

# Will Power

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# Chapter One

Will Hume never wore a hat. On the coldest winter days, you could see him in the schoolyard, slouching against the wall, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his rumpled army trench coat, chewing on a toothpick, bare head. Even on the days when he turned up his collar against the snow, and his small, round glasses fogged up, he wore no hat. Maybe, with as much hair as he had, he just didn't need a hat. Or maybe his brain kicked out more heat than most.

At any rate, the moment Kaida "Foo" Fujimoto caught sight of him on the bus heading downtown, she knew that something was wrong.

Will was wearing a hat.



And it was an ugly one. Brown knit, from the look of it. There was no point pretending not to notice. Foo had already done the embarrassing double-take, mouth falling open. She couldn't help it. She was not expecting to see anyone she knew on the bus—especially not Will, especially not in a hat.

“Hi, Will,” she murmured nonchalantly as she strode down the aisle to her usual seat in the back. But wow—it wasn't just an ugly brown hat; it had two knit drumsticks, one attached near each ear, creating the effect of a Thanksgiving turkey.

Foo couldn't hide her smile in time. She barely kept a chuckle down.

“How's it going,” Will mumbled, sinking further in his seat, cringing. He saw her smile. He started digging vigorously through his backpack.

Foo should have continued past him, and that would have been the end of it. None of the rest would have happened. It would have been just another ordinary Saturday for her. But something in his face stopped her. In that instant, when their eyes locked, she saw trouble.

She sat down in an empty seat next to him. “I like your hat,” she offered. What else could she say?

“Thanks,” he managed. He wore the same crooked, wry smile as always, but he was blushing deeply in pink splotches down his neck. He clearly wished that she would go away.

But Foo was intrigued. Here was a boy—a talented artist, a self-proclaimed atheist, and the only kid in

school who could stare down Mrs. Petri—suddenly so...vulnerable.

“I’m going to my karate class,” she said, drawing his attention away from his backpack. “Where are you going?”

“South Street.”

“That’s cool.” Foo nodded approvingly. “For what?”

Will’s eyes flashed with annoyance. “Nothing big,” he grunted. He was trying to decide how rude to be. Why hadn’t he brought something to read? He couldn’t find anything in his backpack to keep him from having to make conversation with her.

“What are you drawing?” she asked, eyeing the sketchpad on which his hand rested, still in the open backpack.

Dang! She had seen the sketchpad. Now there would be endless discussion of that.

And there was. Or at least it felt endless to Will, as he sat there in the turkey hat for twenty painful minutes while the bus crawled its way downtown. It was all he could do to keep from getting off the bus early and fleeing. But the sketchbook amused Foo. She borrowed it from him and used up a good five minutes showing him the one cartoon she knew how to draw. It was a puppy with a big tongue made out of an upside-down heart.



*Holy misery, thought Will. Why does everyone feel the need to show me the one stupid cartoon they know how to draw?*

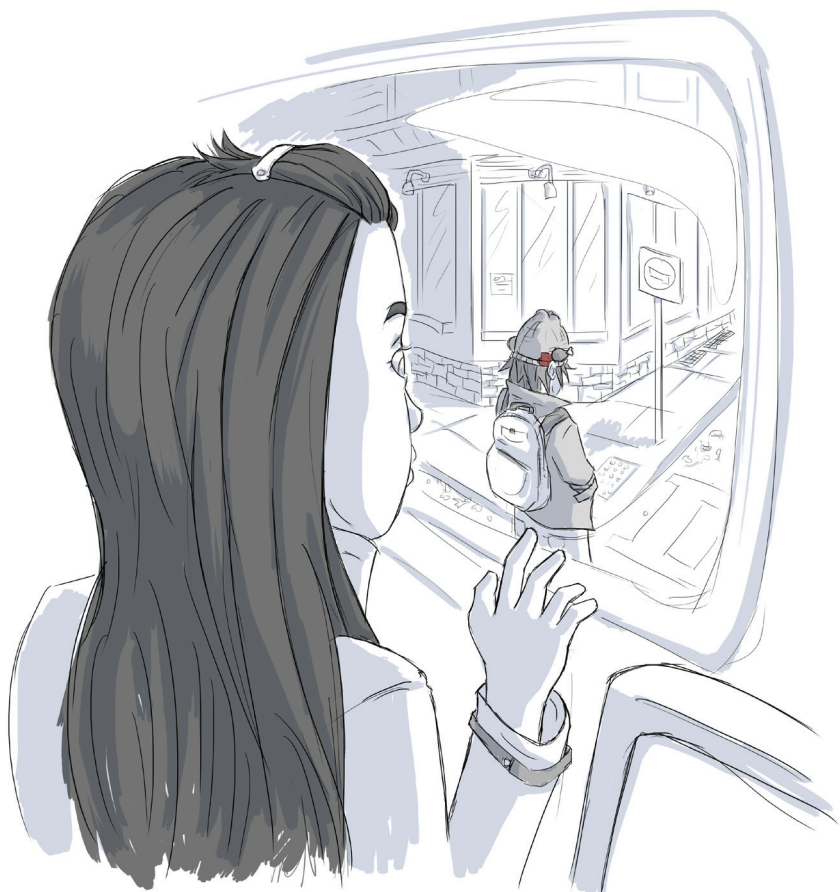
As they passed City Hall, Will gazed at the famous clock tower that was once the tallest building in the world. He thought of the clock in his backpack, and his stomach churned.

Finally, his stop was announced. “See ya’,” he muttered, hoping she would forget that she had seen him, or at least forget to mention it to anyone at school on Monday.

Though Foo was accustomed to making this weekly trek alone, she felt sorry to see Will go. As he descended

the steps out the door without turning back to wave, she did another involuntary double-take.

Behind his ear, the hat had a dark, wet, red stain.



# Chapter Two

Will paused on the street to look at the address of the nearest shop. The crinkled slip of paper in his pocket read “216 South St.” He walked a block farther until he came to a building with a sign that read “Marcus Aurelius Clock Shop.”





Although the blinds were drawn, the sign in the window said “Open.”

Will looked up and down the street. An old woman in an apron was sweeping the sidewalk in front of a greasy diner. Two men in dirty white t-shirts carried a couch into a two-story apartment building that had a rusty fire escape.

Will’s hand traveled self-consciously to his head. He was alarmed to discover how wet his hat had become. He had chosen the ridiculous hat because of its dark color, which he hoped would hide the stain. But the stain had spread. Certainly it was visible now. He set his jaw and opened the door.

The bell hanging above the door jingled as he entered. Will stopped in the dim light to orient himself. He had never seen so many clocks in his life. He went in slowly, past a giant grandfather clock, alarm clocks, clocks with Roman numerals, digital clocks, and a case full of wristwatches. At last he stopped in front of a wall full of cuckoo clocks.

“Hello there, young man. I’m Marcus Aurelius. May I help you?”

Will hadn’t even noticed the small man with silver hair who sat behind the counter under a work lamp. Sporting a red bow tie and suspenders, the man clutched a screwdriver in one hand and a set of gears in the other. A thick, round magnifying glass was attached to one side of his glasses. As he peered at Will, he flipped it up.



It was stuffy in the shop. Will took his hat off and stuffed it into his backpack.

“My grandmother bought this here...,” Will began, pulling the clock out of his backpack. He set it on the counter where Aurelius could see it. The side panel was loose, and two silver springs were sticking out.

“What happened to it?” Aurelius asked. He picked it up and started winding it.

“Wait!” Will shouted, making Aurelius jump.

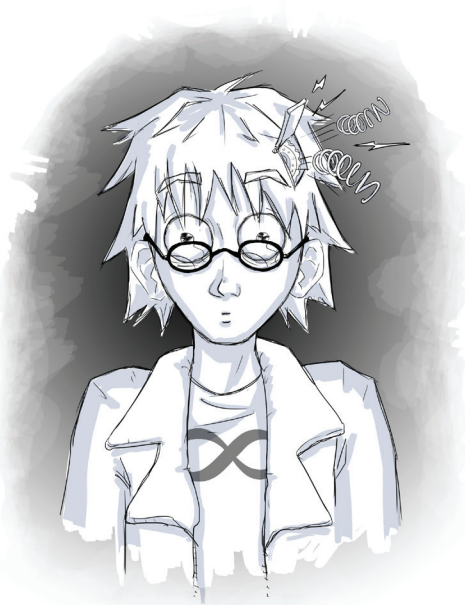
“Sorry,” Will said. “It’s just that I don’t want you to wind it. I need to explain—”

Aurelius frowned at Will, waiting for more. Just then the giant grandfather clock by the door struck nine, followed by a cacophony of other chimes around the room. Cuckoo birds popped out of the cuckoo clocks on the wall, chirping “Cuckoo! Cuckoo!”

Will froze, his eyes bugged out, and two silver springs popped out of the side of his head.

“Sweet succotash!” Aurelius gasped as Will collapsed. Aurelius hopped stiffly off his chair, ran around the counter, and knelt beside the boy. The springs had pushed open a small trap door in Will’s skull. Aurelius tucked the springs back in and snapped the door shut. In an instant, Will opened his eyes and looked around.

“Did it happen again?” Will slurred, propping himself up on his elbow with effort.



Aurelius stared at him in amazement. “Are you okay?”

“I was hoping you would be able to tell me.”

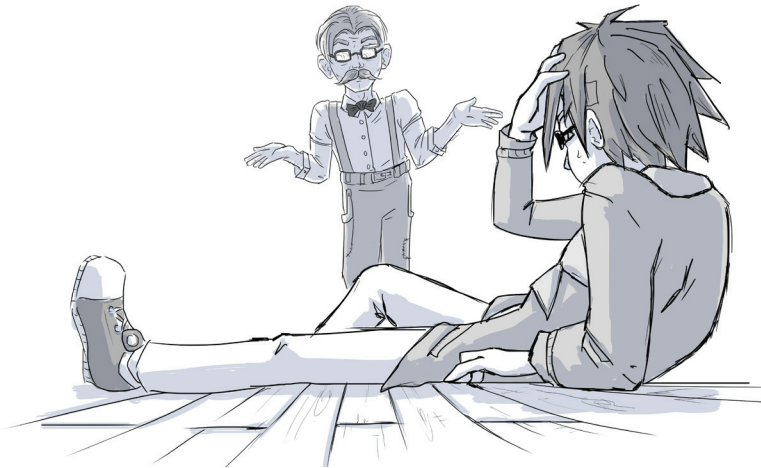
Aurelius suddenly beamed. “I can’t believe it finally worked!”

“Did you make these clocks?” Will demanded, inching away from him.

“Yes!” Aurelius rose to his feet arthritically and picked up the clock on the counter. “I’ve been working for so many years to create a frequency that would reveal the true nature of the human brain.”

“You turned my brain into a machine!” Will’s voice cracked with outrage.

Aurelius shook his head gently as though he were correcting a young child. “The brain already is a machine,” he explained. “My frequency just uncloaks it.”



It occurred to Will for the first time that he was dealing with a lunatic. He tried to get to his feet, but he was still dizzy. “Why doesn’t the chime affect you?”

Aurelius shrugged. “I’ve tried hundreds of different frequencies in hundreds of clocks already. You must be especially sensitive. I always suspected that it would work best on the young....”

“Well, I don’t want springs in my head!” Will spat. “Undo it!”

“Oh, no,” Aurelius chuckled reflectively. “Not even Professor Epicurus can stop me now. With a few tweaks, I can make this frequency work on everyone. Then, when I install my new chime in the City Hall clock tower, I will prove to the world once and for all that human beings are machines!”

Will struggled to his knees.

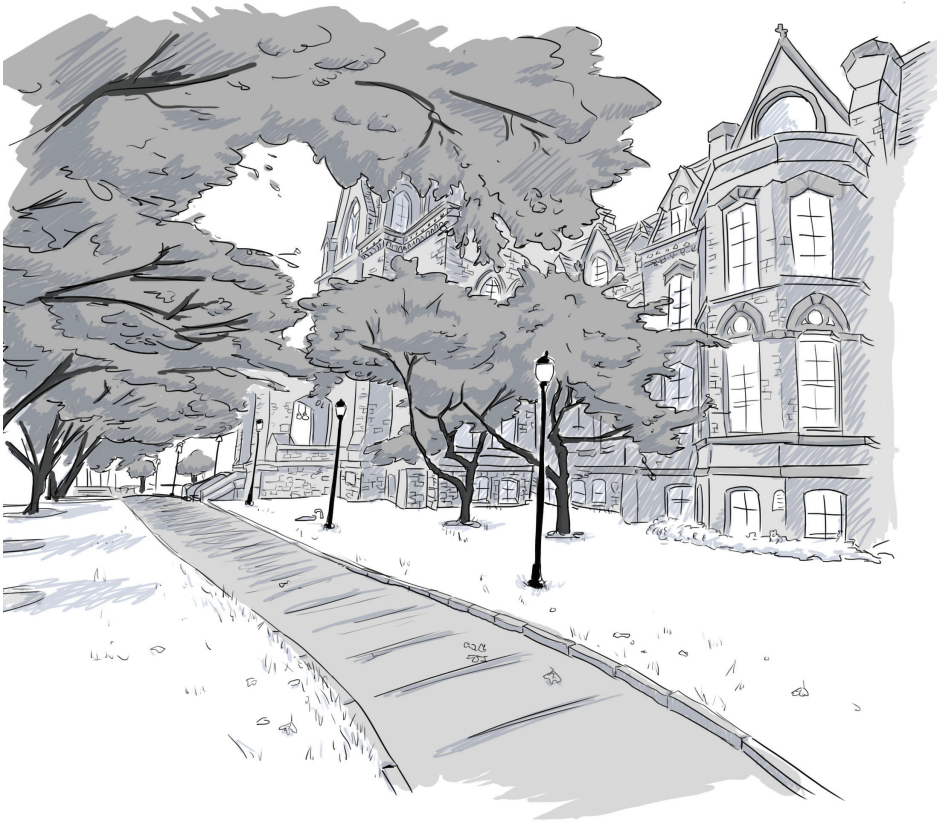
“Not so fast,” Aurelius scowled at him. “All I need to do is crank up the volume on this little beauty, and you’ll obey me like clockwork.”

Before Aurelius could turn the knob on the clock, a figure in black streaked in from the back room and knocked him to the floor with an “oof” and a thud.

# Chapter Four

Foo and Will walked down South Street to the bridge over the Schuylkill River. Arriving at the university campus, they asked random passersby for directions to the philosophy department.

The building was open. They found Professor Epicurus's office on the fourth floor, but no one answered



their knock, and the hall was deserted. They proceeded up to the fifth floor. A graduate student smiled at them from behind a large stack of papers on a desk in an open office.

“Hey kids,” she said, stretching in her creaky swivel chair. “Can I help you find someone?”

“We’re looking for Professor Epicurus.”

“Oooh,” she lamented. “You checked her office? The profs don’t usually come in on Saturday.”

“But you’re in luck,” said another graduate student returning from the restroom to his desk in the same office. “She’s over at the Penn Museum Galleries. It’s dress rehearsal this morning. Her rendition of *Oedipus* opens this afternoon.” He gave a mischievous grin. “I bet if you’re quiet, she’ll let you watch.”

And so they did. A quick walk brought them to the museum, whose marble-columned gallery doubled as a unique performance space. Sinking onto folding chairs as the lights dimmed, they watched, mesmerized.

### *Oedipus*

The characters:

**Oedipus:** King of Thebes

**Jocasta:** Queen of Thebes

**Tiresius:** Prophet

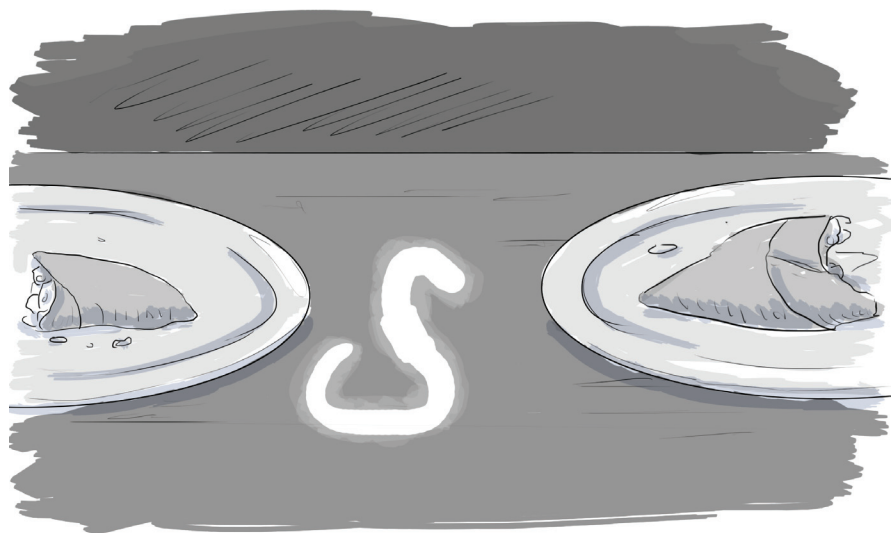
#### **Two Guards**

All the characters wear togas and leather sandals. The king and the queen wear crowns. The setting is the royal palace of Thebes.

# Chapter Nine

Foo swallowed hard, feeling all the French fries she'd eaten welling up in her gullet. Will just froze, hardly able to believe that this day could get any weirder than it already was.

“Let me introduce myself,” the worm said. It had an ordinary male voice. That’s the only thing that kept Foo and Will from fleeing.



“I’m the non-being of the boy you just met,” the worm continued. “His name is Peter. He is Marcus Aurelius’s son.”

“You’re his what?” Will asked.



“His non-being,” the worm repeated with a shy, wormy smile.

Will and Foo just stared, waiting for the worm to continue.

“Don’t you remember the book you read by Lucretius?” the worm asked. “It said that the origin of your free will is the ‘swerve in the void.’ Well, I’m here to tell you: Don’t look for your swerve. What you actually need is your void.”

“In the book,” Will recalled, “Lucretius said that the void is just the empty space that atoms fall through.”

“Right,” the worm confirmed. “Void. Empty space. Non-being. It’s all the same thing.”

“You mean the same nothing,” Foo corrected. “Non-being isn’t a being; it is the lack of a being.”

“Exactly. I am the lack of Peter.” The worm pulled itself up to its full height. “You came in here expecting to see Peter. You expected him so hard that his absence came to haunt you. I am his absence.”

Foo threw her hands up impatiently. “But absence is pure nothingness!”

The worm nodded. “Nothingness haunts being. Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm. I’m not really a worm. I’ve appeared to you as a worm just so I could talk to you.”

“Okay, Mr. Nothingness,” Will offered, “you said you could help us?”

The worm nodded. “Free will means creating something out of nothing. Marcus Aurelius’s frequency zapped your nothingness. So you have hardly any nothing from which to create.”

Foo was skeptical. “And Will needs this nothingness to get back to normal?”

“Yes,” the worm answered. “Human beings are not the sum of what they have already but rather the sum of what they do not yet have, of what they could have. And this future possibility comes from nothing.”

Will was puzzled. “I just want to be my old self again.”

“As far as human beings go,” the worm went on, “it is not what they are that interests me, but what they can become. You can never go back to the person you were, Will. No one can. But you need free will to become the person you want to be.”

Will was thoughtful. “So you think you can give me back my nothingness?”

“Absolutely.”

Foo still was not buying it. She narrowed her eyes at the worm. “How?”

The worm turned to Will. “You have to swallow me. After all, to eat is to appropriate by destruction.”

“Holy misery,” Will moaned. “I am so done with this lousy day.” He dropped his head in his hands.

“Wait,” Foo cautioned. “What about Peter? I thought you said you were *his* nothingness.”

“I’m pretty flexible,” the worm assured her, dividing itself into two and then four and then forty small worms to demonstrate.

Foo motioned the worm to stop. “Two is all we need, pal.”

The forty small worms turned into two, one twice as big as the other.

“Perfect,” Foo pronounced, grinning broadly. She was not at all convinced that there was such a thing as nothingness, but they had nothing to lose. “The big one is for Peter, who lost both sides of his brain; the little one is for you, Will.”

“I guess I should count myself lucky.” Will made a face. “Um, can I get some hot sauce for this?”

The little worm inched closer to Will. “Are you sure you want your free will back?”

“Of course,” Will exclaimed. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“It’s a big responsibility,” the little worm warned. “When you create yourself out of nothing, then you—and you alone—are responsible for what you become.”

Will opened his mouth to respond, but the little worm jumped right in.

