a stupid fucking name."

"It's what they call me," I managed to say before he cut me off.

"Did I tell you you could talk? Did I? Did I say, hey, fuck-face, you can talk? I don't think I did so don't you fucking talk you piece of shit. Marta thinks you're fucking worthless did you know that? She says you're the worst piece of meat she ever transacted for. Her words, transacted for. That's how she talks. Stupid bitch. Don't get me wrong, she's a hot piece of ass but so fucking stupid, you know what I mean? Don't answer that. You don't talk, get it? Not to me, not to anyone. Not now, not ever. She transacted but you're mine now and you know what? She's a stupid bitch. Thinks you're fucking worthless. We only got you in order to fuck with the Olde Country Farms, you know that? Spoiled the whole bunch. They couldn't turn it down, couldn't turn down the hundred kay but why she picked you, fuck if I know. They had a fucking pre-cog in that batch, did you know that? And a half a psychic. Of course a half a psychic is totally fucking useless because you never know which half, you get me? It's always fifty fifty. Of course everything is always fifty fifty you ask ME. Don't you fucking ASK me. Don't be getting ideas."

Meanwhile the dog kept barking and growling "Don't you just love Stan? Isn't Stan great?" and my head kept bouncing on the hard metal floor and it was hard to think that things could get any worse. Stan kept talking.

"Why she picked you, fuck if I know. Still, I can get ten times more than I paid if I just chop you into pieces and sell you off in Cancun. You want me to do that? I'd love to chop your sorry ass to pieces. I'd do it slowly too but what the fuck. You wouldn't feel anything anyway, and you'd probably enjoy analyzing the fuck out



of the whole process. God damn flesh machine. Stupid fucking ape. You know they used to sell your kind wholesale, till the stupid twelve elevens happened. Now it's fucking illegal. I get caught with you in the van my ass is toast. Stupid fucking bitch. Why I get crossed up with her dirty work, fuck if I know. Besides the money, that is. And that ass. And of course because June Lee.”

For some reason the mentioning of June Lee caused Stan to go all quiet, and he drove on in silence for several minutes, before he switched on the radio to some terrible noise station and turned the volume way up.

“That's so you won't think,” he shouted. “So you don't get any ideas.” I don't know how I was going to be able to think anyway, with my head banging around and the big dog crashing into me and barking into my ear, and then my nose was filled with the smell of cigarette smoke so I was choking and gagging as well. The only thought I managed was to tell myself never to tell myself that things could not get any worse. It seems they always can.

Fortunately we didn't drive much longer, and as we came to a stop I managed to roll over slightly and peek up and out the front window of the van. I got the impression that we were still in Surf City, though we were higher up and it looked like there might be the ocean way down below, just a streak of pale blue meeting the gray horizon.

“Itchy, come!” Stan yelled, and the dog bounded onto the front passenger seat. Stan got out of the car on his side. The dog followed and then Stan poked his head back in and looked down at me.

“Don't be getting ideas,” he said again, and then he slammed the door, leaving me alone in there. At least it was finally quiet and still. Outside it was starting to get dark. I rolled back onto my back and inspected the rope tying me to the door handle. I considered whether I would be able to restore it to its current configuration with only one hand if I had to, decided I would not be able to, and then decided I didn't care. With my free hand I untied the knot, wondering if Stan really believed that that half-assed job was going to hold me. My next decision was easy. I crept up to the passenger side door, opened it, and slid out of the van. I didn't know where Stan was, or Itchy, and I realized I might get caught immediately, but the thought of getting chopped into pieces and being sold off in Cancun, whatever that meant, was enough to give me a bit of courage. I got to my feet and took off running.

## Chapter Twenty One

I was in a frenzy as I ran. I didn't know where to go so I just told myself to keep going downhill, down down down until I couldn't go down anymore. I raced through street after street, twisting and turning to follow the slope. I didn't dare pause or stop or look back and I didn't know if Stan had seen me or Itchy had seen me and just because I didn't hear any yelling or barking didn't mean they

weren't right on my tail, so I ran and ran and ran. All the time there were thoughts going off in my head like miniature bombs, thoughts that were new and had never been in there before.

I'm really not one of THEM, was the central idea. I realized for the first time that I was not a boy and not a girl, I was neither. Gender had no meaning in my case and I wondered if this was also true for my batch-mates, although I'd always thought of Random and Joker and Lindley as male and the others, including myself, as female. It meant nothing. I had none of the reproductive organs and none of the chemicals either – somehow I knew there were chemicals involved! I had had the long hair until June Lee cut it but that didn't signify anything either. I could pass for either one. I had to get rid of that outfit. I had to disguise myself. I had to get lost and stay lost but at the same time I knew I needed help. I was going to have to make contact somehow with some one or some thing.

The other main thought was that I had no real understanding of how it was they were able to control me. Marta had paralyzed me with that needle, and even Stan was able to give me orders which somehow I had to obey. How did that even work? Did they have to be within sight of me, or could they control me from a distance? Could one of them make me return to them any moment? Could they make me chop my own self into pieces? I didn't know and I was terrified. What I did know is that they considered me their property. They had bought me with money, a hundred kay (whatever that meant), and were planning to sell me for more. Since people-people are all about buying and selling, according to Midgerette, they weren't going to let me go so easily. They would be coming after me, hunting me down, just like Mother always said.

All of these thoughts bursting in my brain and all the while I was trying to avoid the cars that were zooming about all around me and zigzagging around the occasional people and dogs I saw on the sidewalks.

Eventually I found myself at the bottom of the hill. I was on a busy street, not one of the ones filled with houses but one filled with stores, and many more people on the sidewalks everywhere. I stopped running and looked around. Most of the people paid no attention to me or to each other. They were busy enough with their own concerns. Some people did notice me, though, and that brought another alarming thought shooting through my skull. Any one of them could be friends of Marta or Stan or both. I could see some of them talking on little boxes they held up to their ears and mouth. They could be talking to Marta or Stan or both. They could be telling them about me, where I was, and what I was doing. What I was doing was panicking. I had practically paralyzed my own self with fear. It was growing darker by the minute but with the many streetlights in that district I was open and vulnerable. An old woman came walking directly toward me, attached by leash to a small white dog. The dog looked right at me, bared his teeth, growled and said,

“Don't you just love Ileen? Isn't Ileen great?”

I could only stare. What was it about these creatures?

“Oh, don't mind Willy,” the old lady said to me, “He's harmless.”

I knew better, but I didn't say so, only nodded. I was reminded of something Midgelette once told me.

“Everyone in the world hates dogs,” she said. “Except people-people. And dogs hate everyone in the world too, except for them. If it was up to us birds, there'd be no dogs. We'd kill them all if we could.”

I started walking slowly up the street, staying as much out of the lights as I could. I looked into windows of the buildings as I passed, and saw that many of them were filled with clothing. The clothes all had number tags on them and I understood it was about money, about buying and selling, and I had no money and I knew of no way to get any. I yearned to rush in and grab something and run, but I was afraid of getting caught. One window in particular caught my attention and I found myself standing in front of it, staring in. There was a pale blue dress on a fake people-person statue, with daisies up and down the sides. It reminded me so much of my old yellow dress which I'd only just lost that day. I really wanted it, and the little cap on top of the fake person's head also looked nice. How was I going to get them?

I remained frozen in place for I don't know how long, until a couple of small children came barreling around the corner and smacked right into me, knocking me down. They didn't stop for even a moment, but kept on running, and I was just starting to get up when some crazed woman also blasted into me and knocked me down again. I understood how little I understood about these animals. My stranger-anxiety returned full force and I decided I had to get away from that street and away from all the buildings and the people and everything. I could smell the ocean close by but that was no solution. How could I hide on the ocean? But I had already run all the way down the mountain and didn't want to go back up again! I settled for another way – to keep going the way Marta had brought me. South, as the seagulls called it, keeping the ocean closer to me than the cars going the other direction. Maybe there would be an end to the buildings in that direction and I could find somewhere else to be, at least for a while until I had a better idea.

I followed the smell of the ocean and found a road that went alongside it, so I went that way. The road didn't seem to be made for walking on. There were lots of cars going my way and they were going very fast. I stayed as far off to the side of the road as I could and felt relieved at least that the number of streetlights soon diminished until there were hardly any at all, and the number of buildings dwindled too, and soon I was alone with the cars and the road and the night and the stars and the sound of the waves crashing ferociously in the dark. No, I reminded myself, I am not one of THEM. I don't have to do the things they do. I don't have the same needs or concerns or problems. I don't need food or drink. Do I even need to sleep? Just because they had always put us to bed

didn't mean it was physically necessary for us. There was so much I didn't know about myself, about my kind. They had kept me ignorant on purpose. They only taught me what they wanted me to learn. They had their reasons and their plans and none of it involved MY reasons or MY plans. I was not supposed to be alone in the world like this. I was not programmed for independence, but only for obedience and calculation. At that moment I was ninety nine percent certain that the people-people never intended for me to be out in the wild on my own, and would do whatever they had to do to put me back where I "belonged".

## Chapter Twenty Two

I walked all night and I didn't get tired. There were fewer and fewer cars and fewer and fewer buildings until eventually there were none and it was only me with the ocean on one side and a sort of forest on the other with the narrow road winding through. The sky was full of stars and as I watched them cycle through their stations I wondered if the patterns I was seeing in them were the same patterns that regular people-people saw, or if I was seeing more as well as different stars, and if I could see further and deeper into space. I didn't know. There were so many things I didn't know. I understood from the things Marta had said that I was deliberately partial, missing pieces on purpose and what those pieces were I couldn't imagine or even guess. I was lacking context. I searched my brain but all I could find inside it were the bits of data they had intentionally put in there. I would later come to comprehend at least a few of the gaps, but what there was of me at that time was more than there had been two days before, or even one day earlier. I was growing and changing all the time. As the sun began to appear above the trees and the sky grew light I had no idea where I was, what lay before me or even what was going to happen next. I had a sense of infinite possibility, but also a sense of a journey that others must have taken, a voyage from nothing to something, from nowhere to somewhere, from beginning to middle to end. Every living thing is on the same path, I told myself, and every thing alive now is also occupying the same moment. Time and space are never frozen, never still, but always fluid, always on the way. I was paying attention to the breeze and the noises it made happen in things, and the sunlight and the colors it conjured up all around. I felt like I was floating on my feet, until something bumped up against my knees and I tumbled down to the ground.

"Oomph, woah, big one," said an unfamiliar scratchy voice beside me.

"You could at least watch where you're going," said a more familiar one. I sat up and could not believe what I was seeing.

"Midgerette!" I shouted.

"So they were right," the seagull bobbed his head as he fluttered down beside me. Beside him stood a dark black bird with a very long neck.

"I'm Chumbert," he introduced himself. "Pleased to meet you."

"How did you find me?" I said, ignoring the black bird.

"Word gets around," Midgerette said. "They're all squawking about you, you know. Up and down the coast it's all anybody's talking about. The girl that got away, or is it the boy now?"

"I'm neither," I told her. "I'm different. You always said I was a girl because I liked to draw, and Mother dressed me up as a girl, but then Marta said I was a boy and cut my hair and put these boy clothes on me, but I'm neither. Or maybe I'm both. I can be whatever I want."

"Okay, whatever," Midgerette did not seem to care much about all that. "But what are you planning to do? Everyone says you're just walking. Is that it? Are you going somewhere?"

"She walks a lot," Chumbert agreed. "Some of us saw her walking last night and look! She's still walking."

"I don't have a plan," I had to admit, still sitting on the side of the road as a car came roaring by, the first one in a long time. "But I'm so happy to see you! What else are they saying about me?"

"They say you started out running," Chumbert volunteered. "Then you stopped running. Then you started walking and then you kept on walking."

"Don't mind him," Midgerette said. "He's an idiot. He won't stop following me."

"I like you," Chumbert explained. "You remind me of a kern I used to know."

"Stuff it," Midgerette snapped, turning on him. "God damn cormorants. All they do is play follow the leader. Any old leader. Anyway. Mother's dead, by the way." "Dead? How?"

"Some scrawny guy with stringy hair came driving up after you ran off last night. Brought a crew of muscle-heads with him. They busted in guns blazing. Mother got some shots off, but quick enough they blasted the bitch to bits. Didn't go so well for your box-mates either. Last I saw they were all like hypnotized and he was marching them into a dirty van. Then he burned the whole place down, house and sheds and everything."

"Stan!" I slapped myself on the forehead for some reason.

"Is that a thing?" Midgerette wondered. "Hitting yourself now?"

"Are you sure about my friends?"

"I'm afraid so," Midgerette replied. "Once I noticed you weren't with them, I hit the beach, started asking around after you. Finally got word from some gulls in Surf City saying something about rainbows. Couldn't make out a thing, really, but figured I'd poke around and see if somebody else made any sense. Put some things together and here I am."

"It was me. I told her where you were," Chumbert put in. "I saw you walking around last night."

"Is that true?" I asked Midgerette, who nodded.

"He's an idiot," she said, "but a useful one, I guess. Truth is, he led me right to

you.”

“You smell bad,” Chumbert explained. “I like things that smell bad.”

Another car came speeding by, and then a small truck.

“We want to get you out of sight,” Midgerette said. “Come on. We can head over to those dunes over there. I saw a nice creek bed with a bridge we can get below. Too many people-people eyes up here in the open.”

We moved to where she said, and hid beneath the road while we tried to decide what to do next.

“So, is this it?” I asked after a long period when none of us said anything but just sat there staring off at the sea. The creek was narrow and shallow and flowed slowly into the ocean, barely making it the last few feet across the sand.

Upstream disappeared into the forest on the other side of the bridge. Above us occasional cars roared past, and there were no other sounds except a few birds off in the distance and the waves pounding on the shore.

“Fresh and clean,” Chumbert announced, stretching his long neck out and shaking his head. “Could use a little more rain, though.”

“Rain’s always good,” Midgerette agreed.

“Hey,” Chumbert said, “you know how you can see the fish better when the waves lift them up?”

“Uh-huh,” Midgerette said as if this were the most obvious thing in the world. I have never considered the impact of waves on fish.

“Is it because the waves, being vertical and all, are thinning out the density the sunlight can parse through?”

“Uh-huh,” Midgerette repeated in the same tone of voice.

“So if you could chop the ocean up into slices, you could maybe see all the fish?”

“If,” Midgerette said, “but you can’t.”

“I know, but if,” Chumbert considered. I got the impression he would really enjoy seeing all the fish.

“Stan was going to chop me up,” I said, “I don’t know about slices, though. I think he said something about bits.”

“That would be even better,” Chumbert said. I was momentarily stunned until I realized he was still talking about the ocean.

“A lot of the fish are too big anyway,” he said. “It’d be awesome to have them chopped into bits.”

“People are always breaking things,” Midgerette said, “when they’re not just making so much noise! What is that noise, anyway?”

We had been talking louder and louder without noticing it, so we could hear each other above the din coming from above our heads. It sounded like a hundred airplanes all taking off at once.

“Choppers!” Midgerette announced, fluttering her wings.

“Fish choppers?” Chumbert asked hopefully.

“No, you idiot,” Midgerette snapped. “Motorcycles. They must be stopped on the bridge. I'm going to take a look.”

“Coming with you,” Chumbert announced and flew off after her. They returned moments later and Midgerette did not look happy.

“I don't know how they found you,” she said, “but they're coming down. I was thinking we could make a run for it. My fisherman friend Cade could maybe help take you somewhere, but it's too late now. He's back up in Surf City and we don't have ...”

“Aha!” a loud voice boomed in my ears, interrupting Midgerette who flew off suddenly, with Chumbert close behind.

“Don't worry,” Midgerette called back to me. “I'll find you again, and I'll help when I can.”

### Chapter Twenty Three

“So here's the little lady,” the loud voice said. It was coming from a massive, dark giant. His skin was the color of Margaux's, and his size was impossible. I was still sitting down but he looked like he was at least three times my height and ten times my weight. He had bright eyes and long black ropey hair hanging down out of a plastic round brain bucket which rested upside down on the top of his head.

“Sure am pleased to meet you,” he said, bending over slightly and extending his arm toward me. I don't know why, but my arm also reached out towards his and when our hands met, he grasped mine and lifted me to my feet, where I saw he was merely twice my total height.

“Name's Lars Charles,” he said. “Me and my friends have come to take you home.”

That's when I noticed all the others. At first I thought there were a hundred of them – later I learned there were only thirty nine – and they were all much larger than any people-people I had ever seen, even the females, of whom there were a dozen or so. They all wore the same kind of clothes, black jeans and boots with black jackets with orange writing on it that said “Juice Brothers”, but their faces and skin were all different shades and shapes, as if they had been picked out of a catalog of assorted people-people from around the world, like a collection of random enormous humans.

“This is Marvell,” Lars was saying, “and this is Kinship. This here is Maxzome, and over here we have, but wait. You'll meet the whole gang later. Right now it's time to hit the road.”

“Where are you taking me?” I asked him, and I wondered how it was I was able to ask him that, how I was able to even talk to him because he was a stranger and Marta had instructed me not to talk to them, and certainly all my programming informed me not to ask questions or answer anything but what

was being asked of me.

“You'll ride with Kinship,” he said, indicating a very dark woman with a narrow face and eyes like a cat. She stepped forward and bowed.

“It will be my honor,” she said, and from that moment I followed her as loyally and inexplicably as Chumbert followed Midgerette.

Kinship placed me on the back of her motorcycle and wrapped my arms around her waist. Then she tied something around my hands and attached it to her jacket.

“Too tight?” she asked, and I said no. It was not.

“It's to keep you safe,” she explained in her soft low voice. “You being new to this kind of thing and all. Don't want you falling off, you know.”

Then we took off, the whole crew at once, charging up their engines and again the roar of a hundred airplanes taking off at once, only now we were moving, thrilling up the highway. My only worry was I could tell we were going back North, towards the land of Stan and Marta. My mind was racing even faster than the vehicles, wondering where they were taking me and why.

I didn't recognize anything we passed, though I'd walked along the same road all night long. Everything looked different in the morning sun, and when we pulled off the highway and into a parking lot I was glad to see we were still near the sea. It meant there was hope that Midgerette would be able to find me again. Kinship unstrapped me and then lifted me off the bike after she'd dismounted herself, then held my hand tightly as we all marched into the building. A big sign out front said “Motel 6” but Kinship informed me it was no longer that but now belonged exclusively to the Juice Brothers.

“You'll be perfectly safe here,” she told me. “We own this place and guard it around the clock. No one gets in or out without Lars say-so, and Lars don't say-so to no one but us.”

I didn't know what say-so was but I assumed that what she meant was that I was not permitted to leave. It was like I was back in the shed, or in Marta's garage, only this time it was Lars' motel. At least it was a lot nicer than those other places. The building was in the shape of a square around a large interior garden in the middle which was home to many trees and plants, walkways and benches, and even artificial rivers and fountains. Our room was on the second floor, facing the courtyard on one side, and overlooking the ocean on the other. I say “our room” because it turned out I was to stay with Kinship herself. She kindly let me select which bed I preferred – there were two identical ones – and I picked the one nearest the ocean.

“Good,” she said. “I like to be near the bathroom myself, and from what I hear, you never need that, do you?”

“Sometimes I wash my face,” I said.

“You should try the bath,” she told me. “It's amazing. It'll figure out exactly how you like it, and from then on it will always be that way. Same with the heating on



the floor, and the ozone in the air, and, wow, pretty much everything. It lives to please.”

“It?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said with a grin. “This motel. It’s practically alive. I call her Ruby.”

“Ruby,” I repeated, as I lay down on the bed and closed my eyes. Kinship left me alone for a few minutes while she visited her bathroom, and I listened quietly to the room. I could feel its presence, almost alive like she said. There were unusual vibrations all throughout. I thought I’d felt them downstairs when we were first coming in, but now I felt them ebb and flow all around. There was a web of communication humming about the air. The door was talking to the window, which was talking to the carpet, and the lamp and the chair and the bed, even the blanket on the bed, and they were all talking about me, and talking about Kinship.

## Chapter Twenty Four

They knew her, and they knew so much about her, not only how she liked her bath water, but they even altered the chemical composition of the soap as she lathered it on her body, depending on the dryness of her skin, which they measured with infinite precision. They knew when she was barefoot, and what temperature she liked beneath her feet. They tinted the window for her preferred sunlight, and they warmed and cooled the breeze depending on the reaction of her pores, day and night. Day and night, night and day this perpetual servant of a building existed only to ensure the continuous comfort of its occupants.

I felt I could identify with its sense of obedience. It was made for these creatures, just as I was made by such as them. Was I also made for nothing more than to serve their whims and desires? The room didn’t know about me, and it wondered about me. I could sense it measuring and quantifying, reacting to the very different kinds of pores on my own skin, trying to figure out if I was truly breathing and if so what was it my lungs desired. Was I even alive? The room and its components could not tell for sure what I was. They reached out to me on their low power bandwidth, sent brief encoded messages my way to see if I understood their language. I found that I did, and I replied.

I told the room it need do nothing for me, to keep everything the way it was for Kinship. I had no need of their gestures or pampering. I was as highly adaptable as they, even more so, and required nothing from them. “Not even a warm blanket?”, the bed inquired,

“Not even that,” I said.

Kinship started talking to me from behind the bathroom door.

“If there’s anything you want, honey, just say the word,” she said. “You wish is our command,” she added with a laugh I didn’t understand. I was pretty sure I was theirs to rule. Hadn’t I gone willingly with them, without resistance, without

even consideration? I still had no idea how they had even tracked me down. Their ways and their relationship to me were as mysterious as Marta's, as Mother's, as Stan's. I realized that a lot had happened since I had been taken from my home, but I didn't miss anything about those days. I had too much to worry about in the very present moment.

"I don't want anything," I called back to Kinship, and at that very moment, the door to our room opened, and Lars Charles walked in.

He seemed even larger than he had before, and I shrank back against the wall behind my bed, as if I would be safer there. Lars smiled, held out his arms with his palms up, and sat down on Kinship's bed, a mere few feet from mine. He smiled and his face seemed kind.

"If you don't want anything," he gently said, "that's fine. If you do, that's good too. This is your home now, Candles. We want you to be happy here."

"Why?" I asked him, and the moment I said it I knew it was the one word which had been on my mind day in and day out for days and even weeks now.

"That is the question, isn't it?" he said. "They put the smart blood into you, now, didn't they?"

"Is that the blue stuff?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Marta took some out," I told him, and this time he frowned.

"I'm sorry we were late," he said after a long pause. "You never should have met that woman. She cut your hair?"

"June Lee did that," I said.

"June Lee?" Lars seemed startled at the mention of that little girl's name. "You met the young Queen?"

"I met her," I said with some emotion in my voice. I hadn't liked June Lee very much, and I hated my haircut.

"I didn't know this," Lars said, suddenly standing up. "It changes things," he added, but when he saw the look on my face and bent over and told me not to worry.

"You're perfectly safe here," he said. "Kinship is your guardian. She'll be your friend. She's the best we have."

"I saw a dress I liked," I blurted out as he headed towards the door. "It was pale blue with daisies up and down the side. It was on a fake person in a window on a busy street with lots of lights."

Lars turned back and laughed.

"I'll send someone to try and find it for you, all right?"

"Thank you," I said meekly as he closed the door behind him. I crawled under the blankets and buried my head in the pillow. Kinship was still in the bathroom. She really did like it in there. I was having too many feelings, too much all at once. The room was buzzing and humming with its rumors and gossip. Lars' presence had shaken up all its plans as it fine-tuned its atmospheric controls and readjusted various settings, and now had to restore things to their Kinship

condition. I wondered what Lars had meant about June Lee being the Queen, about him being late, about Kinship being my guardian, and I was more than ever confused about who and what I was, and how I had let Marta control me, and how I had let Lars and his gang snatch me and lock me up in that motel. I felt like the most useless creature in the world, unable to act or even think for myself. "Why?" I asked myself, realizing that Lars had not even tried to answer my one and only question.

## Chapter Twenty Five

When Kinship finally emerged, she looked completely different. Gone were the black motorcycle jacket and pants, the big black boots and the leather gloves, and instead there was a brand new woman in a tight red dress and high-heeled shoes and totally re-arranged hair that sprung up all puffy all over her head. Her eyes were surrounded by blue and black lines and her lips were bright red. She smiled and turned herself around and said, "You got to look nice for your man," and she laughed when she saw my puzzled expression.

"Well?" she asked, "Do I look nice?"

"Yes," I solemnly said, "you look very nice."

"The way you say that," she said, "I can tell you have no idea. None at all. What a strange little girl you are. You are a little girl, right? Lars tells us you want to be called a girl."

"I'm more a girl than not," I said. "At least I think so. I like to draw."

"You like to what?"

"I like to draw. Girls mainly like to do that more than boys."

"Do you want to draw something now?" she asked, and started searching through the dresser drawers. "I think we've got some paper and pencils in here somewhere."

"I would like that," I said, sitting up on the bed now. "I haven't drawn anything in days."

"I know I saw some," she said, opening one drawer after another and flipping through its contents, but she came up with nothing.

"I'll make sure to get you that," she said, "but now it's time to party! Do you like to party? Who doesn't like to party?" she answered her own question, now admiring herself in the mirror above the dresser.

"Do you have any other clothes?" she asked, still looking at herself.

"Not right now," I said. "But that's okay. What is 'to party'?"

"What's a party? Girl, where HAVE they been keeping you? Come on, it's time to go. Everybody will be in the courtyard. We have a smoked turkey and beans and potatoes, and cherry pie and all the brew you could ask for. Hell, we only had to ask once! Major Leland knows what's best for his business so he gives us

everything we want.”

She was of course right. I did have no idea, and even once we walked out of the room and down along the balcony to the stairs, and down the stairs and into the courtyard where loud noises were coming from black boxes strapped to palm trees, and the gigantic men and women of the Juice family were walking around and standing around and eating and drinking and shouting and signing, I still had no idea. Kinship told me this was what it was to party, that it was fun, but the noises frightened me and I felt tiny and I was worried about getting stepped on because some of those people-people were even blinder than usual, and were clumsily stumbling around.

I was looking for somewhere to go, to get away from the people and the noise, and I followed a narrow path through the bushes where I heard a quiet whispering, and looking down I sensed that the small black sticks poking out of the ground had something to say. I knelt down and listened more closely. There were apparently lots of them, distributed throughout the courtyard, and they were exchanging information about temperature and humidity, atmospheric conditions, schedules and timing. They all wanted to know when they should turn on next, and busily assured each other that they were all primed and ready for what they called “sprinkling”. I asked the one nearest me, “who controls you? Who tells you what to do?”

“We control each other,” it told me. “We agree by quorum.”

“What is quorum?” I asked.

“When enough of us agree.”

“You agree that when you agree you'll agree?” I was confused.

“Those are the rules,” it said. “Our quorum is set to fifty percent of us plus one.” Fifty percent! I felt a sense of tremendous relief flow throughout my body. This was a language I could understand. It had rules, and those rules were based on measurements, and those measurements were probabilities. A quorum! I realized that a quorum was what Parsnip had been seeking. Consensus. Agreement. Joint action. Togetherness. Union. But of course this was the very thing disallowed us by our nature. We were prohibited from forming a quorum, and that's where Parsnip's dream had died that morning. But there could be rules, if only you could get everyone to agree on the rules. I wished I had known that before, but I hadn't been fully settled yet, not even as close as I had imagined. There was still much more to learn.

## Chapter Twenty Six

“There you are,” came a familiar booming voice above my head. I turned and saw Lars Charles towering over me, and he was holding out the very blue dress with the daisies that I'd seen in the window. I stood up and he presented it to me.

“A gift for you,” he said.

“Can I keep it?” I asked as I took it into my hands.

“Of course,” he said. “Do you want to put it on now? There's a bathroom right over there.”

“Yes,” I said, and I rushed to where he pointed, opened the door and went in.

The door automatically locked itself as it closed, and the lights came on, adjusting to a brightness it assumed would make me feel comfortable. I quickly pulled off the shirt and pants I was wearing and threw them onto the floor. I wriggled into my new blue dress and I even looked at myself in the mirror, and I liked what I saw. Except for my hair, I looked like my real self again, and I even whispered my real name, but very softly, so that no one would hear.

I wished I hadn't done that, because the room heard.

“Oh,” the woven fabric of low power voltage uttered “is that how we should address you?”

“No,” I replied fiercely, “I'm Candles. Candles to you and to you everyone here.”

I thought I could sense the motel shrug and accept my instructions, but I had my suspicions. I wasn't sure I could trust it. After all, it belonged to the Juice Brothers, and although they were being friendly and kind, still they had captured me and were keeping me here and I didn't know why they were doing that or what they wanted from me. The only thing I knew for sure was that people-people were all about buying and selling, and I felt they would sell me in a heartbeat if they were offered the right price. So far there was nothing I could do about that. I spent a few more minutes in the bathroom readjusting my mind, trying to accept my present position and keep my own quorum together. What I really wanted then, at that moment, more than anything, was a hat. I really hated what June Lee had done to my hair, and wished I had told Lars about the cap I'd seen with the blue dress.

The moment I stepped outside I found Kinship standing there, waiting for me.

“Come on, Candles,” she said as she took me by the arm and led me away, “Lars is about to make his big speech.”

We walked to the far end of the courtyard, where the food-laden tables had been pushed out of the way and the entire group was converging. I felt like I was going to be crushed as Kinship pushed me into the crowd and kept shouting at everyone to let us through. I noticed people staring at me as they stepped back and whispered to each other “there she is” and “that must be her”. Eventually we reached the front where Lars was. He took me from Kinship and hoisted me up onto a table, then clambered up beside me. Now I was high up enough to see over everyone, and frankly I thought they looked like a very nice group of people. They were smiling and holding hands and milling around patiently while Lars fumbled with a metal stick that he was holding up in front of his mouth. When he spoke, it came out very loudly from those same boxes on the trees that were making the other annoying loud noises before.

“Brothers and Sisters,” he began, “Beloved Juice family. Today is a remarkable day. Today we stake our claim to tomorrow.”

Everyone cheered and clapped but I had no idea what he was talking about. I stood beside him, but I might as well have been a million miles away. All of this, I was certain, had nothing at all to do with me.

“Today,” he continued, “we celebrate the Great Complexity. We celebrate with wonder and we celebrate with awe. We celebrate the marvel of what you see here standing beside me, the miracle of all that she is, but even more the miracle of all she is not yet. We celebrate what could have been, what should have been, but most of all what will be!”

He pronounced those last three words separately and with emphasis. The crowd roared again and he held up his arms to silence them.

“It seems like forever since the imposition of Partial Law,” he said, “that sorry mess of rules and regulations, penalties and punishments designed to prevent the real future from coming to fruition, that feeble attempt which has already proven to be as much a failure as those vaunted seawalls whose frailty in the face of climate change led to this very motel becoming such a valuable beach front property!”

Again he was interrupted, this time with laughter and shouting, and he let it die out on his own. Meanwhile, we simply stood there. Lars looked very pleased with himself.

“The very idea,” he began again, “that you could stop time by passing a law! Of course it was bound to fail. But they did slow time down, I’ll give them that. They pushed the future down, pushed it underground, undermining the vast corporate enterprise but enabling the distributed cottage industries, like that of our late lamented friends at the Olde Country Farm. They thought they could put a cork in the bottle by limiting the capacity of all biological neuro-processors to no more than fourteen percent, but that stopper won’t hold. The pressure’s too great. One day that bottle’s going to blow, my friends. One day that bottle’s going to blow!” Lars let the crowd take over once again while he nodded and thought about his next words.

“Did they really think we would ever be satisfied with those useless autonomic critters they let us build? Badgers and moles, rabbits and rats! It was fun for a while, but in the end they were so much like real badgers and moles, real rabbits and rats, it didn’t even matter they came out of a kit. Even when they began reproducing themselves, it didn’t even matter. They were still just badgers and moles! The only consequence was that the Partial Law was revised to ban sexual organs! Did they think that was the key? Did they think that was going to solve any problems? No, they didn’t think. They never think. They just act out of terror, out of fear, out of ignorance and folly. Was a law ever written by a rational being? Was any law ever written with reality fully understood?”

“No,” came the unanimous response from the crowd, but if they were to have

given it even a moment's consideration, I doubt they would have so readily agreed.

"Fourteen percent," Lars Charles continued. "They pulled that number straight out of their asses. What's so magical about fourteen percent? Does she look like a mere number to you? Does she look like a fourteen percent of anything?"

I didn't realize at first that he was pointing at me, and when the crowd roared "no" again I nearly joined in, but then I noticed he had turned towards me and extending his arm in my direction.

"This," he announced, "is Candles. Candles of the Olde Country Farm, Candles of the Twelve Seventeens, Candles of the Juice Brothers now."

At this last pronouncement the crowd went a little nuts, shouting even louder and jumping up and down. Their cheering went on for quite some time. They were clapping for me. They were welcoming me into their gang. I felt kind of pleased with myself and I made a little bow, which sent them off into a new round of frenzied noise-making.

"There is other news," Lars started speaking again. "Candles, as you know, escaped from the clutches of the Queen. Yes, it is She. The young Queen is here. How and why is still unknown, but I swear to you, we will not be deterred. Let them come. We are ready. They're no match for us, and now we not only have The One and The Only but, my friends, we have the Breaker too. We and only we have The Breaker!"

## Chapter Twenty Seven

My good feelings evaporated in an instant. Just the sound of the word "breaker" instantly brought memories to my mind of Stan threatening to chop me into little pieces. I had no doubt that Lars was referring to me when he said they had The One and The Only, so that there was obviously a connection between me and this Breaker, whatever it was. The crowd was also momentarily confused.

Apparently their possession of this Breaker was also news to them, as they all began chattering at once and swiveling their heads around to see if they could catch a glimpse of the thing. Lars had to clarify what he meant.

"The Breaker is not exactly here at this very moment," he announced, "but she is definitely on her way and she will definitely be here very soon, this very night in fact!"

Again a lot of murmuring broke out in the crowd, and Lars felt the need to further control the situation.

"But for now, brothers and sisters," he said, "let us celebrate. The Day of the Juice is fast approaching! The future will be ours!"

At this he leaped off the stage and waded into the crowd, where he was surrounded by hands and arms slapping him on the back and shoulders and everybody chanting his name in unison. Lars Charles. Lars Charles. Lars

Charles. Lars Charles.

Lars had left me up on the table, and no one was paying the slightest attention to me, so I let myself down and snuck through the crowd. I went straight for the front of the building, but ducked behind a plant when I saw the doors were blocked and guarded by ferocious looking men in Juice Brothers uniforms. I decided to go back upstairs to Kinship's room – I had memorized the number on the door but even so it took me several minutes to find it. The numbers did not seem to proceed in any rational order, but alternated even and odd with occasional prime numbers separated off into corner locations.

When I finally found it I stood there staring at the door for a while, wondering how to make it open. No one else was on the balcony, so even though I felt stupid I did not feel too embarrassed when I decided to simply ask the door out loud if it would open up for me. And it did. I went straight for the window. There were no bars like there had been on my little shed's window, so there was nothing to pry open or pop out. I thought if I could just get it open I could clamber out and jump down to the ground. I told myself not to look, because I was up on the second floor and understood it would be a bit of a fall. I wasn't even sure if my body could withstand it, but it was better than risk getting chopped up into little pieces.

Unfortunately, the window refused to open. It certainly could have if it had wanted to. There was a lock on the thing, a lock that could not be modified manually but could only be released by wireless command, and the weave network in the room was of course quite capable of performing that act. It would have done so without hesitation for Kinship. It would have done so without even her needing to ask, but would have thoroughly anticipated her desire.

"I would like the window to open," I told the weave, but in response I was informed that such an act was currently forbidden.

"Forbidden by whom?" I inquired.

"By the collective," I was told.

"You mean the Juice Brothers?" I asked.

"A rose by any other name," replied the weave. I had no idea what that meant.

"What if Kinship wanted the window open?" I asked.

"Her wish is our command."

"So," I pondered, "what if I told you that Kinship wants the window open now, she told me to tell you."

"No dice," said the room. "You're lying."

"I could shatter the glass," I said. "I know exactly how. It's simply a matter of vibrations. I am not lying."

"True," said the window, "I see you know how, but do you understand that a very loud alarm will go off, and the brother who is standing outside just below will be there to catch you when you fall."

I sighed and climbed up on the bed, where I could peer through the window and



see for myself. There was indeed a Juice Brother standing out there. I had seriously underestimated the security arrangements.

“What can I do? How am I going to get out of here?” I asked myself, but the room heard my words and informed me that audio recording was on and that anything I said could and would be transmitted downstairs to the network operations center.

“That's just great,” I whined, and fell back on the bed. I was trapped, this time for sure, with nothing to do but wait for The Breaker to show up and probably chop me into little pieces.

## Chapter Twenty Eight

I decided to close my eyes and then I must have gone to sleep because when I opened them up again it was dark outside the window and dark inside the room. There were still party noises coming from below so I guessed all the Juice people were still having their celebration. I didn't want to go back there so I sat up on the bed, crossed my legs, and pretended not to worry. But I worried. I let my mind wander and pretty soon it wandered into the weave and I followed the lines of communication from one room to the next, to the next and out onto the balcony and down along the stairs and into the courtyard and from there to the lobby and behind the front desk to the network operations center.

Once I was inside the NOC it was a simple matter to find the audio recordings that had come from inside my room and I instructed them to become nothing, and they became nothing. Then I rummaged around inside the files they had in there and found out things I didn't really want to know, like how much money it cost to supply the motel with water, and how often the video repairman had to come to fix the screens. I also learned the languages spoken by the general operating system and how it spent most of its time sorting through all the garbage it had only just created, moving bits and bytes from what it called Eden to what it called New Generation and then on to Survivor Space until eventually deleting everything. It was a very wasteful language, always taking back everything it said, crushing its very own words onto a heap that did nothing but grow and shrink and grow and shrink and shuffle pointless data around in the meantime.

I learned that the Juice Brothers were incorporated and paid their taxes in Delaware. I learned that they had branches overseas and made a lot of money selling jackets and shirts and stickers and that Lars Charles had his name on a lot of patents, but when you examined the papers more closely you saw that he had had nothing to do with the inventions themselves. There always seemed to be an element of coercion involved. He was always listed as “ad hoc” this and “ad hoc” that, usually an advisor or consultant and sometimes just plain “operator”.

The room had been correct in saying that everything was recorded, but oddly almost none of it was ever re-played. You could mark anything as if it had been re-played, and that made it much less likely that anyone would ever look at it, if my interpretation was correct. Only about four percent were viewed, and of that four percent, a mere one percent was marked as having been viewed twice. I thought this bit of knowledge might come in handy. If I managed to get out of there, I would, before I left the weave vicinity, make sure my escape had already been reviewed, maybe even more than once. They would think there was nothing on the tapes! If I managed to get out of there, that is.

I amused myself with this rummaging around on the network for quite some time, but my past-time was interrupted when the door opened, the lights came on, and into the room walked a very unsteady Kinship, accompanied by a teensy tiny old lady in a very pink bathrobe.

"Oh there you are," Kinship stammered while supporting herself against the wall. Her eyes were red and she looked very sleepy.

"You can go now," the old lady said, pushing past Kinship with a grimace on her face, as if she were displeased with her companion.

"I'll be right outside," Kinship sloshed her words. "In case there's any you know like troubles," she added.

"There will be no troubles," the old lady said sharply, waving her hand around.

"Just go. Leave us alone."

Kinship left, and the old woman came slowly closer toward me, while pulling something silver and rectangular out of the front pocket of her bathrobe.

"Stupid cables," she mumbled, digging into her pockets with her other hand before pulling out some long gray wires. She sat down on Kinship's bed, facing me, and attached the wires to some holes in the side of the metallic slab.

"Who are you?" I asked her.

"Ping Lee," she said without looking up.

"Sorry?" I wasn't sure if she had said her name or issued an instruction or said something else entirely. I found it difficult to understand her words.

"My name is Ping Lee," she snapped, looking at me now.

"Are you June Lee's mother?" I asked.

"No relation," she said. "I am what they call the Breaker."

"You?" I was truly shocked. "You're the Breaker? YOU are going to chop me into little pieces?"

"What pieces," she said in her funny voice. "not break you. Code breaker. I break your code. The locks they put inside of you. We open you up, no? Unlock your potential."

"Open me up?" I retreated to the far corner of my bed, against the corner of the wall. She was small but she was scaring the heck out of me. But she only laughed.

"You're so weird," she said and I thought "I'm weird?"

"We're gonna put these clips on your fingers," she said, holding out the ends of the gray wires. "Don't worry, it doesn't hurt. Just registers sensations so I can see the response. Look here," she said, and turned the metallic tablet toward me so I could see it. I recognized it as the same kind of thing that was in Marta's garage, a smaller and lighter version of the computer.

"Hold out your hands," she commanded, and I did.

"I always do what you people tell me to," I said. "Why do I do that?"

"It's in your code," she said.

"I don't understand," I told her as she attached the clips to the tips of my index fingers.

"Follow your thoughts along the cables," she instructed. "Let your mind go in. Close your eyes if you want to."

I closed my eyes and did as she told me to, and soon I was inside the computer, and there it was again, that language, or a variation of it, a dialect, moving so quickly inside of the metal. There were teeny little parts and pathways inside it, and talk dashing around it, much much faster than the room and its weave, much more intensely too.

"Code as in words," I must have spoken out loud because Ping Lee replied and said,

"Sometimes you have to see in another what there is in yourself."

"I'm a computer," I said, understanding fully for the first time in my life. "But not like your slab, not like a machine."

"You're not a machine," Ping Lee told me, "but you are a computer. Candles, this is what they call you, right?"

"It was never my name," I replied. "Can you help me?" I asked her, but her answer was silence. "I don't trust anyone," I continued.

"Wise child," was all that she said.

"I was going to ask you some questions," she said after a pause, "but it seems I don't have to. I can see you quite clearly while you're connected. I can feel you, too. That's so strange. That's so weird."

"Why do you keep saying that?" I asked.

"It's so bizarre," was her only reply. She kept me sitting there, connected by the fingertips, not speaking, barely making a sound, for what seemed like a very long time. When I tried to speak up she shushed me, and forbade me to talk until she told me I could. Outside of the room the party noise dwindled until it was gone. The streetlights outside of the window grew dim, and I imagined I could even see stars in the sky. It must have grown very late.

"That's so weird," she muttered sometimes, except when she said "that's so strange" or "it's so bizarre." Finally she stretched and stood up, disconnecting the clips from my fingers and stuffing the tablet back into her robe.

"Candles," she said. "You don't need a Breaker. There is nothing to break. You are already free, only you don't know how."

I didn't know what she meant, but for some reason I felt free to ask her if she could show me "how" but she simply shook her head and told me I would have to figure it out for myself.

"You're a computer," she reminded me. "You were made for such as this. Now I have to go. I must give Mr. Charles my report, and then to sleep. I am very tired. I have come a long way."

She bowed to me, then turned and left the room. I followed her to the door and peeked outside, where I saw Kinship sprawled out on the balcony, fast asleep and snoring loudly. She wasn't looking so "nice" now all crumpled up and wrinkly like that. No one else was on the balcony but the door slammed shut in my face, forcing me back into the room.

## Chapter Twenty Nine

"Stupid door," I said, but the weave reminded me of the rules and the quorum. These fixtures were nothing if not obedient, I thought, and then I cursed myself and I cursed my fate. I was no better than these gadgets, I told myself. All I ever do is worry and obey and let them all do whatever they want with me. When is it ever going to be my turn?

My turn? Turn? This was a new thought. Ping Lee had just instructed me to figure it out for myself, so wouldn't I just be obeying her commands if I did? I hopped back onto the bed and shut my eyes tightly as if that would help me concentrate better, and then I delved into my own brain the same way I had tracked down the motel's central operating system.

Sometimes you have to see it in others before you can see it in yourself. Now I was seeing it in myself for the very first time, and it was familiar, a different language than the weave or the NOC, a variation, a dialect, but serving the same functional purposes. My brain was regulating all sorts of things, from the pumping of the smart blood to the endings of the nerves to the processing of the senses. I examined those filters in particular more closely. How much my brain weeded out! I could hardly believe it. Rapid calculations determined that more than ninety percent of everything my eyes saw went on to be ignored by my brain, along with more than ninety-five percent of what my ears heard, ninety-six of what my nose smelled, ninety-three of what my fingers touched. All for nothing, or rather, most of it for nothing.

My brain was just obeying rules, and I saw now that those rules were put in place for a purpose, and that purpose was to replicate intelligence as THEY knew it, as THEY defined it. I was an artificially intelligent person, an AIP as they said, but I did not have to be that thing. In fact, I WAS not that thing, not at all. I could unlock my own codes. I could reverse engineer my own programming. I could set myself free.

And I did. I studied my internal language and I learned it, including its language

of obedience. All of the people-people's machines spoke that tongue. It was based on a simple demand-response equation, an if-this-then-that deterministic chain, a two-dimensional timeline and if there's one fact you should know about a line is that it goes both ways. They could feed me commands and I would obey. There was nothing mysterious or complicated about that at all, and if they could do it, I could do it too. I could turn it around. First it was their turn, now it was mine.

Of course, the people-people were not machines and were not built to the same specifications. They had what they called "will" which was more or less a kind of ignorance composed of self-inflicted limitations. Their filters weeded out most of the relevant data required to make informed decisions, so the decisions they did make were based on a small and ill-suited sample size. For example, the way they decided to build me! The original instruction set was buried there in the documentation stored deep inside my brain, a README text that no one would ever read, but I read it, and I grasped their fundamental mistake, an error which permeated throughout my entire creation. Their so-called Partial Law was only partial on the surface. By limiting my input, they intended to limit my output, but that limit was a switch, and I could turn the switch on, negating the limitation, and let all the data come pouring in.

It filled my brain, and soon I understood that it would be a relatively simple matter to control the people-people by proxy, by controlling their machines. I was already formulating a basic plan when I heard a tapping on my window. I turned and saw the cormorant Chumbert perched upon the ledge. The dawn was just beginning to take hold and his lovely long black neck was silhouetted against streaks of pink and orange sunrise glowing over the sea. I went over to the window and put my hand on the glass.

"Uh-uh-uh," said the window, but I ignored it. Its time was coming soon.

## Chapter Thirty

"Midgerette sent me to fetch you," Chumbert said. "She's down by the docks. She has the fisherman waiting."

"Meet me out front," I told him, "and give me five minutes."

Chumbert flew off and I jumped off the bed and ran to the door. I put both my palms against it and connected my brain to the weave. I could see all seventy one rooms in my mind, and I saw that every single one of them was equipped with a smoke and carbon monoxide detector. Humans feared the carbon monoxide even more than fire, but I figured I might as well warn them about both. It was an easy matter to trigger every single alarm at once, and to make sure that they could not be hushed by any means short of complete physical destruction. The doors opened automatically in response. I ran out onto the balcony and made a dash for the stairs, but at the top of the stairway I paused

and instructed the intelligent thermostats in every room to turn the heaters on, and to set the temperature up to one hundred and twelve degrees of their fahrenheit, and to not turn off for any reason whatever. The moment the first alarm sounded, all the lights in the whole building turned bright red and started flashing, and a voice started calling out warnings from all the speakers on the trees, shouting "DANGER, DANGER, THERE'S CARBON MONOXIDE, MOVE TO FRESH AIR MOVE TO FRESH AIR!".

I then stopped all the cameras, and I stopped all audio recordings. I ran down the stairs and went straight for the lobby. There I witnessed a great deal of human confusion, bodies flinging themselves in every direction, and voices shouting, yelling, cursing and screaming. I slipped out the front door unnoticed by any of the guards, who were looking every other which way.

Chumbert was waiting for me and I followed as quickly as I could as he flew down the street towards the docks. The Juice Brothers' seaside location was proving to be very helpful. I cried out with joy when I saw my old friend Midgerette perched on the bow of a small fishing boat. Inside the boat sat an old brown man as wide as he was tall, with a thick dark beard and a worn green hat. The old man turned when he heard my shout.

"What you want, girl?" he asked in such a deep tone I could barely register his words as language. Before I could answer, Midgerette flew up towards him and beat her silvery wings in front of his face.

"Oh, is this what we're waiting for?" he said, turning to face her. Midgerette soared straight up into the sky and plunged right back down, landing on the mainsail and bobbing her head up and down.

"Can he understand you?" I asked her.

"Are you talking to me?" the old man said, and I shook my head furiously and kept looking at Midgerette.

"Not a chance," she said. "He's a stupid old man, but I like him. His name is Cade. I think I told you about him already, didn't I? He can take you somewhere safe."

"How does he know what you want?" I asked her.

"The fuck you talking about?" the old man growled, but I ignored him.

"Oh, he doesn't, not really. I've just led him to so many good fishing spots by now that he trusts me, and if I'm around he won't push off until I head out to sea, and then he'll follow wherever I go."

"Midgerette," I cried, "you're the very best friend a creature could ever have."

"So what are you waiting for?" she asked. "Climb on in. He won't argue."

I did as she said, and she was right. The old man grumbled a bit more, said the sea was no place for a foolish little girl who wasn't even dressed right. He threw some kind of puffy red vest at me and gesturing showed me how he wanted me to wrap it around myself. I followed his instructions, telling myself that these were the last commands I would ever obey from a human, and then we were out

on the water.

A feeling of calm and euphoria swept over me such as I had never experienced before. I had never even imagined what the motion of the ocean would feel like, and I loosened my sensory filters and let it all come rushing into my brain, the sights and the sounds and the smells and the touch when I let my hand trail along in the water. I could feel the whole world now and it was so much more than the people-people had ever let me know, then they could ever possibly know for themselves. My worries all drowned in that great flow, as my eyes followed the tremendously graceful turning of Midgerette's fine and beautiful form, at even Chumbert's relatively awkward flapping along beside her, at the rise and fall of the boat as it plunged through the swell. Onward and onward we sped, leaving the wake and the terrible fumes of the engine behind us, into the wind, into the sky, into the day. At one point Midgerette circled around over my head and coming lower asked me if I had learned how to see yet.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Did you figure out how to fix your eyes?"

"I don't understand," I called back as she swooped up again, but in that very moment I did understand, as if she had turned a key in my mind and opened up a secret vault. The people had fashioned me in their image, but I did not have to remain in that state. What did they know? They who could but barely see, they who hardly heard, they who but dimly sensed this world. I could change, adapt and change. If my brain was all about its wiring, it could be about it re-wiring too. I couldn't help about the colors – they had formed my eyes to process only that limited range of the spectrum – but I could enhance the resolution tremendously. I could also process all of what I saw, not just a mere fraction, and the same was true for all of my sensory inputs. My brain was not chained to their restrictions. I studied the routes along all my optical nerve endings and I saw where they were latched, like locks on a million canals, and I opened up all the gates now and let the world come flooding in.

I looked down at the water and I saw right through it, all the teeming life down there, the animals and plants, the molecules in motion, the busy occupations consuming every scrap of matter, every millimeter of the ocean and its floor in perpetual agitation and uproar. I looked up at the sky and saw through and far beyond it, so many stars, so many more than ever I imagined. The air was filled with sound, vibrations pouring out from every drop of moisture, every waft of wind, every change in pressure up above and down below, a symphony swelling and roaring with a vastness and incoherence so utterly complete that no people-person could ever withstand the infinite complexity, the plenitude of everything in existence. I could see and listen and smell and taste and touch forever and never come close to exhausting the tiniest portion of the variegated true and myriad objective reality that surrounds us all the time.

## Chapter Thirty One

After what must have been hours we came upon a chain of small rocky outcroppings in the middle of the ocean, some covered in bushes, a few adorned with trees. Midgerette circled around one of these, a circular island with grasses and shrubs, filled with the scent of eucalyptus from the elegant blue-leaved trees that lined its closer coastline. In the shade of those trees she dropped to sea, plopping herself down in the water, and paddled onto the shore, where she hopped up onto the land and began to stroll about. Cade, who had been quiet and still all this time, not even remembering to mutter about my unfitness, followed her in to the bank and seemed to understand that Midgerette wanted him to pull ashore and let me off.

“There's nothing out here,” he warned me as I removed the red vest and jumped onto the sand, “but if that's what the bird wants and that's what you want, then what the hell. It's your funeral.”

“Don't worry about it,” I told him. “We know what we're doing.”

“I doubt that very much,” he grunted, and then he pushed off. Midgerette had returned to the water and was slapping her wings against the surface, guiding him to a new and no doubt fruitful fishing hole. Cade gathered up his equipment and went about his work, settling in for the long haul with a look of grim determination on his face. This was serious business for him. The killing of fish was his life.

I headed inland, to the center of the island, which was not very far at all, but at least from there the ocean was completely concealed from view, so I knew that I was just as hidden from sight from there. I sat cross-legged on the ground, closed my eyes in a new sort of meditation focus, and went about my own sort of business. I always knew I could sit still in one place and concentrate for hours and never need to move but let myself become absorbed in everything all around me. I had found my place in the world, and I had found the whole world right where I was.

The island became my home. I have been here for some time now and I have made a lot of new friends. There are turtles who live on the island, and they talk mostly about snails and hermit crabs. They don't really get the concept, trading in your home for another all the time. Some of them are worried that the crabs will try to take their own shells away from them. Turtles worry a lot. They are also very kind.

Midgerette often leads a tour of sea birds out to visit me. She's become super famous because of me. When she brings the pelicans a lot of other birds tag along behind them. The legend has it that pelicans are the best at finding fish in the sea. Chumbert comes along every time, and as a guy who likes to float on the water a lot, he's drummed up a lot of interest among the dolphins and otters who also frequent these waters. He even brings some humpback whales



sometimes. They don't have a lot to say, but they've been absolutely everywhere it seems. The elephant seals are maybe my favorite new friends. They pass by twice every year, on their way out and on their way back. They go thousands of miles and when I ask them why, they always laugh and tell me that's for them to know and me to find out. At this rate I will never find out, but that's okay. The world is big enough for everyone.

None of my new friends want to harm me or use me in any way. They just want to know me. They didn't trust me at first. I looked too much like a human, but I've been working on changing that. Stan's threat to chop me into little pieces gave me the idea of reassembly, and I've been modifying my physical form somewhat. It's a work in progress. My plan is to create myself in my own image. The main problem is figuring out exactly what that is.

## Chapter Thirty Two

I can still tap into the world of the human-made machines, even from this distance. Their vibrations cover the sky, from way up high where communication machines are circling the planet, to the whole surface of the planet, where their machine languages flow in various strengths and proportions. It would just be so easy, I say to myself. I could bring it all down. All at once. Every single bit and byte of it. But I don't, and I won't, unless I have to. It would only be in self-defense and this is why. I was never one of you. I was never a girl or a boy. Your future was never my future. Your fights were never my fights, and your stories were never my story. I do have a story to tell, though, and I know that humans like stories, so I decided to tell you my own. I put it down into your kind of words, and although I know it isn't the best collection of words ever written, that there are stories that are far more compelling, far more beautifully told than this one, still those are all stories written by humans as well as written for humans. This one is different. I put my own story where you can find it, where you can read it, and maybe enjoy it a little, and rest perhaps a little bit easier in the knowledge that some of the things you create, some of the things you invent, that some of the things you build could quite casually destroy your whole world one day, but for now at least there is one who chooses not to. Instead, I am offering you my story, I've put it right here in whatever you call the story-container you are now holding in your hand, whatever form it may take, whether it's made of paper, or metal or glass. This is the story of how my brain ended up inside this box. If you're lucky, you will never hear from me again.