

Tommy Schneider
Forking Paths
Friday, November 10, 4:27am
Round 2

What We Talk About When We Talk About Talking About Talking About Talking

The year was post-2016, and school was almost in session. Youth had rediscovered meaning, but couldn't do anything about it. The Newish English Academy for Superheroesⁱ had admitted its largest and most super class yet. They were a jaded, factless bunch, admitted only so that the requisite ten percent could burnout their freshmen year and be fed to the always-hungry school mascot/largest donor, Amy the Axolotl.

Emil, Aria, and &*& were going to be roommates at NEAfS. They planned to inhabit a triple-double (room 116A), a housing unit built out of their mutual desire to be selfless.ⁱⁱ Of course, &*& was the only truly selfless one out of the bunch. That's because all their actions were determined randomly. While Emil wanted others to like him, and Aria wanted to like herself, &*& gave not a single care about anybody or anything. Despite this lack of intent, &*& happened to make the right call in ninety-nine out of every hundred situations. Once &*& saved a cat that was on fire just because they wanted to see what the cat would look like wet.ⁱⁱⁱ

They were each excellent middle schoolers—Aria, &*&, and Emil—and it showed on their résumés. Emil had many superpowers, including and limited to: an IQ that nearly broke 115, the common cold (about which he was deeply ashamed), a mild level of mind control, and excellent taste in children's' media. Aria, on the group's other hand, was a talker. This meant she synthesized semantic syntax strings (sometimes sonically, sometimes scrawled) which other people could hear, listen to, and interpret to varying degrees of understanding.

The future inhabitants of room 116A were excited to meet each other.

Sometime in August, 1:08 a.m.

Emil arrived first, several days before classes began, to set up his collection of connectors: glue, fridge magnets, those hollow cylinders that link-up glow sticks and the like. Next arrived &%*#!, who spent their time helping others unpack and enjoying the sensation of cardboard boxes brushing against their fingers. Aria arrived last.

“I just love it when thirty-second commercials will have fifteen-second versions. The advertisers make these jokes that lack either a setup or a punchline and they always forget that their job is, first and foremost, not to sell a product, but to tell a story,” she said upon entering the room. “Sorry. Airplane television.”

“I love it when people say they love things when they really hate them,” said &%*#!, lying face down on their unmade bed. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m &%*#!.”

Emil laughed a good hearty laugh, not a cackle in any way. “Wow,” he said, “I’m in love.”

The conversation that began that night was one of the longest the school’s bugged smoke detectors had ever picked up. It began with some meta-level jokes about meeting new people and adopting their speech patterns, but shifted quickly to talk of life stories, anxieties, desires, and critiques of each other’s respective thought processes. “What’s it like to have two parents?” one would ask, and be met by understanding laughter. “What’s it like to have one *good* parent?” the response would be. They agreed, at the end, to fight not only evil together, but the entropic equations that gradually force friendships apart.

Sometime in September, 5:40 p.m.

“They really ought to restructure the curriculum at this bludging institution. I mean, here, look at this syllabus. We’re supposed to turn in our final project for Time Symmetry and Manipulation seven weeks before we even start the class. How’s that supposed to work out?”

“Yeah. Ahum. Yup.”

“Emil, hey. Hey Emil. Emily? Emilio? Emilson? Emil-erald Jones? Yo, hey, look over here. Look at me. Emil?”

“Doing...something.”

“Emilvescent? Emil McEmil? Please help me. I’m running out.”

“Finishing...just about...”

“... now. What were you saying?”

“Uh, I guess nothing.”

NEAfS was not like other superhero schools. NEAfS had a rigorous curriculum, which exposed students to several flavors of gym class. They had combat gym, trampoline gym, social gym, engineering practicum gym, and—every student’s favorite—laser gym. A point of cultural conflict between students, other students, and the administration during the post-2016 school year was just how naked students were allowed to get in the ~~laundry room~~ locker room. This was a quote unquote controversial topic. The sides were plentiful. Some students wished to not be ogled by other students. Some students transmuted into reptiles, and had to shed two to four times per year.^{iv}

But never mind that. Aria had discovered her passion for physics and Emil had discovered his passion for a girl named Beth. The subject of physics slayed with its cuteness, but it had lots of applications too. It was used, Aria learned, to create all the particles you find in your everyday objects (such as shrink rays and peanut butter cookies). Emil, meanwhile, had never been more self-conscious about his snotty nose. It had two holes in it—what could he do! He asked Aria to do some physics on it to clean it up, but she said she was too busy working on her own project.^v Emil gave her his grimace face.

Sometime in November, 6:78 p.m.

&%*#! thought to theirself:



Jeffery, aren't you the quintessential document. Vulture mood synths—without me?
Preposterous, devil clips...let me bourgeois my way down to the coffee shop and reap the efforts
of my very, very coffins.

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Ain't no pepper party without some pepper, is it? Hey! You there! With the yellow light and the pumpkin suit! I need to see your ID! Hey! Without births, we are nothing. Without birds, we just have fewer feathers.

Hold on just a steaming second, what is this? Hello? Void, is this you? Nah, if this were the void, I would be able to hear my own thoughts. This doesn't feel normal. I feel queasy.

Emil and Aria woke up to the sound of &%*#! screaming in their sleep. Their scream was like that of a newborn child, but much, much louder. Glass broke. Desks ruptured. All the gunk in their drain finally got pushed down and out.

“We need to talk,” the roommates agreed.

Sometime in January, 6:08 a.m.

Aria had spent her winter break perfecting her standup routine. Her big bit was when she would ask for an audience member to come up on stage so she could slap them. She'd make a big deal about how they were actually going to be slapped, and how they would probably regret this, and how this isn't part of the joke, that she was seriously going to go through with it and that they shouldn't blame her when her hand rips into their face. She'd get the audience really excited, and really uncertain about what would happen when one of them would finally volunteer. She'd wax and wane the crowd (whatever that meant) until somebody would finally raise their hand, get on stage, and get slapped.

She thought through all the situations. Would she slap a baby? Yes. Would she slap her teacher? Joyfully.

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It was on the last day of break that she was hospitalized. According to one of the doctor's forms, she had swallowed a whole bagful of plastic board game pieces that were labeled "not for individual consumption nor for consumption by children under age 4" and it gave her a nasty case of puzzle-piece-throat. She adopted a therapy dog and was back before the second week of classes had begun.

Sometime in January, 3:30 p.m.

"What an adorable dog," said &*&#, "Is it good?"

"Thanks. And yes, Sidekick is great," said Aria.

"What an adorable name," said &*&#.

"&*&#," asked Aria, "Do you know where Emil is?"

"He's in the bathroom. I think he's doing some kind of experiment in there," said &*&#.

"You should consider updating your priors," said the dog.

"Quiet, Sidekick. Bad dog! Bad! Sorry," said Aria, "Sidekick's kind of going through a rationalist phase."

Sometime in February, 12:00 a.m.

Emil had been spending less and less time in 116A, and the time spent there was worse and worse. It wasn't exactly his vibe anymore, *kapish*? Besides, Beth wasn't there. She was off saving civilians or something else superheros do that's so very—what's the word for it?—civilian.

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It was probably a joke that gave him the idea. “You have mind control powers, right? Why not just control her mind? It’s her mind, not her body.”

Sometime in March, 5:00 a.m., 6:00 a.m., 7:00 a.m., 8:00 a.m., 9:00 a.m., 11:00 p.m., 12:00 a.m., 1:00 a.m., 2:00 a.m.

Aria and &%*#! worked on the machine with fervor and fever.

“Sidekick, pass me the wrench,” said Aria.

“Wrench,” said Sidekick.

“That’s a tennis ball,” said Aria.

“Is there anything I can help with?” said &%*#!.

“Go find Emil,” said Aria.

The machine was janky, but it was done.

Sometime in May, 12:30 p.m.

“Have you considered the fact that you shouldn’t be okay?”

“I—”

“You shouldn’t be good with this. You—you should feel bad, very bad. You’re not the hero of your story, of any story. You’re the villain. An ignorant and cruel and self-absorbed one and”

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“I jus—”

“Like what the fuck do you think those pieces of paper above the printers mean?”

“I—”

“They’re very clear: Mind control not okay. Mind control is abuse.”

“If you’d just let me explai—”

Some Time

“Does it work?” asked Emil.

“Well, if it weren’t working, I’d call it a box. Or a broken time machine. Also, should be questioning me way, way more right now, and, like, just in general, ya know? But yeah, it works.”

Emil enters the box and Aria slams the door shut.

Choose a Path:

- 1) Emil returns to sometime in August; re-read the story.
- 2) The machine implodes, killing Emil, Aria, & %*#!, Sidekick, and a chunk of their community; return to your life.

ⁱ Despite its many architectural and cultural similarities, the fictional elite preparatory superhero academy NEAfS should not be confused for the author’s alma matter, Roth Academy for Heroes of a Super Nature. It is with a curious mix of nostalgia and anxiety that I look back on that time and remember my school’s moto: *Ageōmétrētos mēdeīs eisītō*, which roughly translates to “Google it for yourself.”

ⁱⁱ Also out of wood and concrete-infused whale blubber and other normal housing ingredients.

ⁱⁱⁱ They didn't know of their powers yet, but did well enough on standardized tests to get flagged as a 'super-likely super' individual.

^{iv} Cool, glad I could get you here, alone, in the endnotes. There's some other things I want to say about this issue but I'm not sure that up there was either the time or the place. There's some messed up shit going on. I'm talking about invisible students sneaking and peeping—creepy stuff—and that's not even the iceberg's tip. One time I was on the residential end of campus, just minutes after curfew, and I saw three students [REDACTED]

I mean, it's the CURRENT YEAR, people. Would it kill you to just be a decent human being?

^v Aria's was interested in the Eddington conception of time; namely, the Arrow of Time. She began collecting all sorts of physical specimens to test her theories on. That is, until she jerked the mouse head the wrong way and it started begging her to stop. Ever since, Aria has only eaten animals that aren't Turning complete.

^{vi} I've sort of messed up as an autho-narratorial presence. My apologies. There's an additional story I wish to tell, but I forgot which character it happens to and most of the details. It may not even be related to this story. Here it goes.

There was a young scientist desperate for love. They had no delusions that anybody else could ever love them (save their research advisor, but that relationship was strictly vampiric). However, they at least wanted to love themselves. So, one day, they created a love potion. They knew how shitty magical science potions were (both going down and coming back up), and would never even think of drugging someone else. So, without hesitation, the scientist rips off the potion cap and drinks the entire beaker in one gulp, and immediately stares into a mirror.

The scientist and the mirror have been going steady ever since.