

Genius At Work

“Hey,” Irwin said as he met Louis at the door. “Come on in.”

Irwin walked back into his lab, formerly known as the family garage but having been converted into a lab when his parents realized Irwin was a genius back in grade 3. That was three years ago, and the lab had only become more densely packed with the likes of flonometers and gigascopes since then. Those probably weren't the right words, Louis knew, but he had trouble keeping up with Irwin's thinking at the best of times, let alone remembering what anything in the lab was called.

Baseball was Louis's love. It was simple and beautiful, nothing like all the hard, mechanical, weird stuff here in the lab. He followed Irwin through the maze of perplexing machinery.

“So what's the big secret?” Louis asked. They walked past an apparatus of glass bottles and winding hoses, where something green was boiling and smelled like a cross between belly button lint and that old cheese his grandad liked.

“My biggest accomplishment yet,” Irwin said. He leaned against a platform raised three feet off the ground. The platform was metal, about a foot across, with wires running up the stand to its underside. There was a second one exactly like it a few feet away. Both platforms were connected to a series of devices—including tunograms and primopeters, no doubt—which were all wired in to a desktop computer and a laptop computer, both of which had been stripped down and re-made, Frankenstein monster-like. The desktop computer was now cooled by tubes connected to canisters of liquid nitrogen.

“Bigger than superrubber?” Louis asked. Irwin's new kind of rubber could not only vastly extend the life of tires—basically revolutionizing the industry overnight—but even more importantly to a kid, made *amazing* rubber balls.

“Bigger,” Irwin smiled.

“Bigger than that bubblegum that never loses its flavor?” Louis asked. That had been a particular favorite of his, though until Irwin perfected the sugar-free version, Louis wasn't allowed to have it much.

“*So much* bigger,” Irwin said.

“Well, spill it,” Louis was getting impatient. It still sometimes frustrated him the way Irwin would do a dramatic tease leading up to his big reveal. It had been the same when they'd first met years ago in school: Louis was having trouble with his baseball pitching and Irwin—who Louis didn't know at the time other than he was the small kid with glasses from that other class—approached him one recess and said that he could help.

Louis blew the offer off at first. But as the days passed and Louis's pitching actually got worse, he finally agreed. Irwin pulled out a binder and flipped past pages of equations and theorems and bad sketches—Louis thought he saw what was supposed to be a flaming plane in the jaws of a dinosaur—and finally stopped at a page with a large, poor diagram of a baseball on it, with a small stick figure of what Louis guessed was supposed to be a pitcher. The images were surrounded by lots of math jargon, numbers, and notes.

Louis wasn't sure if any of it was English. He looked at Irwin, who beamed with pride.

“What's this?” Louis asked.

“How to improve your throw,” Irwin said.

Louis looked back at the page. It made his head hurt.

Irwin's smile quickly faded. “You don't get it?”

“Would anyone?” Louis arched an eyebrow.

Irwin sighed. “This would really help you, though.”

“So show me,” Louis said, handing Irwin the baseball.

“You sure you're ready?” Irwin smiled at him, squinting in the sunlight.

“Show me,” Louis said, getting frustrated.

“Alright,” Irwin finally relented. “So this is how you usually hold the ball...”

Now, years later and back in the lab, Irwin was smiling again. And Louis was once again getting ready to throttle him.

"I've accomplished large scale teleportation," Irwin said.

"Teleportation," Louis echoed.

Irwin nodded, smile widening.

Louis looked again at each of the two platforms, then the super-cooled computer, then back to Irwin.

"Does it work?"

"Of course it works," Irwin said, a touch offended. "I teleported an apple this morning." He gestured to a plate on a nearby table. It had apple sauce on it. Louis looked from it to Irwin. "Yeah, I know," Irwin granted. "But I've got it now. I know what happened."

"Me too," Louis said.

"No," Irwin said, waving it off. "I mean, I know how it happened. It's already fixed. I'd just forgotten to carry a one in a calculation."

Louis looked sidelong at the apple sauce, unconvinced. For all Irwin's brilliance, a lot of what he made initially had something wrong with it. Before the superrubber was perfected, it liquified in sunlight. Before the everlasting bubblegum made its public debut, it got scalding hot when it came in contact with saliva. Louis had learned over his years of friendship with Irwin that genius is sometimes a process.

"Look," Irwin said, turning around and reaching into a container. "To show you how confident I am that it's fixed," he turned back to Louis, holding a rat upright in his hands, "I'm sending Captain Whiskers through the teleporter next."

Louis looked at Captain Whiskers.

Captain Whiskers looked at Louis. There may have been a hint of desperation in those beady black eyes; a primal awareness that something, somewhere was very wrong, and that he was at the centre of it.

Louis had a soft spot for animals. Furry ones in particular. He felt obliged to say something. "I don't think—"

"It'll be fine," Irwin waved him off, placing Captain Whiskers on the platform he'd been leaning against. "But in case anything goes wrong," he fished something out of his pocket and presented it to Louis on an open palm. "I made him this."

It was a rat-sized crash helmet.

"Yeah, that should do the trick," Louis rolled his eyes.

Irwin ignored him and strapped it onto Captain Whiskers, who now struck Louis as an endearing mix of cute and ridiculous.

"Ok, stand back," Irwin shooed Louis back past the computers, which Irwin began madly typing on. First the laptop, then the desktop, then back again. Then he tweaked a knob on an oscilloscizer, flipped some switches on a vermaspec, checked the gyronomer to ensure everything was on the up and up, and held a finger over the Enter key of the desktop computer. He looked at Louis, smiling widely. "Oh," he said. He slid out a container on a shelf and pulled out sunglasses, handing them to Louis.

"Cool," Louis acknowledged, taking them as Irwin put on his own.

"Yes, they are," Irwin said. "But also practical. Teleportation like this involves folding space, and opening a wormhole between the two nodes tends to show momentary glimpses into other dimensions, which may drive humans insane. These glasses have been designed to off-set those wavelengths. They're filtered to just our reality." He finally turned to Louis, who held his gaze for a long moment.

"Kind of like how looking through a red filter will remove the red from what you see," Irwin explained.

"Only, in this case, with beings that could make your brain turn to goo." He made a quick check to ensure Captain Whiskers hadn't escaped from the platform. "Of course, there's a small chance they won't work."

Louis's face dropped. "How small is this chance?"

"Oh, less than ten percent, for sure," Irwin said, hitting the Enter button to execute the program.

A quickly rising whine of machinery, and with the small pop of a sudden vacuum, Captain Whiskers disappeared in a blink of light.

Irwin and Louis turned their heads slightly to look at the second platform.

And kept looking at it.

"Just checking," Louis finally said after a long pause. "Should teleportation be faster than walking the same distance?"

"Something's wrong," Irwin confirmed. He typed on his laptop keyboard. Then on the desktop. Line after line of programming code scrolled by. Seconds passed. And then more. Without a clue of what Irwin was looking for and with nothing to do and unable to make sense of anything around him, Louis was getting bored fast. "There," Irwin stopped the scrolling and pointed to something on the screen.

"Forget to carry another one?" Louis asked.

"No," Irwin said, missing or ignoring the sarcasm. "This is supposed to be pi divided by infinity, not infinity divided by pi. So stupid!" He began typing to correct the problem. "Rookie mistake."

"So... where's Captain Whiskers?" Louis asked.

"Well, that changed everything," Irwin said as he typed. "It'll be a challenge, but I'm confident I can get him back safe and sound."

And so he did. Until then, however, in negative space just beyond the edge of theoretical reality, Captain Whiskers drifted in his crash helmet. He had, as a result of the teleportation glitch, been given the intelligence of an average human teenager, and was painfully aware of what had just happened.

"Crap," he said.