

As I mentioned, this short story won the 1991 San Francisco Bay Guardian fiction contest. It first appeared in the May/June 1991 literary supplement of that same magazine, and has been out of print since then.

I am proud to present it now, here, for your enjoyment.

Thank you.

Super Heroes

By

William Mize

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On a good day Daniel was the thin, elfin figure that strolled through the busy white hallways as if he owned them, the sarcoma on his calves a stark contrast to the bear claw slippers he wore. He was the candy striper's confidant, giving advice on love and makeup with equal abandon. On a good day Daniel smiled and laughed through the pain.

On a bad day Daniel cried, humiliated at having another clean him, for he was too weak to walk the ten yards to the bathroom. He cried when his social worker, a beautiful but sad woman, came to update him on his shrinking benefits. On a bad day Daniel wept, because the pain was too great and he knew that soon he was going to die.

Today was a bad day. The pain medication he could no longer afford made him feel weak and ethereal, like he was having an out-of-body experience. Every move he made surprised him, as if he had lost control to an unseen puppeteer. Today Daniel lost his private room. Just a matter of economics, they said. We'll send someone for you at ten, they said.

The aide was sullen and quiet and stared at Daniel with angry, impatient eyes as he waited for him to make his way to the wheelchair. The room was silent except for the popping of the gum in the aide's mouth and Daniel's heavy, moist breathing.

Daniel held out his hand for help, but received none. The aide remained behind the chair, his latex-covered fingers tapping a staccato beat on the plastic handles.

"Could you help me?" Daniel winced as he spoke, the glands in his throat were swollen and raw.

"I just wheel," the aide said. "They don't pay me enough to touch."

The words struck Daniel with the sting of an open-handed slap; their meaning made flesh by the look of hate on the young man's face. Daniel looked around for something familiar to ground him, to comfort him. His eyes fell on the bright orange band that circled his wrist; that was familiar. He had received it when he checked in. Orange was the color of caution lights, of sunsets, of AIDS patients. He tried to hide it under his white hospital gown, but the color still bled through.

"Fuck you," Daniel said through dry, cracked lips. "I'll walk."

Ten minutes, fifty yards. Daniel clutched the handrail in the corridor as he would a strong man's arm, giving it his full weight. He took several quick breaths and allowed himself a

rest. He let go of the rail, then touched the cool steel several times to ensure that it was still there. His left sleeve turned gray with the perspiration from his brow.

Room 103, his new home. His hand left the rain expecting to touch the wood veneer of the door, but found a piece of paper instead; a sign taped at eye level for all to see. Drawn in a crude hand was a large yellow circle. The artist had tried to color it in, but the marker had dried out towards the end, the circle fading into the very paper it was drawn on. Trapped inside the circle, a black bat. This had been filled in completely, but the artist had strayed outside the lines; the mixture of black and yellow giving the winged creature an amber aura.

Amber. Daniel thought of fossils, of formaldehyde, of high school science; of creatures thousands of years old, trapped in mid-breath. No longer living, not quite dead.

From behind the door came the sounds of battle. Each combatant had a different voice, but the source was the same: a small child. The first voice was deep and resonant.

"Drop the gun and let the girl go."

The second was high pitched and frantic. It broke and stopped at irregular intervals, as if it were a chore to even speak.

"No way, caped crudhead. The girl's mine and so's the money!"

The vocal explosions, gunshots and screaming that ensued ricocheted out the door, beyond Daniel, beyond the nurse's desk.

"Ssshhh! Bobby!" came the command from a second occupant. This one was older and female. The command was obeyed. Daniel took this cease-fire as his cue to enter. He covered the insignia with his hand and pushed.

The young boy was the first to notice him. Curious brown eyes peeked from under unruly brown bangs. Daniel nodded at the child and the woman while allowing the door to close behind him with a hiss and a click.

"Can't you say hello, Bobby?" She sat to his left, below the wall-mounted television. Neatly combed brown hair, flawless makeup, precise creases in her jacket and skirt. Daniel took her hand, but did not squeeze too hard, for he feared he would destroy her façade with the slightest pressure. Her smile appeared, then gate way to questioning, pursed lips.

"I'm Daniel," he said, releasing her hand.

"I'm Bobby's mother." Her eyes danced around the room for a minute, but, finding nothing to land on, went to the floor below her. She laughed, then shrugged at the silence; returned to her chair and her reading. Daniel made his way to his bed.

His two suitcases awaited him, stacked neatly and squarely atop the freshly made bed. He was too weak to move them, too proud to ask, so they remained and he napped where they were not, his frail body forming a warm cocoon around his possessions.

In his dream he was naked. He lay face down on the wooden bench, the thick towel beneath him absorbing the sweat produced by the steam. The door to the steam room was ajar, allowing hallway light to enter and steam to escape. He heard the sound of footsteps outside his door, of cool water striking the heated rocks.

Darkness. Daniel turned to see the figure in the doorway. He, too was naked, except for the towel around his waist. Daniel motioned for him to enter, then rose to a sitting position to greet his latest lover. The door closed with a click, the steam rose with a hiss.

"Pow!" The explosion threw Daniel off the wooden bench and into his hospital bed.

"Bam!" came the gunfire from the bed next to him. Daniel kept his eyes closed and waited for parental intervention, but none came. The pain medication had worn off and every

sound the child made was the sound of sledgehammers against steel. Next came the screeching, high-pitched laugh.

Daniel propped himself up and spoke. "Bobby?"

This surprised the child, causing him to drop the purple-suited figure he had been holding into the folds of the blue towel that surrounded him, one end held fast around his neck by a safety pin.

Daniel placed a forefinger against his lips and went ssshhh. It was the sound of air escaping from a tire, of steam from a boiling kettle.

The silence lasted ten minutes then was broken by whispering and the click of plastic figures being struck together. The random clicks were a Morse code of evil and justice that echoed in the dark room. The sun was setting and Daniel saw Bobby only in silhouette. He was lying on his stomach and he held the figures before him, his arms forming an arena for redemption. His untied sneakers swirled around his prone body like clumsy pigeons, their laces useless, fragile wings.

The clock on the wall said 7:20. No medication, no release from the pain. Each rustle of linen, each intake of breath assaulted Daniel's senses. He pulled his suitcases closer, as if they could shield him from the battle next to him. After two successive gunshots, he could take no more.

"Stop it!" he screamed, rising to face his small tormentor. "Go to sleep! Be quiet!"

The boy's eyes were wide as saucers in the dusk of the room. When he moved to put aside the toys, he was illuminated by the beam of hallway light that came in through the door's small window. His dark hair and dark eyes magnified his pallor. A small hand came up to wipe his eyes. Surrounding the child's wrist was a band the color of caution lights, of sunsets.

When Daniel awoke the next morning, the sun was high on the horizon and bore down on the room with a fury that air conditioning could hardly control. The blinds that the aide adjusted were magnified and projected onto the white tile floor, onto the white nightgowns, their shadows forming the bars of the prison.

Bobby was sitting Indian style in the center of his bed, his eyes not on his stirring roommate, but on the television suspended above him, where cartoon figures slapped and played and fought in silence.

"You can go ahead and turn that up now," Daniel said. He hoped his voice was cheerful and persuasive. The boy's eyes remained on the screen, leaving only to glance at the motionless figures on his tray table.

"That's okay," the boy said. "I don't mind."

Daniel sighed and directed his own eyes to the flashing pictures above him.

The silence and the stifling heat continued throughout the day, each magnifying the other until Daniel thought he would go mad. He tossed, turned, sighed, feigned interest, feigned disinterest in the show above him, but did not speak. Bobby didn't move either. He made no move to touch his figures, to touch the volume button on the remote. Lunch and dinner were served by aides with puzzled looks and furrowed brows.

That night Daniel opened a window to allow the cool north breeze in. The blinds moved in unison with the wind, occasionally tapping the windowpane to keep time. Daniel could feel the numbness and exhaustion washing over his body like a fresh ocean wave. He licked his lips, tasted the salt of his own sweat. Above the roar of the surf he heard the squeak of untied sneakers on a clean tile floor.

"Daniel?"

Daniel blinked his eyes then propped himself up on one elbow. "Yeah?"

"Could you undo this for me?" His small fingers were playing with the safety pin that held his cape securely around his neck.

"Sure," Daniel said. "Having problems?"

The child shook his head, which caused an errant lock to fall over his eyes. He brushed it back. "No," he said. "I can do it, but – " He brushed his forehead again, but there were no bangs to block his view of the floor.

"But what, Bobby?"

Small dark eyes rolled to the ceiling, small sneakered feet shuffled uncomfortably.

"My – my mom won't let me."

"Why not?"

A heavy sigh. "She's afraid I'll get hurt."

"It's just a pin, for goodness sakes."

"Yeah, but I bleed a lot if I get hurt. I bleed and I don't stop."

"Oh." Daniel's response rose and fell, like the mountain of understanding he had scaled. He motioned for Bobby to come closer. The child took two steps forward. Daniel started to take the pin, but then stopped. His hands returned to his lap.

"No," he said. "You do it."

Confusion, fear, surprise and joy all fought for control of the boy's face. They finally agreed on a smile. "Really?"

"Really. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise."

Large hands directed small ones in the opening and closing of the pin. Large hands tucked the blanket around the small boy, large hands turned off the light.

Daniel awoke during the night, his body gloved in a cool sweat while a stronger fever raged inside him. The pain was a fall from a great height and his scream was silent as he fell. He breathed deeply and slowly, as if the oxygen provided could quench the flames within. He coughed several times, adjusted his covers.

"Daniel?" came the small voice from the darkness.

"Yeah?" he croaked.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'm okay. You go on back to sleep."

"You want for me to call the nurse?"

"No."

"I can do that for you."

"I'm okay, Bobby. I just need to get some sleep."

"Let me know, okay?"

"Okay. Good night."

"Good night."

Daniel closed his eyes and continued his descent.

Hours later Daniel rose to find the sun just peeking over the horizon, the brilliant orange conquering the cobalt blue that had reigned all night. An orange the color of breakfast juice, of jack o'lanterns. He turned on his side to get some water and bumped his elbow on his tray table. A tray table that had not been there the night before. On the tray, three items that had not been there before.

First, a red towel. Imperfectly folded, as if by small hands, it was placed in the center of the table and acted as a cushion for the other two objects. Next, a bright and shiny safety pin that reflected all the colors of the day on its small clasp. Last, a small plastic figure. It was dressed in blue, except for red shorts and red boots. His face was strong and healthy, as if it had been chiseled out of stone. His hair was jet black and perfect, except for a single lock that

fell over his forehead. On his strong muscular chest, a red S bordered in yellow, around his broad shoulders, a red cape.

Daniel smiled, examined the figure, then looked at the child in bed next to his; a child peaceful and angelic in sleep. No furrows tainted his brow, no dark circles under his eyes. To this child every day was an adventure to be undertaken, with villains to be fought, innocents to be protected.

Daniel inhaled, letting the cool air penetrate into his chest. He felt the fever dying, imagined the flames becoming smaller and smaller. Old aches and pains dissipated, he felt his strength returning, he felt like a man of steel.