

CONNOR'S BRAIN



MALCOLM ROSE

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Connor's Brain
by Malcolm Rose

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*For Kay
With thanks for her help.*

*I would also like to thank
Daniel L. Schacter for Searching For Memory,
Michael Paul Mason for Head Cases
and Paul Hoffman for The Man Who Loved Only Numbers.*

*All of the brain disorders in this book are taken from real cases but the
patients themselves are entirely fictional.*

*The excerpt on page 16 is from Funnybones
by Janet and Allan Ahlberg
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CHAPTER 1

Joy lost her childhood at the age of fourteen.

At the end of the summer term, she was tossed from a moving car like a bag of rubbish. Dazed, dumped and abused, Joy fell into the gutter under the railway bridge. She rolled onto her front, gagged and blacked out. A little blood ran from her forehead into the rainwater, making a pink puddle. The first passer-by hesitated only to take a photo of her on his mobile. The fifth passer-by hesitated, squatted down by her side and then called an ambulance.

Like other girls before her, Joy Patterson had been groomed, introduced to men, seduced by their glamorous lifestyle, fooled into thinking she was loved, passed around, paid with drink and drugs, exploited until she was soiled and spent, and finally discarded on a street in central Leeds.

Stripped of her innocence, she was second-hand, unwanted.

CHAPTER 2

Connor began his second life at the age of fifteen.

There were three people in the room. A man and a woman were holding hands on a sofa in the corner and a younger woman was sitting behind the desk. She was a funny colour. The couple looked sad and the dark woman was smiling in a serious sort of way. Connor could not recall any of them. His eyes were attracted more by the single red-topped volcano that poked out from the clutter on the desk.

The younger woman jumped up with a bright, 'Hello, Connor.' She was shorter than Connor but she seemed much more grown-up. While she ushered him to a seat at the side of her desk, she asked, 'Do you remember me?'

'Erm ...'

'I saw you this morning. I'm Ranji Nawaz – the doctor looking after you from now on. You're going home today but, every other day, you'll come and spend some time here with me.'

'Oh.' Connor shuffled round on his seat to get nearer to the volcano.

The doctor leaned towards him and said in a friendly voice, 'Your mum and dad and I have been thinking about what to tell you, how much to tell you. In the end, we decided you should know everything, so I'm going to explain exactly what's happened to you. We think that's best.'

Connor drifted. He put out his hand and touched the velvety

top of the volcano. At the same time, he sniffed. 'Volcanoes smell.'

'Volcano. Yes,' Ranji said. 'We call it a *flower*, Connor. It's a nice smell and someone bought it for me because it's my birthday today.'

'Birthday.' Connor nodded uncertainly. He didn't know what she meant.

'If I'm going to tell you all about yourself, it's easiest to show you with pictures.'

She picked up a photograph and held it out so that Connor could see it. He was used to looking at pictures and trying to explain them, but this one was weird. There was no action to describe. He'd seen nothing like it before. It didn't seem to be anything – just a fantastic shape. It was all wrinkly and grey, like a partly deflated kicking ball. Finally losing interest in the volcano, Connor stared at the extraordinary image, in the same way that he would sometimes focus on clouds and find faces, animals and fierce monsters in their fragile forms.

'This,' Ranji said, 'is a normal brain. It's a sort of photograph of what's inside a head.'

'Wow,' Connor replied, suddenly enthusiastic. He stood up, put out his hand and ran his eels across the strange, wonderful picture. Then he clutched his own head. 'I've got hair and funnybone. No bottle. No see inside.'

For a moment, Ranji seemed puzzled. Then she said, 'I've got a special way of taking pictures through hair, skin and bone. I've got a really clever machine that doesn't need a window to see a brain. It can even take a picture of what's inside the brain. Like this.' She picked up a brain scan and showed it to him.

It was even weirder. Marbled grey with splashes of red and black. Even more like clouds. Storm clouds. Open-mouthed, Connor was enthralled.

'When I used the machine on you, Connor, I got a picture of what's inside your brain. Do you want to see?'

Connor nodded eagerly.

'Here it is.' She held it up next to the other picture.

When he gazed at it, Connor felt a warm shiver engulf his whole body. He had never felt anything like that before. Not

that he could remember anyway. Awestruck, he placed a reverent eel on the shiny paper and traced the outline of the image, slowly and carefully. 'Mine,' he whispered. The picture enchanted and thrilled him. His hand came to rest by the black hole on one side. His brain was different. The normal one didn't have a hole. 'Mine's best,' he murmured slowly. 'Pretty shape.'

'Let me tell you as best I can what this pattern means.' Ranji took a deep breath. 'That hole means you have part of your brain missing, Connor. Your memory and most of the things you knew have gone, but you can learn quite a bit again. You know yourself you've already learned a lot. You've done really well. Come to the window.' She pointed at it and added, 'What you call a bottle.'

But Connor was still preoccupied with his brain scan. To distract him, Ranji took his hand and walked with him to the view over the city.

'Look down into the street. See? It's packed with cars. How fast do you think the cars are going? Do you know about speed?'

Now captivated by Ranji's hand, Connor exclaimed, 'You've got something on it.' He poked at the hard and shiny surface attached to her soft peel.

Ranji smiled. 'Yes. It's called a ring.'

Connor watched her take off the shiny yellow band and hold it out for him. She let it drop into his palm and he looked at it closely, turning it over and over. 'What's it for?'

'It's ... a decoration really.'

'Decoration.' Connor closed his fist around it.

Behind him, the man who had not uttered a word, said, 'Give it back to Dr Nawaz now, Connor.'

Reluctantly, he held it out to her.

She said, 'Thanks,' and slid it back onto her eel. 'Look out of the window at the cars, Connor.'

They were three floors up from the road and, below them, the street was seething.

Connor muttered, 'Cars?' He had been shown photographs of cars, but he did not recognize them in the street. That was the wrong place for them. They belonged in pictures.

'Yes. They're called cars. People drive them to get from place to place.'

'What place? Where?'

'Some are going to work, some are going home, but do you know what speed they're doing?'

Connor shook his head vacantly. Again, he didn't know what she was talking about.

'They're going very slowly. Thirty miles an hour at most. But you know, people buy cars that'll go over a hundred miles an hour. A lot of those down there are very powerful. They can zoom – very fast – but here in the city they can only do thirty miles an hour.'

'Why?'

'Because of the crowds, because there's a law that says they mustn't go faster. That's the speed limit. So, they can't use all their power.' She walked him back to her desk and held up the scan of the normal brain. 'That's like a hundred-miles-an-hour brain, Connor. It's very powerful, but people with this type of brain don't use all its strength. Like cars that could go at a hundred miles an hour, they still stick to thirty. You, Connor, have a thirty-miles-an-hour brain. It won't go any faster. You have to accept that. But it means it'll work just as well as everyone else's, because they're not going at full speed. You've just got to learn how to use yours as best you can. Because it's a different sort of brain, it'll mean you'll do things in different ways. It'll take a bit of getting used to, but you'll get there.' She smiled at him again. 'What you need now is driving lessons.'

The woman was talking *to* him, not talking about him to the other people in the room as if he wasn't there at all. She spoke clearly, slowly – but not too slowly – and not too loud. She didn't treat him like an idiot. Even so, he could barely understand her words, but the picture ... The picture was different. The picture of a no-zoom brain he could understand. He took it and clutched it against his chest as if it were a teddy bear. Indifferent to Ranji's word explanation, he asked, 'Why is your peel a funny colour?'

The quiet man interrupted. 'Connor, we don't ...'

'It's all right,' Ranji cut in. 'It's because my family originally

came from another country, a country where everyone has dark skin.'

Connor turned away from the nice woman who took pretty pictures and looked at the other two. 'Who are you?' he asked innocently.

The man's mouth opened hesitantly. 'We're your parents, Connor. Mum and Dad. You ate lunch with us a little while ago.'

Connor tilted his head to one side and gazed at them with curiosity. The man was big and his knuckles were white. His head peel was shiny with no hair, so he looked like a funnybone man. Strangely, the woman clutched a small piece of white cloth between both hands. She had bare legs, lines round her eyes and her hair was patchy – brown and grey.

'No,' Connor declared simply. 'Don't remember.'



Malcolm Rose is an established, award-winning author, noted for his gripping crime/thriller stories – all with a solid scientific basis.

Before becoming a full-time writer, Malcolm was a university lecturer and researcher in chemistry.

He says that chemistry and writing are not so different. *'In one life, I mix chemicals, stew them for a while and observe the reaction. In the other, I mix characters, stir in a bit of conflict and, again, observe the outcome.'*