

The Hero in my Head

My dearest Emily.

Did I ever tell you that when I was a child I tried to give myself superpowers?

I was just seven years old and I attempted it twice. They make for amusing stories now, but truthfully either occasion might have killed me.

I was lucky for the intervention of my dutiful mother.

Both attempts were inspired by the comic books that she would read to me each night. Fertiliser for an imagination so swollen it practically leaked from my ears.

The first time, I took one of my father's golf clubs from the garage and climbed out my bedroom window and up onto the roof in the middle of a storm. The terracotta tiles were gleaming wet and slippery as ice. I had planned for the club to act as a makeshift lightning rod. Imagining that the strike would endow me with super speed, like the Flash, or maybe electric powers of some kind.

Fortunately, my mother noticed the rain coming through the open window. The drizzle leaving dark speckles on our carpet. She clambered onto the roof after me. I can still picture her shuffling along the tiles gingerly with one hand hiking up her dress, the other outstretched and beckoning me to safety. Hair and clothes sopping wet. That poor woman.

Afterwards my mother did not yell at me. She was too restrained for that. Too patient. She told me that I had frightened her and that alone was enough to wring tears from my eyes and promises from my throat. Perhaps her greatest mercy was that she did not tell my father. That man loved his golf clubs nearly as much as his car and substantially more than his fantasy addled son.

It was several weeks before my second attempt.

This time I went to our kitchen and took every cleaning product and chemical out from under the sink. I squirted their contents into a plastic tray and then poured the lather over my head. I suppose mutation was my goal. I remember watching proudly in the mirror as the greenish goo seeped over my hair and down my face. Some of it went in my mouth and turned to bitter foam as I sputtered and spat.

They should really be more responsible when writing the origin tales for these heroes. Few of them are safe for children to replicate.

After this second misadventure my mother took me to see Doctor Hallstrom. She was convinced that I was either mentally ill or clinically stupid. The doctor ran his practice from a little cottage in the suburbs. The lounge served as his de facto waiting room and I sat with my mother there on the old, creaky leather couch. Wrinkling my nose at the faint sour smell and staring blankly at the goose pattern wallpaper.

When Doctor Hallstrom finally called me in to his office, we talked for what felt like hours. About school and my grades. About the older boys who threw their apple cores at me. About my father.

He had no prescription to cure dreams of superheroism, save a stern lecture. It did not curb my obsession, but from then on I kept my fantasies contained to my imagination and out of our cabinets and off our roof.

I spent much of the rest of my childhood lost in daydreams. My cheek resting in my palm. Staring at my bedroom wall or my desk or at words on a chalkboard.

“That boy lives up there in his head,” my mother would tell people.

She was right. While my body bumbled through the school week on autopilot, I lived thousands of adventures in my mind. I leaped over buildings through math class. I travelled through time during recess. My perilous experiments might not have made me a superhero, but my imagination had less tangible limits.

I did not imagine myself to be like the heroes from my comics. I did not imagine that I was any older, taller, or square-jawed. Or that I wore a bright spandex bodysuit, accentuating every bulging muscle.

No. In my fantasies, I was still just me. That same small kid with the broken spectacles mended with a strip of electrical tape. The one who was always getting into trouble for forgetting to do his homework. Only now I had an assortment of magical powers at my disposal.

My schoolteacher, Mrs Prestia, would often keep me back after classes as punishment for arriving late. She was a severe looking woman with her hair pulled back and tucked away as if it were a nuisance to her. I would take her scoldings with downcast eyes and take a seat alone at a front row desk. I might have appeared bored, slumped in resignation, but in my mind I was reliving that morning.

I imagined myself once again skittering down the May Street stairs. The straps of the backpack biting into my shoulders. Then stumbling out onto the road only to find the bus

already roaring around the corner. This time, however, I imagined myself smiling mischievously at the sight.

“I guess, I’ll just have to run,” I said to myself.

I bent my knees and my first step boomed as I broke the sound barrier. The newspapers and bin bags swirled across the pavement and the birds scattered in fright.

I was a blur, streaking down the sidewalk.

The three old Italian men who drank coffee every morning at the café on the corner startled and spilled their espresso as they turned their heads after me. The other pedestrians and the lycra clad bicycle riders stared at my wake in confusion.

When the bus arrived out the front of school, I was waiting there for my classmates. Feigning a yawn and looking down at my watch as they exclaimed in surprise.

Of course, when my fantasy was over I was still in detention under the sharp gaze of Mrs Prestia. It made me feel a little better though and helped to pass the time.

I’m not sure exactly when this fixation with superheroes began. Perhaps when I was four or five? To my young mind, the pictures in my comic books seemed more real than life. Their psychedelic colours brighter than the drab plaster and drywall of our home. The characters alive with emotion, expression and kinetic energy.

On the other hand, I can pinpoint the exact day that the daydreams stopped. April 5, 1999. I had not long turned 19. It was a Monday and it was the day my father was sent to prison.

You remember him, don’t you Emily? All of five feet and five inches tall and yet somehow towering. His hair greased back and his sleeves always rolled up to expose the curve of his biceps. Vanity perhaps. Or a show of force.

Many of my daydreams featured my father.

I remember some nights, when I laid in bed listening to the shouting downstairs. I would imagine that I could snap my fingers and disappear. Just like the Invisible Woman of the Fantastic Four.

Of course, I would still be there, just invisible. So when I heard his footsteps on the stairs and they were loud and uneven because he had been drinking again, I would have to roll out of bed and tuck myself in a corner. That way when he came in, red faced and shouting, the sheets would be flat and I would simply be gone.

But just like with Mrs Prestia, the fantasy was never real.

My imagined powers would have other uses too. If I refined my control, I could make parts of my body disappear individually. An ear or an arm. All but my head, floating there like the Cheshire Cat. With enough practice I could make a single atom of my body invisible or the thin layer of skin on my cheeks that showed the bruises. So when I went to school I wouldn't need to cover up the marks with my mother's makeup.

My favourite daydream was that I could turn myself to steel, or something stronger... Adamantium like Wolverine's claws. Or even diamond.

Were a car to run a red light and bear down upon a group of schoolchildren, I could throw myself before them and transform. The car would bounce off my glittering form, like a toy.

I could grasp the barrel of a bank-robber's gun and transform my hand. When they fired, the lead bullets would crush harmlessly against my palm and tinkle to the floor. I would smile smugly and raise an eyebrow as my would-be assailant stuttered in confusion.

But most importantly, I would never break.

No matter what.

Whether I fell from a skyscraper or walked into the eye of a firestorm. I would remain unscathed.

This was the dream that I held to fast on the night that my mother and I fled our home.

I was fourteen at the time. In my second year of high school. I had a small, but strong group of friends who would meet in the library after classes to swap comics and trading cards. After that night, I would never see those friends again.

I awoke to my mother shaking me. She was breathless and frantic. The glowing numbers on my bedside clock showed that it was well after midnight.

"Pack your rucksack," she said to me. "Quickly now. Just the things you need. We are visiting your grandmother."

I had wanted to argue, but she turned her head briefly and I saw the side of her face in the faint light that the streetlamps cast through the window. Her cheek marbled with bruises. A crust of dried blood above her lip. Her eye swollen shut and dark purple as if stained with ink.

I did as she said.

When we snuck downstairs and out to the car, my father was asleep on the couch. Snoring and muttering. An overturned bottle of whiskey lay not far from his limp hand, soaking in a pool of its former contents. His knuckles and the sleeves of his shirt were flecked with blood.

We never returned to that house.

Over the next few years we moved seven times. Each relocation tore me away from friends and familiarity. Seven times I was the new kid at a new school. Seven new daily routines. Seven different ceilings to stare at above my bed. Then there were the visits from the police and the long interviews at the station. The lawyers. The supervised visits with my father. All of the things he would say about my mother.

In my mind, over and over, I hardened myself and I endured.

Then I met you, Emily.

Our first semester of university. A year before my father's trial.

My first memory of you was from our media and creative arts class. You used to sit in front of me at the tutorials and I found myself distracted by your hair.

Please don't laugh. Or cringe. But it is true. I found your red hair very distracting. It was vibrant and true. Not orange or auburn or that pinkish shade they call strawberry blonde, but red. Like the petals of a rose. Like Superman's cape.

Your bravery is what I admired most. Whenever the tutor asked a question to the room, you were always the first to answer. You never hesitated to challenge her or other students when you felt they were wrong. Yet you were happy to admit when others had changed your mind.

Meanwhile, I remained buried in my notebook. Scribbling away. Cataloguing every word that was spoken and every thought that those words provoked. My debates were held on those pages, safe from judgement and rebuke. I was a spectator. Observing, but never participating.

Do you remember the first time I spoke to you?

You were sitting at the cafeteria eating lunch and lying there atop your stacked books was a comic book. Marvel, Annihilation No.1. Science Fiction. I nearly dropped my tray of pudding.

Even in my late teenage years, I still daydreamed about being a superhero.

I must have asked you out in my imagination a dozen times. In one daydream, I revealed to you my secret power of flight. I carried you to the top of the clocktower in the middle of the campus. We laid a blanket across its corrugated roof and watched the sun set together.

In another, I asked if you'd like to join me for dinner... in Paris. You were confused at first, but I winked mysteriously and weaved my hands in arcane signs and a glowing portal opened before us. On the other side was a laid table overlooking the Seine.

I had never imagined that I could impress you in reality. I certainly never thought my encyclopaedic knowledge of pop culture would do the trick. Nevertheless, after I asked you about your comic we talked and joked for hours in that cafeteria. I went home that evening with a grin on my face that might have sparkled.

The rest is history. As you know. Strangers became friends. Friends became best friends. Best friends drank too much one night... and here we are.

If not for you, I might have been broken by my father's trial.

In the courtroom, as I sat beside my mother and listened to him lie on the stand, I imagined that I was a telepath like Professor Xavier from the X-Men. That I could make him tell the truth. I could place a finger to his temple and broadcast his thoughts to the jury. Their mouths agape as his admissions resonated through the chamber like psychic radio. If that were not incriminating enough, I would delve into his memories and rip them from his neo-cortex and hold them up like a hologram in my palm.

But there was no such revelation. Not so much as a quiver in his testimony. Perhaps he genuinely thought himself the victim. Or perhaps deception was his own power.

Soon my turn came to take the stand.

As I took my oath, my father sat opposite me at the defendant's table. His expression was neutral, but his gaze was fixed on me. Clamped to me. I didn't see him blink.

I seemed to lose the ability to swallow. I had to take long, conscious gulps before I could speak. As I talked my train of thought would wander and my eyes would slip back to my father and that suffocating stare.

Then a familiar shock of red caught my eye in the gallery. You were smiling, despite the situation. I did not know if that smile was for me, but I took it so. There was no-one I had ever felt more comfortable talking with. So I spoke to you. Through my testimony. Through the cross examination.

After the guilty verdict was announced, I felt transformed.

I still loved comics, but my fantasies seemed... unnecessary. I no longer needed imagined superpowers. I had found my own personal, real life hero.

All of this happened more than twenty one years ago. Much has happened in the time since. My home had once been a place of fear. But the home we built together has been full of laughter. Challenges that had once seemed like unpassable obstacles, were now mountains to be conquered with a Robin... or really a Batman, by my side.

But now, my love, I must make a confession. It is the reason that I write you this letter.

After that day six months ago. The day that we received your diagnosis. I have relapsed into my old habit. Once more, my mind conjures fantasies of superheroism.

When I come to the hospital to visit you, I imagine not that I am walking those sterilized white hallways in that blue suit. The one that you picked out for our anniversary. No, in my mind a scarlet cape hangs from my shoulders. Sailing behind me as I glide to your room.

I imagine that my X-ray vision can pierce your skin and I can see your bones and veins like the lines of a map. Your heart pulsing in the cage of your ribs. And there on your left lung is the recurrence of the tumour.

In my mind it is always a black, bulbous thing. And through the web of your lymphatic system I can see the secondary growths, down to the cell. I point them out to the doctors, so that they can cut each and every one out, aided by the precise laser that my X-Ray eyes can produce.

But the fantasy always ends. Just like with Mrs Prestia. Just like with my father.

Were I truly a superhero, I could save you. The way that you had saved me.

I could stand before whatever dangers came and plant my feet and summon my strength and bear them unflinchingly.

A hoard of alien monsters, seething through the streets. The encroaching roar of a tidal wave. The smell of whiskey on the breath of a bitter old man. The lengthening trill of a heartbeat monitor in a hospital room.

I would bear it all for you and I would not break.

Not my body, not my mind.

Not my trembling heart.

But I am no superhero. I am merely man.

Mortal.

Me.

If I am to endure this it will be only because of you, my Emily.

My love. My one true hero.