

MATTER FRAGMENT: PARTICLE 166—67

MATTER,” SAYS FRANK EINSTEIN, KID GENIUS AND INVENTOR.
“The stuff that every living and nonliving thing is made of. That’s what this is all about.”
“Great,” says Frank’s longtime pal Watson,

crouching behind him. “So how does that help us get out of this?”

Frank Einstein applies, as he always does, the scientific method he learned from his Grampa Al.

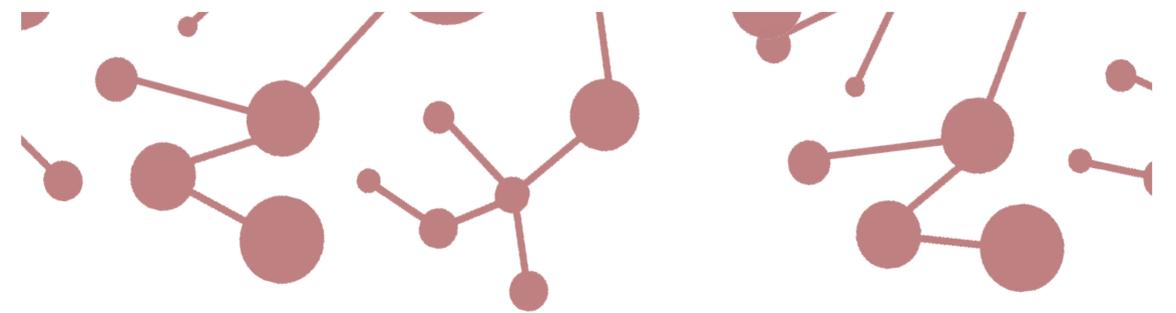
Frank thinks:

OBSERVATION:

Red lights flashing twice a second.

Incredibly loud *whoop-whoop* sound echoing over factory floor.

Cage bars: metallic-white color, lightweight, high-strength.



Two mechanical shapes against far brick wall.

Two shadowy figures, both wearing ties, on platform above.

A beam of concentrated white light, sparking and melting a line across the near brick wall, presently moving on a path to intersect position of Einstein and Watson in twenty-eight seconds.

Frank says:

“HYPOTHESIS:

“Lights and siren probably an alarm.

“Bars most likely titanium and unbreakable.

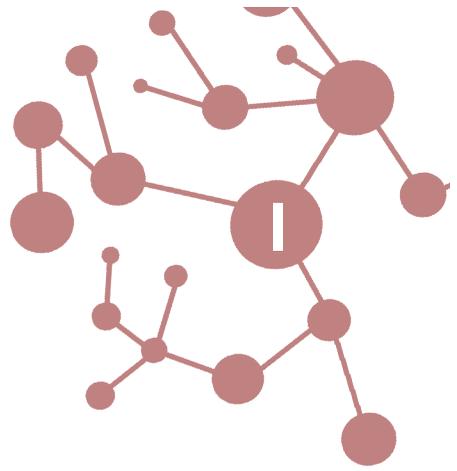
“Those two over there might help us.

“Those two up there will not.

“We now have thirteen seconds before every atom, element, molecule, and bit of matter we are made of violently explodes into ashes, heat, and smoke.”

“Why do I ever listen to you?” asks Watson, moving as far away as he can from the advancing beam of brick-sizzling light.

Frank Einstein cracks a smile. “Begin **EXPERIMENT . . .**”



E XACTLY 48 HOURS/2 ROTATIONS OF THE EARTH EARLIER . . .
Night.
Darkness.
Flash!

A bright bolt of lightning splits the dark and flickers over the skylight.

Frank Einstein looks up from his work. He counts out loud, “One thousand one. One thousand two. One thousand three. One thousand four. One thousand five—”

Craack boom! The sound-wave vibration of the thunder rattles the old iron-framed windows of Frank’s workshop and science laboratory.

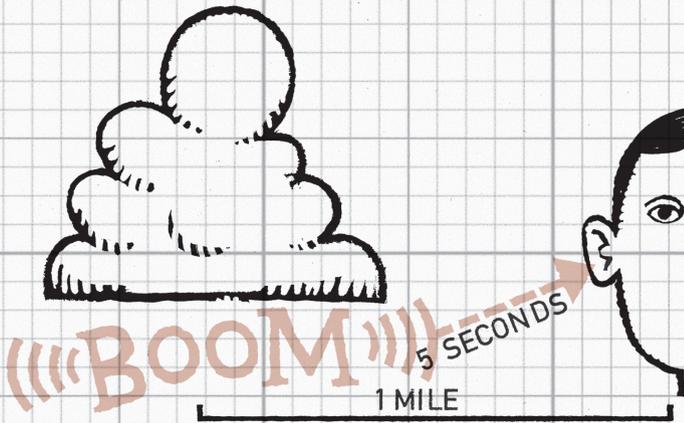
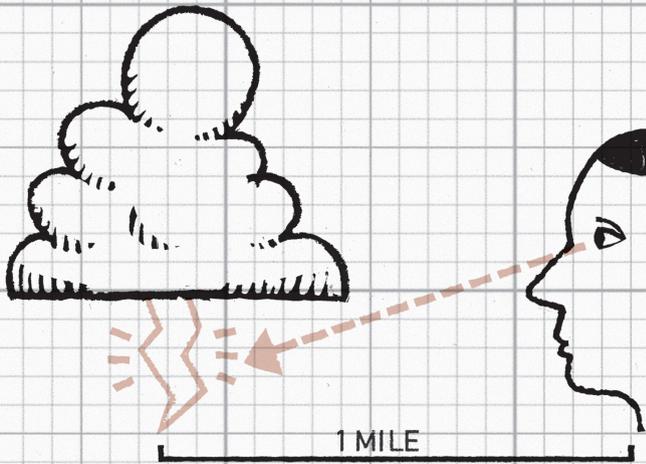


fig. 1.1

“Five seconds between light and sound for every mile . . . One mile away,” Frank calculates, using the difference between the almost-instant speed of light and the much slower speed of sound. “Right on time.”

“Are you sure this will work?” asks Watson, pulling on long yellow rubber dishwashing gloves to protect himself. “Because, man, this seems pure crazy.”

“It’s perfect,” Frank answers. “Perfect my mom and dad are gone again on one of their travel-hot-spot trips. Perfect Grampa Al let me set up my lab in his garage and use all his great repair-shop junk. And perfect we can use this lightning to supercharge my SmartBot to life and win the Midville Science Prize.”

Lightning flashes.

Thunder booms.

“That hundred-thousand cash prize will pay off all Grampa Al’s bills. And the SmartBot will help us invent anything else we want.” Frank secures the final copper wire in his SmartBot’s brain. “What could go wrong?”

“Well, remember that time we were making race cars—”

Frank holds out his hand like a doctor in an operating room. “Vacuum switch!”



“—and you bolted the jet engine onto the baby stroller—”

“GPS unit!”

“—and you decided it would be more ‘fuel efficient’ without the brakes?”

“Skull piece!”

“I can show you the scar.”

“Skull piece!”

Watson looks around the workbench covered with the bits and parts of twenty years’ worth of mechanical, electrical, and plumbing repairs. He picks up a shiny metal piece with two slots. “You mean this toaster thing?”

Flash!

Frank looks up at the skylight and counts, “One thousand one. One thousand—”

Boom!

“Less than half a mile. Yes! Skull piece. Now!”

Watson tosses the toaster-skull to Frank.



Frank screws the piece into place. He lays the SmartBot in a rusty red wagon bed roped into a harness, looped over a pulley, and wired into the motor of the garage-door opener.



He stands back and gives his work one last look. “A robot that will be able to think, learn, and become smarter and smarter. It just needs this lightning power to come alive.”

Frank punches the garage-door-opener button.

Hmmmmmmmm. The motor hums. The rope tightens. The SmartBot rises up to the garage roof on Frank’s old wagon/operating table as the skylight opens.

“Yes!” says Frank Einstein with a crazy laugh. His hair and lab coat whip around in the sudden gust of wind blowing into the lab. He grabs his barbecue-fork switch to transfer power to the SmartBot just as the lightning strikes. “Ready, Watson?” yells Frank.

Watson tightens the strap on his safety goggles and unconsciously shakes his head no. But he gives Frank a floppy yellow thumbs-up yes anyway.

A wild wind swirls through the lab.



The operating table rises up toward the lightning-charged sky.

Frank counts, “One! Two—”

Then, suddenly, *bzzzzzt!*

The garage lights blink . . . flicker. The lab goes black.

Frank hears Watson yell, “Oh no!”

The powerless garage-door motor releases the wagon rope. And the wagon falls, hitting the concrete floor with a terrible metal *clang crash!*

Flash! Boom! The lightning and thunder explode at exactly the same time directly overhead. A blue-white charge of electrical energy that was supposed to bring the SmartBot to life crackles down the lightning rod and harmlessly through the ground wire and into the earth.

In the storm’s strobing light, Frank and Watson see a series of snapshot images:

- the SmartBot flying out of the wagon
- the SmartBot’s toaster-head spinning one direction
- the SmartBot’s vacuum-cleaner body spinning the other.

Then darkness.

Bruuuuum, brrrummmm . . . The thunder from the storm rumbles away.

“Frank?” calls a voice from the kitchen doorway. “You guys OK in there?”

Grampa Al’s face, lit by the candle he holds, pokes into Frank’s laboratory.

“What happened?” asks Watson.

“Nice gloves,” says Grampa Al. “Must be a power outage. Though it’s somehow just in this building.”

Grampa Al’s candle casts a yellow circle of light that falls on the broken parts of what was Frank’s SmartBot.

“What’s all this?”

“Oh, just something I was goofing around with for the Science Prize this weekend,” says Frank.

“It didn’t get messed up, did it?”

“Just a little,” says Frank, not wanting to worry his grampa.

Frank gathers up the lifeless SmartBot head and body parts and places them gently on the workbench. “I’ll fix it in the morning.”

Watson peels off his rubber gloves, pats the bodyless toaster-head, then slings his backpack over his shoulder. “A robot that can teach itself stuff is still a great idea.”

Frank picks up the sheet of paper he has covered with

robot-brain plans and sketches of atoms. He wads the paper into a ball and tosses it onto the workbench with all the repair parts and broken junk.

Frank nods. “Thanks, Watson. See you tomorrow.”

Frank Einstein turns to leave his lab.

Bbbrrrrrrmmmm grumbles the last of the thunder, as he closes the kitchen door behind him and Grampa Al.