

SUPERGIFTED

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1

SUPERGENIUS

DONOVAN CURTIS

The problem with smart people is this: they can be really stupid 95 percent of the time.

To be fair, I'd only ever met one actual genius. But when that genius was Noah Youkilis, it counted as a full education on the subject.

A little background on Noah: He was the smartest kid by far in Hardcastle and possibly the whole world. We used to go to the Academy for Scholastic Distinction together—me by mistake and him because he actually

belonged there. Actually, the Academy was way too easy for him. Even the gifted teachers agreed on that. When you had a 200-plus IQ, finding something to challenge you was the biggest challenge of all. For Noah, that challenge was getting himself kicked out of the Academy. And he succeeded with flying colours.

I wasn't smart enough to understand why Noah was so dead set on going to regular middle school, even though he explained it to me a bunch of times.

"Being a genius isn't hard," he told me earnestly. "What's hard is being normal."

He was 100 percent right about that. No one in the history of Hardcastle Middle School had ever been less "normal" than Noah Youkilis. He was short and skinny, with an eager, slightly bent posture that always reminded me of an oversize praying mantis. He was totally thrilled to be there, which instantly separated him from every other kid in the building. Plus he had a tendency to launch into a lecture at any time on any subject. Face it: he was a wedgie looking for a place to happen.

The craziest part was that the world's greatest genius wasn't doing so well in a school where the work was fifty times easier than his last one. He did all the math in his head, so he always lost points for not showing

his work. He wrote his essay on *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English and lost 78 percent for spelling errors. His programming skills were so advanced that none of the school's computers could handle his coding. In Hardcastle, most of the good equipment went to the Academy, not to this dump. All the teachers here knew about Noah was that nothing he did with technology ever worked.

"Noah, this is stupid!" I told him. "You're getting C's in a school where nobody's qualified to carry your pencil case!"

He was starry-eyed. "Isn't it great?"

"No, it's not great! It's not even good! At the Academy, you never sank as low as ninety-nine. Now you barely crack seventy."

"I'm average," he said blissfully.

"You're not even average for a genius," I shot back.

He looked wounded. "Do you know what it's like to be right *all* the time?"

"My brother-in-law lives with us," I informed him. "I'm not right *any* of the time." That was First Lieutenant Bradley Patterson, United States Marine Corps. More on him later.

"It's terrible," Noah said emotionally. "You know the answers before anybody finishes asking the questions.

You can't enjoy a movie because you can predict the ending during the opening credits. If it wasn't for YouTube there would be no surprise in my life ever."

"You're insane," I muttered.

His narrow praying-mantis shoulders hunched. "I knew you were going to say that."

"Well, you make it worse than it has to be," I accused. "You go out of your way to pick classes you're going to be bad at. Why did you have to sign up for wood shop?"

He drew himself up to his full four foot eleven. "I reject your premise that I'm bad at it. My salad bowl was a mathematical masterpiece—geometrically circular, with sides that rose to parabolic perfection."

"So how come you got a D?"

"There's nothing wrong with a D," he argued. "It's my first D. I love it."

"Daniel Sanderson said you hooked it onto the lathe wrong and it got launched through the wood shop window. By the time they tracked it down in the parking lot, it wasn't parabolic anything. It was toothpicks."

"It was what education is all about," he reasoned. "To you, a D means bad. To me, it means I have something to work toward."

“Like a bowl that’s in one piece instead of nine hundred,” I put in sourly.

“I’ve never had that before,” he explained. “It’s *empowering*. Just the thought that my work tomorrow, or next week, or next month, might be *better* than my work today—that I can practise, and show improvement—it makes it worth getting out of bed in the morning.”

I sort of understood, I guess. If you aced everything on the first try, you had nowhere to go but down. And Noah never even did that. He just stayed perfect. Until he landed in a school that didn’t have a category for him.

I had to admit he was happy, though. Who was I to take that away from him?

So I assumed the next most important job—seeing to it that he didn’t end up stuffed into a locker or hanging from a fence post by the waistband of his underwear. Hardcastle Middle School had a way of dealing with dweebs—all middle schools did, I guess. And a kid like Noah—the size of a fourth grader, the insect-like posture, the grating voice, the rocket-scientist vocabulary—had a real bull’s eye painted across his chest. Or he would have, if he’d had a chest.

To help me protect Noah, I enlisted my friends the two Daniels—Daniel Sanderson and Daniel Nussbaum.

They liked Noah—they thought he was entertaining, anyway. At least recruiting them as bodyguards reduced the number of potential bullies by two.

Three days a week, Noah and I rode the minibus to the Academy for Scholastic Distinction for robotics class. Believe it or not, the robotics team needed me almost as much as they needed Noah. Our latest robot, Heavy Metal, was operated via joystick, and I was the only team member who played enough video games to be good with a controller.

The usual crowd swarmed Heavy Metal. Chloe Garfinkle was oiling his Mecanum wheels, which had been squeaking. Jacey Halloran was adding fluid to the hydraulic system of his lifting arms. Noah and Abigail Lee were hunched over tethered laptops, pounding out the computer code of his operating system. Latrell Michaelson was polishing his stainless steel body with Windex. And then there was Oz—Mr. Osborne, our robotics coach—making sure everybody in the lab was completely devoted to the care and well-being of Heavy Metal. We were the servants feeding him grapes and cooling his computer chips by waving palm fronds over him, like he was some ancient pharaoh.

It hit me—I was actually *jealous* of a robot! Sure, he

was just a bucket of bolts and circuit boards, but he had the life. All he had to do was stand around while the smartest kids in the Academy agonized over how to make him better and stronger and faster than he already was.

My life? A little different.

For starters, my house, which was jam-packed these days. Brad, my sister's husband, was home between tours of duty in the Marine Corps. But since he was redeploying in a few months, there was no point in them getting their own place. So picture a smallish three-bedroom house with my parents; me; my sister, Katie Patterson; her six-foot-four husband; their baby, Tina, age two months; Brad's dog, Beatrice; and one more dog—Kandahar—all living in it. Kandahar was actually one of Beatrice's puppies. We had managed to unload all the others, but Brad had made us keep one. Now that he was a dad, he wanted to be a grandfather, too.

Get the picture? We had to walk sideways when we passed each other in the hall, and if we all got home at the same time, it practically took a shoehorn to get us in the front door.

Brad was a tank commander, a munitions specialist, and a grand master at making my life miserable. He

was an officer, used to barking orders and having people hop to it. Katie didn't mind. She was just thrilled to have him back. Mom and Dad were fine with it because he wasn't barking at them.

There were no newborn babies in the Marines, but that didn't stop Brad from trying to put Tina on the military schedule that he had up on our fridge:

0600: Reveille

0605: Diaper change #1

0615: Morning feeding

0640: Burping

0645: Satisfactory burp produced

0700: Playtime—educational toys

0730: Initiate cleanup song

0815: Diaper change #2 (execute solid waste contingency, if necessary)

1015: Commence naptime sequence . . .

Get the picture? Well, the very next day, Tina screamed for two solid hours, barfed all over her crib sheet, and blew through diaper changes one through six, all before reveille. At breakfast, Brad kept gazing longingly at the refrigerator door through bloodshot eyes with dark circles under them. He was looking

at the schedule as if he couldn't believe it had let him down.

"You know, Brad," I commented, "Tina isn't in the military. Maybe General Patton raised his kid on a timetable like that, but Tina has other plans."

He glared at me. "When's the last time you had a haircut?"

Brad seemed to be obsessed with the last time I did a lot of things. The last time I did ten push-ups. The last time I tucked my shirt in. The last time I used the word *sir*.

"When's the last time you gave somebody a break?" I shot back.

"I owe it to the men under my command to be hard on them," Brad lectured. "It could save their lives one day. The greatest gift you can give anyone is high expectations."

I had high expectations for him, too. I expected him to leave me alone. But nobody ever called it a gift. It was more like a pipe dream.

The worst part was that Mom, Dad, and Katie—my family—just sat there eating breakfast while Brad—who wasn't even really related—listed all my faults, one by one.

"So that's how it's going to be?" I asked. "Tina's too

young to enlist in anything more military than Gymporee, so all Brad's commander instincts get switched to me?"

Katie yawned. Two hours' sleep did that to a new mother. "Come on, Donnie. Brad may be tough on you, but he does it out of love."

"Why can't Brad love somebody else for a change?" I mumbled.

Apparently, Brad had plenty of love to go around. He seemed to believe I was some kind of caterpillar, and enough hours or days or weeks or months of boot camp would transform me into a beautiful butterfly.

Brad had a military buzz cut and kept threatening to sneak into my room while I was sleeping and buzz me too. He exercised twenty-five hours a day and wanted me to do the same. Every morning when Tina woke him and Katie up at the crack of dawn, he would come into my room in his jogging shorts.

"Will I see you on the track this morning?"

In reply, I would mumble, "It's possible."

Just like, for example, whales might start doing sudoku and the moon might fall out of the sky, eradicating all life on earth. It was possible, but I wouldn't count on it.

Then Beatrice would growl him away—which was

the one good thing about that dumb chow chow sleeping in my room. Despite the fact that Beatrice was Brad's dog, her list of grievances against him was almost as long as my own. First, he disappeared on her to go to Afghanistan. Then, when he finally came home, she wasn't even allowed in his room, since that was where baby Tina's crib was.

The fact that Beatrice liked me better than her actual owner was another item on the long list of things about me that got on Brad's nerves.

"Like it's my fault the hairball chose me to shed on after you and Brad kicked her out of your room," I complained to Katie.

"Of course it isn't." For once, my sister agreed with me. "We're grateful for all your help with Beatrice—and Kandy too. But deep down, Brad's heartbroken that he's lost the love he used to count on. And he can't help noticing who it's been transferred to." She looked at me pointedly.

"The dogs only love me because I let them take over my room. I'm their patsy more than anything else."

"Give me a break, Donnie. I haven't slept more than forty minutes at a stretch since we brought Tina home from the hospital."

I wasn't getting much sleep myself. When I inherited

Beatrice, I got stuck with Kandy by default. You could ignore Beatrice, but Kandy was even younger than the baby. He was restless and hungry, and his new puppy teeth were just coming in, which made him whiny and irritable. His bowwow bone helped a little. It was a bright purple chew toy in the shape of a miniature dumbbell. I literally saw that thing in my sleep—it glowed in the dark. Worse, it squeaked—a piercing, high-pitched sound that felt like a piece of dental floss had been inserted in one of my ears and pulled out the other.

My theory: Kandy thought I was his mother. He was definitely dumb enough. And he needed a mom, because his own—Beatrice—wasn't very motherly. He followed me around like a bad smell. Whenever I sat still, he snuggled up next to me. Even my scent seemed to be a comfort to him. Never once did I enter my room without finding him trying to insert himself—drooling all the way—into one of my sneakers. Every night when I got into bed, he gazed at me imploringly. His big liquid eyes practically spoke: *Please let me up there with you!* He was so pathetic that I was almost tempted to give in. But let's face it, Kandy was about as toilet-trained as Tina. I wasn't *that* much of a sucker.

I tried to paper-train him. I spread out some newspapers, but all that taught him was how much he preferred peeing on carpet. The world was his toilet, and my room was his world.

He was named after the Afghan city where Brad was deployed. He was half chow chow, but we never met the dad. Great Dane maybe, or possibly sasquatch. If he ever grew up around those giant paws, he was going to crowd the rest of us out of the house. Maybe he would mature into a majestic creature one day. For now, he was just plain funny looking and so ungainly that all I heard half the night was *scramble-scramble-whump, scramble-scramble-whump* as he explored the room and his enormous feet kept tripping him up.

He had to be the homeliest, clumsiest, most infuriating mini-mutt on the face of the earth. I loved him, though. Only God knew why. Maybe because he kind of needed me. Katie and Brad were new parents and they had no time for him.

Besides, there was something in that *scramble-scramble-whump* that reminded me of myself. In those urgent, gung-ho steps you could tell Kandy thought he had it all figured out. Then—*whump*—he fell flat on his face. That was *me*. I was always getting in trouble for

acting without considering the consequences. It was my fatal flaw.

The Daniels called it “fallout blindness.”

That was my special connection to Kandy.

Tina had a lot more aunts and uncles than the average baby—unofficial ones, anyway. The entire Academy robotics team shared that honour. Katie had gone into labour in the middle of the state meet, and the team had ended up in the waiting room at the hospital while Tina was born.

Chloe and Noah visited the most often. Noah was obsessed with Tina the way he was obsessed with—in this order—YouTube, writing computer code, professional wrestling, and being average. Being obsessed was just what Noah did.

Noah was *different* when he was with Tina. He held her a little stiffly, like she was a prehistoric fossil that might turn to dust if handled too roughly. He didn’t coo at her or talk baby talk. Instead, he recited scientific facts and formulas like “a floating object displaces its own weight in liquid,” or “the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.” For some reason, this brought out some of Tina’s best toothless smiles.

“When she learns to talk, her first words are going to be ‘E equals mc-two,’” predicted Sanderson.

“The two means *squared*, Einstein,” Nussbaum corrected him.

The Daniels got a kick out of Noah. They got a kick out of everything. Some of the stuff I did had them rolling on the floor. Those two could make it through the end of the world so long as they had enough to laugh at.

With Noah around, they would never run short of material.

Lately, though, the Daniels had been getting annoyed with Noah. It was one thing to be entertained by him. It was quite another when he made them look bad in front of girls. Like when Noah accidentally flushed his glasses down the toilet. Sanderson had been using the stall next door. Noah told everyone who would listen how lucky he was that “my moment of crisis coincided with my friend Daniel’s bowel movement.” Or the time at lunch when he sneezed all over this girl Nussbaum was trying to sweet-talk, and then fumbled his asthma inhaler into her soup. While she scrambled to get herself cleaned up, Noah delivered a detailed scientific lecture on the strains of bacteria commonly found in human mucus.

“I like inhaler soup as much as the next guy,” Nussbaum said angrily. “But not when it interferes with my love life.”

“You don’t have a love life,” Noah pointed out helpfully.

Nussbaum was bitter. “Thanks to *you*.”

For all his brains, Noah didn’t pick up on their anger and impatience. He thought he was fitting in perfectly, and this was what regular school was like. Glasses down the toilet. Inhalers in the soup.

And that was how it was going—until the day the fire alarm went off.

The siren interrupted a social studies quiz, so it got a big cheer. We assumed it was a drill until we got out of the room to find the corridor filled with smoke. At that point, all our orderly filing turned into a mad scramble for the exit. My first whiff of the fumes nearly put me flat on the floor. It was rancid and spicy-sweet at the same time. What was on fire—the Dumpster outside the cafeteria?

I was psyched. A nice unscheduled break from class and a little chaos besides. Chaos was kind of my specialty. It was usually pretty entertaining.

A flying figure came racing at me, knocking me

into a bank of lockers. It was Sanderson, choking and gagging. Nussbaum was at his side, breathing into a paper towel.

“I quit!” Sanderson shouted over the clamour of the alarm. “It’s a lost cause!”

“What’s going on?” I demanded. “Where’s the smoke coming from?”

“Like you don’t know!” Nussbaum rasped.

“I *don’t* know!”

At that moment, an unmistakable voice cried, “That’s not just a soufflé—it’s next generation data analysis!”

The home-and-careers room emptied out in a flash, Noah in the lead. His white apron was black with soot, and his face hadn’t fared much better. His glasses were askew with one temple tangled in his hairnet as he ran down the hall, followed by an angry mob of classmates.

He slipped behind the three of us as his pursuers lost him in the smoke and thundered out the nearest exit.

It looked like the fun was ending already. “Noah, what did you do?”

“Oh,” said Noah, as if surprised at being asked, “my program can sift through thousands of terabytes of information—”

Nussbaum was furious. “That’s not terabytes I smell—it’s sewer gas!”

“I devised an artificially intelligent program to scan every recipe on the internet to make a soufflé no one’s ever made before.”

“I wonder why!” Sanderson raged. “Because it explodes, maybe?”

“It didn’t explode,” said Noah with dignity. “It’s just on fire. And,” he added, dejected, “it fell.”

Nussbaum faced me. “Sorry, Donovan, but you’re on your own from now on. Yesterday somebody wrote ‘loser’ on my locker in Wite-Out. It means I’m getting blamed for *him*.”

“That’s totally unfair,” Noah complained. “I have a C average.”

Sanderson addressed Noah. “Sorry, kid. It’s nothing personal. You were okay at the Academy for Scholastic Dorkstinction, but around here, you’re a drag on our image. We can’t help you anymore.”

They headed out the door, bringing up the rear of Noah’s cooking class.

Noah seemed bewildered. “What’s that supposed to mean? I don’t need help. I’m doing amazing. Do you realize how much room for improvement this leaves?”

A platoon of uniformed firefighters swarmed past us

in the direction of the home-and-careers room.

I sighed. “I’ll give you that, Noah. There’s definitely room for improvement.”

Noah glowed.