

# Chapter 1: Birds, Bees and Trains

It was a pleasant spring morning. The sun was warm, the skies were blue, and the leaves were green. A rainbow blanket of flowers blossomed everywhere, and the butterflies and bees were humming about, busier than ever.

The morning commute was in motion. Roads were crammed with cars, and a serenade of engines and horns swept across the city. A few hours ago, everyone was fast asleep. Now, most were headed to a place they'd rather not go, to spend time doing something they'd rather not do. That was the case for Artour and Jaden.

It was an average morning for them, travelling to school on board the metro-train. They sat in the same booth they always did. Artour had scruffy brown hair, which covered his dark brown eyes, and he wasn't overly tall. Not compared to Jaden, who was tall and slender. Jaden had a strong jaw, neat hair, and wide brown eyes. The grey pants they wore creased, and the woolly blue jumpers tattered, with an untucked shirt underneath, hanging down their legs. They hated their uniform and it showed.

Jaden was chewing gum. He entertained himself by combining the entire pack into one large clump. Artour looked out the window, watching the tree-branches dance across his eyes.

‘There are more stars in the universe than grains of sand on all the beaches combined, right?’ said Artour.

‘Yep,’ said Jaden, expanding his gum into a bubble until it burst. ‘And our sun is a pretty ordinary star,’ he added, cleaning his face.

‘And there are more atoms in our bodies than stars in the visible universe, right?’ said Artour, brimming with energy.

‘Yep and those atoms came from stars,’ replied Jaden, putting the gum back in his mouth. ‘It’s only been a week since we watched Cosmos. What are you getting at?’

Artour stood up, knocking his bag from the seat to the ground.

‘We need to choose our university preferences today. But how are we supposed to know what to do? We’re seventeen!’ he yelled, emphatically.

‘It’s dumb,’ said Jaden. ‘I don’t think anyone knows,’ he added, throwing his gum into the bin.

A small, caramel-skinned student sitting behind them noticed the commotion and leaned in. He had a slender neck, and his wavy jet-black hair was saturated with gel.

‘Except for me,’ said the boy, in a gentle voice. ‘I want to be a doctor. Just like my dad.’

‘Geniuses don’t count, Sumail,’ said Artour. ‘Besides, do you want to, or is it to please your old man?’

‘No. I want to,’ replied Sumail. He paused for a moment and scratched his head. ‘I think...’. Less sure of himself than before, he withdrew to his seat and dissolved into his thoughts.

The train pulled up at the next stop. A group of loud and obnoxious students hopped on board. They skipped the ticket-machine and headed to the end booth. The tallest member was tall and blonde, with blue eyes and pale skin. He bumped shoulders with everyone he passed along the way. The knock startled Sumail and he yelped in pain.

‘Damn it. Tom Lambert is such a douchebag,’ said Artour. ‘Weren’t you friends with him?’

‘Yeah, in primary school,’ said Jaden, checking his shoulder. ‘We played Pokémon every day after school for a year. He was alright back then. Now he’s an asshole.’

‘Found his career already,’ added Artour, laughing. He searched his bag and pulled out a white envelope.

‘This paper holds the fate of my future,’ said Artour. ‘I don't know what to do.’

‘What courses did you pick?’ said Jaden.

‘Journalism, Law and Psychology,’ said Artour, nervously. ‘But I don’t care about any of them.’ He scratched his head. ‘Mum and dad think I’d be a good lawyer.’

‘You probably would,’ said Jaden. ‘But only if you liked it. You’ve got to enjoy something to be good at it. That’s what my dad always says.’

Artour nodded.

‘He wants me to do computer science because I’m always on the computer,’ said Jaden.

‘That sort of makes sense,’ replied Artour.

‘Yeah. But I haven’t written anything yet,’ said Jaden. He looked down with a sad expression. ‘I’m not ready for life to get serious.’

‘Will we ever be?’ replied Artour. ‘Two years ago, we had had sleepovers every weekend, playing video games and doing whatever we wanted.’

‘That was true freedom,’ said Jaden. ‘When did life become such a drag?’

Artour shrugged.

A deflated and confused mood swept across their booth. They sat in silence as the train rolled on, indifferent to their lives and problems. People entered and exited at every stop. There were many different types. The students were the liveliest bunch, filled with energy, and chattering to pass the time. It was a stark contrast to the adults, who seemed emotionless and expressionless. Disconnected from the world and each other. Jaden seemed to notice. How sad, he thought.

Artour was looking at a group of businessmen crowded in a booth. He couldn’t tell them apart. They were neat and well-groomed, with slicked-hair and expensive suits, each with a different shade of grey. There were no signs of life. No human interaction, or eye-contact. Their heads were buried into phones and tablets. Some signed paperwork,

others checked stock. Anything to keep them distracted. When one was ready to leave, he stood up and tiptoed around the others, who hardly slid out of the way. It wasn't long before the empty seat was filled with another businessman, and the cycle continued. He shook his head in disbelief.

'These people are zombies,' said Artour. 'It's scary. Do you think they're happy?'

'I wouldn't think so,' said Jaden. 'They probably make good money though.'

'Maybe,' said Artour, taking another glance. 'But shouldn't life be more than that? I don't want to end up like them.'

'Neither,' replied Jaden.

They slumped into their seats. The train stopped, and another group of students came on board. This time they were all girls from a different school. Their uniforms were green and beige, with brown skirts and socks. Hidden among them was a girl with curly brown hair and emerald-green eyes. She was the least noticeable, but also the prettiest. Her footsteps were softer than snowflakes. The others pushed and shoved to find a seat, but she was content with standing and found a place against a window.

There was a subtle and mysterious energy about her. Artour and Jaden were completely entranced.

'She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen,' said Artour.

'The first ever ten out of ten,' said Jaden.

‘She's the type of girl The Beatles would write songs about. And she wouldn't even care,’ said Artour.

They were smitten and sat with dumbfounded expressions as the train moved on. Their stop was drawing closer and closer to the city-centre, and the next stop was a station in the parklands. It was a place where nature and cityscape existed in harmony. Buildings and roads kissed oceans of green and blue. Passengers seemed indifferent to the serene view, but it inspired something in Jaden.

‘Chilling with your best friend, seeing a beautiful girl, and falling in love. That’s what life is about,’ said Artour.

‘Falling in love?’ said Jaden. ‘That didn’t take long!’

Artour punched him in the arm. Jaden scowled and gave him one back.

‘It’ll happen one day,’ said Artour.

‘Why not today?’ replied Jaden. ‘I’m sick of waiting for a day that never comes.’ He pointed outside the window. ‘Screw the future. Look how awesome today is!’

‘What are you getting at?’ replied Artour, with caution.

The intercom blared its next announcement, obnoxiously interrupting them.

‘Next stop: Parkland East Station,’ said the intercom.

‘Let’s ditch school,’ said Jaden. ‘I don’t know what to do. Neither do you.’

‘But what about the preferences? If we miss the deadline...’ replied Artour.

‘Screw the preferences,’ said Jaden. ‘If we send these in, we’ll be stuck on a road. And that could be a bad road.’

Artour stirred for a moment, intrigued. Jaden noticed. He knew this was a good opening and threw another verbal curveball.

‘A terrible road,’ he added. ‘I’m tired of thinking about the future.’

Jaden pointed to a brittle old man sitting nearby. The man’s eyes were tired and sad. He had coarse and braised skin, and his hair was whiter than snow. He wheezed and coughed every few seconds.

‘See that old man over there?’ said Jaden. ‘That will be us one day.’

Artour still seemed unsure. His heart and mind were racing.

‘Think about everything you said before about atoms and stars. Is there anything to lose?’ said Jaden.

Artour had to think for a moment. He took everything in. He studied the old man, the businessmen, the other students, the beautiful girl. He looked down for a moment, and then looked outside.

‘You’re right,’ said Artour. ‘You’re right’.

Jaden cheered. He launched himself in the air, nearly losing his balance.

The train was approaching the parkland and began to stop.

‘There’s something I need to do before we step off,’ said Artour.

‘Me too,’ said Jaden.

They stood up, grabbed their bags, and turned in opposite directions.

Jaden walked towards the back of the train and approached Tom Lambert.

‘Hey yo, Tom,’ said Jaden. ‘You screwed me over with that trade in year five. I want my Charizard back.’ He turned his back before Tom could say anything.

Tom looked confused and embarrassed but played it cool.

‘Loser!’ he yelled, snickering with his friends.

Artour walked towards the front and approached the beautiful girl. She was more and more beautiful with each step. Sunlight trickled in from the window behind her, dancing around her body. Artour thought she was a goddess, and now he knew for sure. Music blared from her earphones. It was so loud, he wondered how her eardrums were still in-tact.

Time slowed down. It didn’t even exist anymore, and gravity seemed denser than ever. Artour was nervous. He took a deep breath and politely tapped her on the shoulder.

She took her left earphone out and turned toward him.

‘Hey,’ said Artour, smiling.

‘Hey,’ she replied, looking surprised.

Artour was spellbound. He wanted to say more, but the words wouldn’t come. The girl looked at him expectantly, widening her eyes. The train came to a sudden halt. Artour lost his footing and tumbled.

Everyone saw and laughed. Especially Tom Lambert, who did his best to make matters worse. The girl seemed concerned, but even she had a little giggle. Artour blushed with embarrassment.

‘Are you ok?’ she said.

Artour wanted to reply but the words wouldn’t come. He couldn’t even pick himself up off the ground. Jaden scurried over to save the day.

‘He’s fine,’ he said, lifting Artour from his collar. ‘We need to go.’

She watched in the distance as they moved towards the open door. A soft breeze caressed their faces.

‘You still want to do this?’ said Jaden.

Artour looked over his shoulder and noticed everyone was staring, even the girl. He seemed to have sparked her curiosity.

‘More than ever,’ replied Artour, placing his arm around Jaden.

‘One small step for man.’

‘And one giant leap for all mankind’ said Jaden, laughing.

They leapt out the door and into a day filled with infinite possibilities.