

THE
ALMOST
EPIC
SQUAD
IRRESISTIBLE

Richard Scrimger

Illustrations by Britt Wilson

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*To you, with the book in your hand. Yes you.
You're welcome.*
— R.S.

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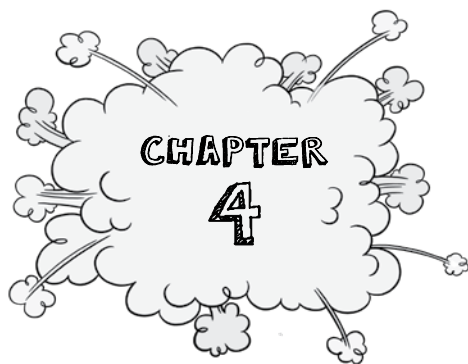
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CHAPTER 4

CALL THAT A GIFT?

Back in Montreal, in the basement Boredom Institute, Archie has almost finished this year's tests for his giftedness. He's written a logic quiz, and had his muscles probed and reflexes checked. He's jumped, lifted weights, run on a treadmill, held his breath. Now he's putting his shirt back on.

"Hoawmmmm," says Dr. Fassbinder, checking the screens. "Below average in everything again. But don't feel bad, Archie."

"Eh? Why should I?" says Archie. "*Me* feel bad? You're the one running these stupid tests. You're the one who should feel bad. Ha ha ha. Call those tests? Ha ha ha. The only test they pass is the smell test — eh? Speaking of smelly, if that kid with the runny nose is

gifted, I'm an aardvark. And Daisy from my school. She comes here too, right? What's with her? Everyone's a loser. At least I'm normal."

"Actually, Archie, you are below normal." The doctor pulls at his moustache. He's got a beauty, curled up around his nose.

"So, I guess I must be *extra* qualified for your study then, eh?" Archie starts to laugh some more but gets distracted by his hands. He turns them into giant crab claws. *Snap snap snap*. "Hah! Take that!" He attacks the doctor's arm with his crab claws.

The doctor sighs and spins in his chair to finish the interview. "Two more questions, Archie. Have you noticed anyone paying attention to you? Following you around? Maybe someone from back in Dimly?"

"Eh?" says Archie. He says this a lot.

"How about a hot-air balloon. Have you ever looked up and seen one of those, closer than it should be?"

"A blimp?"

SCARY MUSIC (Yup. There it is.)

"Like at a baseball game? Following me? I dunno. I doubt it. Who'd pay attention to me? And anyway, why would I notice? I don't spend my time looking up."

"Why indeed." The doctor sighs again. "All right. Last question. You are thirteen years old now. Lots of

hormones. Puberty is a time of great change: bones, hair, muscles, voice. Have you noticed any gifts that today's tests might not be able to pick up? Has anything strange happened to you?"

"You mean, can I fly or turn invisible? Eh? That kind of gift?"

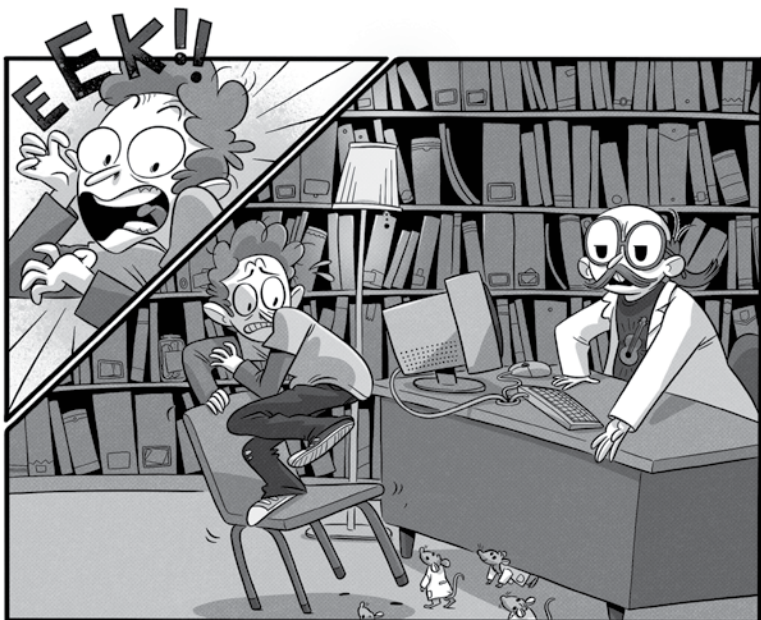
"Yes, yes. Just like that."

"Or shoot lasers out of my eyes? Or tell what someone else is thinking? Ho ho ho. Let's check now. What are *you* thinking, Doc? Wait. Wait! Don't move. I'm getting a signal . . ." Archie puts his finger to his forehead and closes his eyes, pretending to concentrate. "Wow. Maybe I do have a gift, because I know what you're thinking right now. You're thinking: *Geez that Archie O'Kaye is a real dork. I never want to see him again!*"

Dr. Fassbinder almost smiles. "Are you sure you don't have telepathic powers? Because that guess was very close." He has an accent that stretches all his vowel sounds, so that "very" comes out sounding like "vaairy." And "close" is more like "clooase." You'll have to imagine all those extra letters while he's talking. I'm not going to write them out. It would take too long. I'd be an old man by the time I finished writing the book, my white whiskers falling over the keyboard.

“Doc,” says Archie, “if I could turn myself invisible, I wouldn’t be here, would I? I’d be robbing a candy store. Or pranking Big Mean Ehsin. Yeah! I’d sneak up behind him and tie his shoelaces together. He’d fall down and look around for the bad guy, and I’d be invisible. Ho ho ho. That’s what I’d be doing if I had a superpower.”

“Yeasss, you probably would,” says the doctor, making a quick note on a file. The note reads: “A. O’Kaye. No talent. Self-absorbed. Unformed personality — like a baby. Most unlikeable child I ever met. Do not schedule for next year. Never wish to see him again.”



“Weeall, I guess we’re done here,” says Dr. Fassbinder. “My assistants will tidy up when you leave. I don’t know what we will decide to do next year. Perhaaaaps—” He breaks off when Archie screams. “What’s wrong?”

“Eek!” Archie stands on his chair, pointing down at the floor. One, two, four furry little creatures have dashed out from under the doctor’s desk. “Mice!” Archie shrieks. “I can’t stand mice! I – I –”

The doctor chuckles. “Don’t be afraid, Archie. These are my assistants. They have helped me for some years now. Good afternoon, Marvin, Denise, Elaine. And Claude, of course. You are all up early today.”

The mice wear lab coats. Two carry clipboards. The one named Claude waves a teeny paw.

“What?” says Archie. “What– what –”

The doctor explains: “These mice were exposed to reidium when they were young. Look what it’s done to them. They are almost a different species — super-mice. Claude is quite the linguist — speaks three human languages as well as Mussine. And they’ve all exceeded their expected lifespan. Why, some of them are older than you, Archie. These little fellows have taught me so much about the properties of reidium. And I’ve been interested in you and Gary and Daisy and Jessica ever since *your* reidium exposure. I have

high hopes for the girls. I don't know about Gary yet. I see him again in a few minutes. But in your case, Archie, I just don't seem to be able to locate any kind of super—"

Dr. Fassbinder breaks off abruptly and stares at Archie as he climbs down from his chair. The boy's hair is neater. Somehow, his shirt is tucked in. His smile is as white and magnetic as the North Pole.

"Hi... I mean, hello... there... How are you? *All of you?*" Archie says to the mice. Adrenalin courses through his body. And it has happened again. As it did at his birthday party, fear has activated Archie's special power.

"How... totally *wonderful* to meet you all," he says, bending low.

There is a collective high-pitched gasp. A mouse with a clipboard squeaks, then ducks her head bashfully.

"Eek, yourself," says Archie, smiling broadly. "You are totally wonderful, do you know that? What's *your* name?"

"E-laine," she squeaks.

"That's a lovely name. Like music. It suits you. And *you*, Claude, with the twitchy ears. What a rogue you are. Keep your eye on *this* one, Doctor." Archie bends further and pokes the mouse with a gentle forefinger.

Claude squeaks contentedly. Archie straightens up.

Dr. Fassbinder has been typing rapidly all this time. Now he rises to his feet. "You . . ." he begins.

"No, no, it's *you*, Doctor." Archie faces him. "I simply can't thank you *enough* for . . . all you've done. I'm just terribly sorry to have . . . well . . . let you down."

"No, no, no," says the doctor, breathing deeply. "Not at all, Archie. I am delighted to see you. Truly. This has been a wonderful visit. I've enjoyed every second."

"You're . . . really . . . too kind. All of you are. I can't *wait* to, uh, come back. I'm sure we'll have great times together, all of us. While we work out what it is – if anything – that I can do well." He favours them with a particularly melodious chuckle.

The doctor finds himself laughing along. "No worries there. We're happy to spend time in your company, Archie. Right, boys and girls?"

"Oh yes," the mice all squeak together.

"Come back next year," squeaks Elaine.

Archie wags his finger at her. "You just *try* to keep me away." He gives an infectious laugh. They all catch the infection and join in.

Archie leaves the room. Dr. Fassbinder shakes his head to clear it. It takes him a few seconds to recall what has just happened. Right! The boy Archie O'Kaye has finished his testing for this year. And

what exactly did the tests prove? The doctor checks his onscreen file notes, which now read: "A. O'Kaye. Amazing potential. Could do anything. Most likeable child I ever met. Must see again next year. Reminder to Dept. C to book him first-class tickets. Check his hotel status."

As Archie walks down the hall, the adrenalin drains out of him like dirty bathwater. He breathes out, shakes his hands, lets his shoulders relax. The back of his shirt begins to blouse out of his pants. When he reaches the door at the end of the hall, he is moving toward normal.

The boy in the waiting room is long and lean. He tosses a Kleenex at the wastebasket.

Archie compliments the boy's shooting. "That juke to the right? *Sweet*. You could be a three-point king," he says. There's still some charm remaining in his voice, like heat in a dying ember.

Archie shakes his head and his hair comes uncombed. His shirttail is flapping by now. He is back to his usual inappropriate self. He continues. "If you had any talent. Call that a shot? I've seen better at the flu clinic."

The kid's face falls like rain.

Archie heads out the door.