

$$E = M\text{Connor}^2$$

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By

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Looking at the distant Earth from the International Space center, Connor R. Kingston feels a strong superiority and omnipotence over all beings. He shapes his hands as if he is holding the grey, spherical object. At that moment he becomes a god. He can sense the Eiffel Tower being erected for the hundred and seventeenth times. He can hear the ruckus in the market place. He can feel the soft hair on his son Rex.

Earth used to be green, brown, and watery blue; a thing called nature used to exist deep in there. But as humans flourished, and technology advanced, these hues and antiques were dispelled into complete oblivion. Now there is nothing but cement and concrete, and gray is its monotony.

Connor sits on a wooden armchair by the porthole. It sways back and forth. As terribly as it may sound, the lack of nature does not bother Connor at all. He is, after all, a scientist, or to be exact, an eminent neurologist who have published tens of thousands of impactful papers. The advancement of technology only makes him happier. He takes a sip of the Gyokuro tea he brought with him from Earth.

A ring echoes in the room, and the speaker begins to talk. "All personnel relating to Dr. William K. Kingston's experiment, please report to the Experiment Hall."

The message repeats itself for the second time. Connor takes another sip. White intangibles rise from the ceramic cup and are dissipated by the ultra-venting system. Connor stands up, faces the mirror, and tightens his tie.

Just as Connor, his brother William is also a renowned scientist, but in the field of physic. When they were little, they expressed very distinct interest in science. Connor fancied the complexity of the human brain, while William focused on the way things move. Regardless of their predilections, they are equally successful in their area of study. And today, his brother is

going to achieve something that will shake the entire world, from Earth to even the farthest celestial colony of Jupiter.

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When Connor arrives at the Experiment Hall, the hustling that has dominated the area for weeks is over. The final preparations are finished. His brother William is sitting on a metallic bench by the side, enjoying a cup of Gyokuro tea, revealing no sign of skittishness.

Connor sits next to him. They are silent for a while, and then Connor breaks that silence and says for the perhaps thousandth times, “Do you have to do this?”

William, as always, shakes his head and smiles in his usual strange manner that conveys his omniscience and your ignorance. “Still brooding over that and trying to convince me, huh? Where did you get that mule stubbornness of yours anyway?”

“From who?” Connor says, “We have the same old man and old lady. Who do you think I get it from?”

“Right,” William says as if he just remembers. “But you didn’t need to ask that question. You have already known the answer right from the start, before you even ask it, otherwise you wouldn’t be up here instead of down at Mother Earth with your lovely Lucy and little Rex.”

Some of the staffs form circles and chat, perhaps to mitigate their nervousness of the soon starting experiment. William hands Connor a cup of Gyokuro tea, and Connor gladly accepts it. They enjoy its bitter sweetness and watch the whites rising as they would in their homeland during the harsh winter.

William gazes up. He looks at the chatting crowds, the machines that are running and emanating low buzzing sounds, the far away stars visible through the portholes, and many other things in the hall. But at the same he is also not looking at them. He is simply gone, far out into

the future in which his theories, his principles, and his visions become real and his dream materializes. The foci in his eyes blur. The only connection between him and the world is his speech:

“We live in the end of the twenty-second century, in which science and technologies have reached their apex. But should we be satisfied? Should we be content? No, we mustn’t. We must move on, evolve and continue to grow. Scientists from various backgrounds continue to conquer the boundaries and limits that we once were told as insurmountable. Little by little our knowledge expanded. And to think that I am one of these renowned pioneers fill me with great joy and pride. You would understand, wouldn’t you, Con? You are a scientist too, you ought to know. I have to conduct this experim—.”

“But you don’t have to be the guinea pig!” Connor hears himself shouts, and the hall shouts back at him. The chatting comes to a sudden halt. The spotlight of the hall hovers around the two of them. “You can do whatever Goddamned experiment you want—I don’t care—but why be the one who enters the machine and risks being torn into pieces? Why!”

William does not answer him. As if he did not hear, he continues, with vision into the far past and future. “In the 18th century, Einstein proposed the theory of relativity. Then the mad scientist Brian Churchill proposed a possible way to surpass light’s 3×10^8 m/s speed—the speed that we are told as the absolute limit! Ever since then physicists have been trying to move things faster than light. First were simply radio signals, then ordinary objects, then giant buildings, and at the end living beings such dogs and monkeys.”

“But humans—”

William raises his hand to stop Connor. He is still out of reach in his own world. “But humans are intrinsically different. Their complex systems and immense amount of neurons

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hinder such unimaginatively fast travel. Our own intelligence forbids us. Various experiments had been conducted, but they all failed. The same result reoccurred: the person gets sucked into black hole and returns as unrecognizable meatball.” William returns back to this world and suddenly holds tightly onto Connor’s shoulder so hard that he could sense William’s excitement. “But not this time! After eight years of researches, works, and trials, we have perfected the system. We can succeed! A person can move faster than the speed of light, just imagine it, Con! And I want to be *that person!* I won’t allow some lucky person to steal my pride and have his name—instead of mine—recorded in history books. *I want to be that person.*”

Connor is silent for a moment. After William informed Connor of his definitive decision, they have had heated argument of this sort for countless many times. No one would yield. William would not permit his fame to be robbed, and Connor would not succumb to his precious brother shredded into pieces. The only compromise they managed was to allow Connor up to the International Space Center to witness the process.

Connor let go a deep, submissive sigh. “I know I can’t change your mind, Will.” he says, “But I want you to know that whatever you do, no matter how much I detest it, I will support you.” He places his hand firmly onto William’s shoulder, as if to evince his determination, and William nods.

They then begin to talk about the past, the childhood: how William used his newly invented multi-purposed robot “Big Will” to steal a dead rooster, and how Connor dissected its tiny brain with glistening eyes filled with curiosity. Those were the heyday of wonders and freedom, time of huge and naïve talks, but they were long gone. Somehow at one juncture of their lives, they have taken different paths. The paths took them farther and farther until when they look back, all they can see is a vague figure in the horizon, familiar yet distant.

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A staff comes by and informs William that the experiment will soon start, and that he should prepare himself. The two feel an unknown force pulling the tenuous string between them.

“This is it.” William says. “This is the moment.” Connor nods.

“Don’t you worry! Just wait for my name on the headline. Cheer up!” William masquerades a carefree smile on his façade. Connor tries too, but all he can manage was an awkward, bitter smile.

“I guess I should get going.” William stands up, strides a few steps, but then comes to a halt and turns. His countenance is a gravely serious one that makes Connor to listen attentively. “Listen to me, Con, and listen well. You have the stubbornness of a mule, just like me, just like Mom and Dad. I know should I ever fail—I don’t think it will happen—you will follow my footsteps and complete my quest. But I don’t want that. I want you to go on your own path. Promise me, right now, that you will never transfer to the Internal Physic Department. Promise me that!”

His gaze penetrates Connor, and that makes Connor obey. “I promise you.”

The moment he receives a satisfactory answer, William is gone. He takes that one last step, voluntarily, and when they look at each other for the one last time, on that paths of theirs, each have merged with the infinite horizon.

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A lot of time has elapsed. Connor has been staring blankly at the tea, which reflects his own visage. An emerald leaf is at the center of the glistening liquid, standing vertically. The random motion of the cup tries to suppress it, but it will not waver. It just stands there, upright and with its own belief to believe in.

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Connor recalls that down on Mother Earth, centuries ago, such occurrence used to symbolize something. Good luck or mishap, he doesn't remember. It is recorded on an ancient astrology book that he happened to purchase from an antique dealer. "Let's hope it's a good luck charm." He whispers to himself. He stands up and walks out of the hall and into the room where the experiment takes place.

The experiment has already begun; the speaker has announced it while Connor was lost in reverie. William is at the far end of the room, isolated by ultra-glass. Before him is the entire controlling staffs and equipments. There are not many spectators; in fact, including Connor, there are only seven, all of whom Connor can recognize as learned people successful in their own scientific study.

The director of the experiment is a stout, red-haired man. He supervises the controlling staffs from behind, and while the device is powering up, he constantly talks to William through the system "How are you feeling, pal?" he asks. William perfunctorily responds yes. Several more useless questions ensue, perhaps to dispel nervousness. William has seen Connor when Connor passed through the security check and entered, but he decides to pretend as though he did not notice and engages himself in the questions.

Minutes flies and finally an operator announces that the device is fully charged. The director asks once again if William is feeling fine, and he resolutely responds affirmative. A countdown is started. It begins with T-60 seconds, then 59, 58, 57, 50, 40...

Connor finds his calm disposition being disrupted. To him the seconds extend into centuries, then millenniums, then eons. His childhood memories with William kick in and mingle with his current ones.

T-10 seconds...

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Connor has a similar experience of equal disturbing quality: after the breakdown of Big Will, Connor and William decided to collaborate and create an even more advanced robot: Big WilCon. The moment they finished its construction they took it to their backyard and began Test 1. It had the same excitement as he feels currently. William had the honor of pressing the red button Start, which he did after exclaiming so loud that the world could hear him. Little starting characters appeared on the Big WilCon's screen:

T-7 seconds...

The day William received his notice of employment from the International Space Center was also the day Connor was enrolled in the University of NeuroTech. A spacecraft was taking its first flight to Mars. Under its witness they vowed to each other that they would relentlessly push the human scientific limits, and that they would never give up. The spacecraft was at its final countdown:

T-4 seconds...

William looks toward Connor. Smiling, he thumbs up.

T-1 seconds...

Connor closes his eyes.

He hates himself for not remembering what the astrology book said. He only remembers vaguely a few lines of it. His left brain tells him it is a good luck charm, but his right brain tells him it is an ominous sign. He really wishes his left brain is correct. He really wishes it.

He hears applause from the people around him. His left brain rejoices: Does it mean... does it mean it is a success! But then his right brain annoyingly reminds him that a scientist should always collect multiple data. It urges him to open his eyes, which he does.

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The black hole did not appear. William is still in the glass room, safe and sound. The experiment is a success, his left brain tells him, it is a success. It repeats for so many times that Connor himself begins to believe in it. The experiment is a success! But no sooner than the belief establishes itself it is ruthlessly shattered. A beeping sound echoes in the room, and on all the monitors occupy big red signs that read “Error.” The director immediately calls upon the termination of the experiment, but William’s voice stops him. It says that the experiment was a success, that the error was trivial, that he can already see light racing around him, and that he has become the first man to ever surpass light.

Then part of him is gone with light.

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A month later, Connor reports once again to the International Space Center. He steps out of the spacecraft and onto the place that reoccurred in his nightmares. He goes straight for the administration department and is assigned with his own office. Hours later a staff enters. Connor smiles in a peculiar manner that William used to do and shakes his subordinate’s hand.

“My name is Connor R. Kingston. I will be taking over my brother William K. Kingston’s work. It is my honor to work with you.”

On his desk is a cup of Gyokuro tea and, stacked carelessly, a newspaper with a headline about some calamity far in Pluto and a sideline on its third paper that reads:

“Failed Experiment: Renowned Scientist’s remains found at the outskirts of Mars.”