

OH BROTHER, WHAT ART THOU?

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GET THIS. You are not going to believe it. Almost twenty minutes ago Mum calls me for dinner see. So I go out and everyone's at the table because Nan is visiting us, which means we're having one of those special sit-down, can't-have-the-TV-on-under-any-circumstances, forced-to-listen-to-boring-conversation kind of meals together.

Anyway, Nan's grabbed the spot at the head of the table, so I pull up a chair across from Mum and Dad and the first thing I notice is the number of places set. I'm about to say something but Dad calls out, "Jason! Come on, matey. We're waiting to eat here!"

Then mum rolls her eyes and asks, "What does that son of ours *do* in his room all day, anyway?"

Well of course I go to say something *again* but Mum beats me to it. "Finally!" she says looking behind me. "Come on, Jason, hurry up or it's going to get cold."

And before I know it, the chair next to me gets yanked back and I hear, "Shove over, Sis. We all know your bum is enormous but you don't need that much room."

Now I guess that sounds fairly normal right? Just the sort of thing a pea-brained, pain-in-the-butt brother would say to his amazingly beautiful and absolutely average-backside-sized sister?

Sure. Except for this one teensy-weensy detail:

I DON'T HAVE A BROTHER!

In fact, I'm an only child. That's right. Thirteen years ago when my parents copped an eyeful of their cute-as-a-button new-born baby girl, they obviously thought. "Well, you can't improve on perfection, so we might as well give the whole breeding thing a big miss from here on in!"

So let me just repeat – **I DON'T HAVE A BROTHER!**

What I *did* have however, was some strange kid with freckles, a mop of messy hair and an expression like a bored zombie, sprawled beside me at the dinner table, chewing with his mouth open, *claiming* to be my brother, while my parents and my nan just sat there as if this was all perfectly normal!

I must be dreaming, I thought. So I just did what I normally do to jolt myself awake. I closed my eyes, pictured myself in bed and shook my arms and legs about madly.

When I opened my eyes I was still sitting at our dining room table, but now three members of my family plus one complete stranger were gawking at me as if I was an escaped lunatic.

“Teagan, what in the world’s got into you?”

That was Mum.

“You’re not coming down with something are you, sweetie?”

That was Dad.

“Gee T-bum, just when I thought you couldn’t possibly get any weirder, you go and prove me wrong.”

That was my obnoxious, never-seen-him-before-in-my-entire-life brother.

“She’s having a fit! And no wonder. Spends far too much time camped in front of a computer screen—it fries the brain cells!”

And *that* of course was my nan who spends far too much of *her* time telling me about the dangers of computers and warning me all about *me*.

For example:

“Teagan, you’re too pig-headed for your own good!” and you’re too kind, Nan!

“Teagan, if someone tells you to do one thing, you go and do the exact opposite!”
Got me in one, Nan!

“Teagan, you mark my words, that stubborn streak of yours will land you in trouble one day, my girl!” Gee thanks for the pep talk, Nan!

I stared back at the four sets of eyes that were now zeroed in on me. It was definitely time to put an end to all this craziness.

“Okay, well I give up then,” I said jerking my thumb at my non-brother. “Who is this guy and why is he pretending to be part of our family?”

Stranger boy next to me stopped eating for a moment and sat there with his mouth open, displaying a lovely glob of half-chewed food. Mum and Dad glanced at each other briefly, then back at me. Nan jabbed a finger my way.

“I knew it! She’s contracted an Internet virus and now she’s delirious!”

Beside me, my mystery-guest brother grabbed his head, rolled his eyes back and let out a long groan. “Awww, you can *not* be serious. You’re not *still* going on about that stupid camera thing are you, Sis?”

“What stupid camera thing?” Mum wanted to know. Me too.

“*Apparently* her camera’s not working properly so *naturally* I get the blame. Says I borrowed it without asking and then reckons I broke it somehow. I told you a *million* times, Sis, I *never* touched it.”

This was getting way too weird for words. I swung around to face the ring-in at our table.

“This has *nothing* to do with you—*whoever you are*—borrowing my camera. AND STOP CALLING ME “SIS”! I am *not* your sister. And you are *not* my brother. And you know why? Because I don’t *have* a brother. And if I ever *did* have a brother, you can bet your life it wouldn’t be a drop-kick like *you!*”

But I didn’t seem to be getting through to any of them. Nan just sat there making annoying tsk-tsking noises at me, while my “brother” stuffed his face with food (occasionally finding his mouth) and Mum rabbited on to Dad.

“I really don’t know what’s got into the two of them lately, do you? They used to be best mates. Remember all those beautiful sandcastles they spent ages building together at the beach?” Mum said.

Now my head was beginning to spin.

“What are you *talking* about? They were *my* beautiful sandcastles. Nobody helped me! I made them all my . . .”

I jumped up from the table, raced into the lounge room and grabbed the big digital photo frame off the TV cabinet. I’d figure out how I could put a stop to all this madness. I clicked through a few images until I found the one I wanted.

“There!” I said placing it on the table in full view of everyone. “All my own work!”

It was a photo of me—just *me*—sitting proudly behind a huge sandcastle stunningly decorated with driftwood, shells and seaweed.

“Hey, come on, Sis,” my non-existent brother whined, “be fair. *Your* design maybe, but *I* did most of the muscle work. Look,” he said poking his finger at the empty patch of sand beside me on the screen. “I’ve got my trusty spade in my hand.”

“Yes,” Mum said with a frown and pointing to the same vacant space, “but just look at the colour of your shoulders and face, Jason. You were always a devil to keep sunscreen on!”

I squinted at the photo until my eyes stung.

“Wh . . . what are you looking at? There’s noth. . .” But Mum was already busy clicking through more pictures and everyone else was ignoring me and crowding in to get a better look.

“Awww, now *that’s* one of my absolute favourites,” Dad said. “A terrific shot of the both of you. Love those big smiles!”

“*Both* of us?” I said peering at an image of me on a horse. “It’s just *me* in that photo. It’s just me in *all* these photos!”

“Come on, Sis. You’re taking this stupid “my-big-brother-doesn’t-exist-anymore-cause-I’m-really-mad-at-him-even-though-he’s-done-*nothing*-wrong” thing a bit far, aren’t you?”

Everyone’s eyes were now directed my way like I was the odd one out, like I as the one spouting crazy-talk. I began edging away from the table. This wasn’t just weird anymore. It was getting scary.

“I haven’t got a clue what’s going on here, “ I told them, “but I want you all to know it’s SO. NOT. FUNNY!”

I spun around and stamped down the corridor to my room. When I got there I slammed the door behind me, threw myself on the bed and hugged a pillow to my chest. This had become just too freaky for words. I wanted my normal, boring, predictable life back! I decided to go over everything that has just happened to see if I could find some answers.

From the bottom drawer of my bedside table I dug out an old Dictaphone that I’d borrowed from Dad ages ago to record and store all my brilliant world-shattering

ideas. Of course that was before I discovered that I didn't actually have any brilliant world-shattering ideas. Now maybe it was finally going to come in handy.

I sat up in bed and propped a pillow behind my back. I pushed the "power" button and watched the little Dictaphone light glow green. Then I hit "record" and held it close to my mouth.

"Get this. You are so not going to believe it. About twenty minutes ago Mum calls me for dinner, see..."

I'd only just finished recording what could have been the pilot episode for "When Normal Families Turn Nuts!" when a single thump shook my bedroom door.

"Sis, it's me. Can I come in?"

The door started to open so I quickly pressed "Stop" and shoved the voice-recorder under a pillow on my lap. Then my make-believe brother wandered in, spun my desk chair around and plonked himself down on it.

"Hey you're not *still* mad at me are you, Teagan?" Look you gotta believe me I ..."

"You stop right there, mister!" I told him pushing myself back against the bed head.

"But Sis ..."

"I mean it! STOP!" I held up my hand like a traffic cop. "Let's get one thing *perfectly* clear. You are *not* my brother and I am *not* your sister ... well ... okay ... that's really two things ... but I don't care. It's still true. You know it and I know it, and if you don't stop *pretending* that you are my brother immediately then I will start screaming my lungs out until my parents are *forced* to call the police and have you arrested just to shut me up! Now tell me the *truth*. Who are you really?"

It took my fake-brother a while to answer me.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because it's against the rules and anyway you won't believe me."

"Try me."

"Okay, I'm a visitor from another planet."

"Ha! Garbage!"

“Told you.”

“Well alrighty then, ET. Why don’t you just *prove* it to me? Like how about you use your super-duper-extra-special, whiz-bang, inter-galactic, magic powers to ... let’s see ... um ... oh, I know, levitate my iPod off the desk.”

My iPod instantly levitated off the desk, rotated every which way, separated into a hundred different bits and pieces, then reassembled itself, played a blast of “Ta-daaa!”-type music and returned exactly to where it had been.

I screamed. Loud and long.

Dad’s voice drifted in the form the lounge room. “Come on, you two. That’s enough now. Sort out your differences. No more fighting. I mean it!”

I had a feeling our *differences* might be more humungous than my father could ever imagine.

“But ... but ... how ... how did you ... *do* that?”

“Easy. I just used my super-duper, extra-special, whiz-bang, inter-galactic, magic powers.”

My brain felt like it was about to pop. A visitor from outer space? That was just too corny and too way out there to be true. Wasn’t it?

“You ... you don’t ... *look* ... like you’re from another planet.”

“I’m wearing a Subatomic Molecular Image Refraction and Distortion Shell.”

“Of course you are,” I said in a daze. “I heard they’re all the rage this summer.”

“Perhaps if I disengaged it for you?”

The would-be alien closed his eyes and his whole body glowed and shimmered. His messy hair morphed into a smooth, neat covering like velvet, his cheeks rose, his nose shrank, his ears pushed close against his head and his freckled skin became as flawless as an air-brushed supermodel’s. He reopened his eyes. They were larger than before and a deeper bluey-green colour. He smiled. His teeth were perfect. Then I noticed that a skin-tight material that clung to every curve of his body had replaced his old T-shirt and jeans. A single thought floated around my head.

He’s hot as!

(Of course it was perfectly okay for me to think this because, remember, he wasn’t *really* my brother, he was just an alien.)

Then he spoke with a voice as smooth and sweet as honey.

“In your language my name is pronounced Darvan. I hope we can be friends.”

For a moment I thought I was going to pass out or be sick of possibly both. My imposter-brother was actually from another planet! Aliens had landed! We were being invaded! I had to tell someone, but even if I did, who in their right mind would believe me?

That’s when I remembered the Dictaphone I was still clutching under the pillow on my lap. I ran my finger over the buttons and selected what I knew was “record.”

“Well, go on,” I said, “if you really want us to be friends, you have to tell me the truth. All of it.”

Darvan studied me closely like he was making up his mind. Then he spoke.

“Fine. If you want the truth, then this is it. You were right of course about me lying. I am not your brother. I come from a planet not unlike your own, but many galaxies away. My people have come here in peace. We wish only to learn about your civilization, so that we can better help and protect you.”

“Help? what makes you think we ... ah ... earthlings ... need *your* help anyway?”

“Global warming? Hole in the ozone? Species extinction? Pollution?”

“Oh yeah, right.”

“We are far more advanced than you and have the technology to fix those problems. We can secretly guide your top scientists and innovators in the right direction.”

“But wait on, my parents aren’t scientists or innovators. Mum’s an accountant and Dad’s a counsellor. What big discovery could you possibly be “guiding” them towards?”

“I am not an Advanced Technology Facilitator yet, but I hope to be. I am only young – like you. This is what we call an *imbedding*. I am in your family to learn as much as I can about your race and your customs. You have nothing to fear from me.”

“So you’re here like ... on work experience?”

Darvan smiled and nodded.

“But you also said something about protecting us. Protecting us from what exactly?”

“Attack. Invasion. Not everyone in the known universe is friendly.”

“You’re telling me that there are some bad guys out there?”

A corner of Darvan's mouth twitched slightly. "Oh yes. *Very* bad."

"Well, protecting and helping *sounds* okay, but what about Mum and Dad and Nan? What have you done to them?"

"They have undergone a Temporary Reality Adjustment. I assure you, the procedure is completely safe and reversible. They now believe they have a son and grandson called Jason and everything they see and hear will always conform to that reality."

"So how come I didn't get the adjustment thingy, too?"

"You did. But you have obviously resisted and rejected it. An extremely rare thing. You must have a *very* strong mind."

Woohoo! Chalk up a win for Team Pig-headed! Take that, Nan. Looks like it pays sometimes to do the opposite of what you're told. I restrained myself from pumping a fist into the air, but I couldn't stop myself from blushing, just a little.

"So what do you alien types do when the old Temporary Memory Adjustment has an epic fail?"

Darvan Smiled.

"We do a one-on-one," he said and his beautiful eyes met mine.

All at once all the confusion, anger and fear I'd been feeling just evaporated and I was completely calm. Darvan's pupils were shining back at me like opals, full of light and fire and hidden layers. They were drawing me in, leading me gently but firmly further and further down a long hallway deep into his mind.

A thousand memories began to fill my head and file themselves away like books in a library. Birthday parties. Holidays. The beach. Sandcastles. Me and my brother playing together. Jason laughing at me and digging in the sand with his spade.

But I wasn't about to be sucked in by the old Temporary Reality Adjustment trick. No way! I had a "very strong mind", remember. Darvan had no idea who he was up against!

Concentrating with all my strength I pulled back against the force that was trying to suck me in. Too easy! I was beating it! I could feel my real memories returning as I withdrew more and more from the grip of Darvan's mind.

I was almost totally free when I saw it—or rather sensed it.

It was like a wormhole or a doorway to another part of Darvan's consciousness, but it was locked and bolted with a big STAY OUT! THIS MEANS YOU! sign nailed on the front. I hesitated for a moment then moved my own mind towards it. It pushed me away. Something was hidden in Draven's alien mind that he definitely didn't want me to know about.

Maybe Darvan wasn't all he seemed? Maybe there was another layer to his Subatomic Shell thingy and he wasn't so hot-looking after all? Maybe he and his "people" were really scaly and lizard creatures with gross, pointy teeth, beady eyes and ugly flicking tongues?

And what if he'd lied and he and all his mates weren't really here to *learn* and *help* like he claimed? What if they were here for lunch and to help themselves—to us! What if *they* were the bad guys we needed protection from?

The truth had to be hidden somewhere behind that imaginary door in Darvan's mind, but he was holding me back and forcing me away. He was telling me I had to leave. He was *telling* me I was forbidden to enter.

Well, hard luck, Space Boy. Like Nan will tell you, no one makes Teagan Carter do something she doesn't want to do!

I summoned all my powers of pig-headedness and in one final effort, willed myself forward. Just as I did, all resistance gave way and I plunged through the door and deep into Darvan's mind.

Suddenly everything was revealed to me and I finally knew the truth. I had been right all along. He was lying!

It was Dad's voice that finally brought me back to the bedroom.

"What's this then? A good old-fashioned staring competition or are you two just giving each other the silent treatment?"

I turned away from the freckled face and the mop of hair I'd been gazing at to find Mum, Dad and Nan all squeezed around my doorway.

"Here," Mum said stepping forward and placing a plate on my desk, "these are guaranteed to help bring about a truce. A bunch of Nan's homemade gingerbread men for both of you to share nicely."

“Gingerbread men and *women*,” Nan added. “I didn’t burn my bra back in the sixties for nothing.”

“Just hope you remembered to take it off first, Nan!”

Everybody laughed.

I laughed too.

“Yeah, good one, Jason...” I began to say, but stopped. I turned back to the dopy face that was grinning back at me. and I remembered. He was a liar. And soon his own words were going to help me prove it!

I whipped the Dictaphone out from under the pillow on my lap and rewound it to just the right spot. I smiled up and the confused face sitting opposite me.

“Thought you were going to get away with it, didn’t you?”

After turning the volume up high, I held the Dictaphone towards my parents and Nan.

“Listen up everyone,” I said and stabbed “Play”, The Dictaphone crackled into life. My voice came on first.

“Well, go on,” I heard myself say. “if you really want to be friends, you have to tell me the truth. All of it”

I waited eagerly for the reply that I knew was coming.

“Fine. If you want the truth, then this is it. You were right of course about me lying.”

I beamed a triumphant smile around the room. “But wait, there’s more!” I said and the confession on the voice recorder continued.

“I did break your camera. But It was an accident, Sis. I borrowed it to take some shots for my Facebook profile and sort of dropped it on the floor. I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d go nuts about it. but I thought it would be okay, honest.”

A deathly silence settled around the room. I was the one who shattered it.

“See! I *told* you he took my camera, but you wouldn’t believe me! I *told* you he broke it. I *told* you he was lying!”

Mum and Dad and Nan were now all frowning daggers at Jason. It was awesome! Dad looked grim.

“Well, mate, on the positive side I suppose you *did* fess up ... eventually. But I’ll still expect you to pay for the repairs out of your own pocket money and as for the lying part—consider yourself grounded for two weeks.”

Jason groaned and slumped down in his chair.

“Now, no more fighting, you two,” Mum said as she and Dad and Nan filed out of the room. “it’s about time you showed a bit more maturity—*both* of you.”

When they’d gone I looked at my brother. You know, maybe Mum was right. Maybe it was time, to show some maturity. I moved to the edge of the bed and reached out to Jason. Then I punched him hard in the arm.

“Grrrounded, suckerrr!” I laughed. “That’ll teach you to mess with me.”

Jason held up his hand in surrender as he leaned back on the chair and stuck his dirty feet on the end of the bed.

“All right T-bum, you win—this round at least. You really got me with that recorder thing.”

“Tell me about it. Sucked. You. Right. In!”

That made my brother laugh for some reason. Then he gave his shoulder a shrug and grabbed one of the gingerbread women from the plate and looked at it closely.

“Oh well, it’s only for two weeks. I’ll survive. After all; he said with a typical Jason Carter know-it-all smirk, “It’s not like it’s ... the end of the world.”

Then he chomped the head clean off his gingerbread biscuit and shoved the rest in his mouth before adding, “Not yet, anyway.”

I shook my head as Jason munched away loudly. When he saw me watching he narrowed his beady eyes and flicked a revolting biscuit-covered tongue my way.

My brother can be so weird and disgusting that I find it hard to believe that we’re related.

Sometimes I wonder if we’re even from the same planet!