

## The Superhero

“So, you you can walk through walls?” The court appointed psychiatrist looked up from his notebook and peered over the top of his reading glasses as he asked the question.

Randy sighed and stared at the floor. “I can’t walk through walls” he said. He was obviously tired of answering what he considered to be stupid questions. “Only Permeators can do that” he added. “I’m a Transformer. And not one of those silly cars in the movies that turn into robots.”

“So what does a Transformer do?” the doctor asked.

“Transformers can transform their bodies into other states, like a liquid or a gas. I usually transform into a gas.” He paused thoughtfully for a moment. “Although maybe I transform into a plasma. I’ve never been completely clear on the difference between a gas and a plasma. I do stay coalesced instead of dispersing throughout the room the way a gas would, so maybe I’m a plasma. I wonder if I’m electrically conductive. . .” His voice trailed off as he became absorbed in thought.

“Have you always been a plasma?”

“No, no.” Randy answered, irritated at having his thoughts interrupted. “I’m not a plasma now, for Heaven’s sake. Only when I want to be.”

“Then have you always been able to turn into a plasma?”

“I don’t know.” For the first time Randy took an interest in the question. “When I was little I didn’t know that I could change into other forms. When I got to Junior High I started reading about people with special abilities. Superman, Spiderman, the X-men, the Fantastic Four . . . you know. People with super powers. I started wondering if maybe I had some special power too. Then late one night I was in bed, reading a Playboy I’d bought from my cousin Fred. Suddenly I heard my mom’s footsteps in the hall. She was walking fast, and I knew she’d seen the light under my door and was going to yell at me because it was way past bedtime. I didn’t want her to catch me with the Playboy and without really thinking about it I just sort of melted away and drifted under the bed. She threw open the door, but she couldn’t see me.”

“Did you have a good relationship with your mother?” the doctor asked.

“Well, sure. I mean, she was my mom.” Randy answered. “She yelled at me when I did something wrong, but all moms do that.” He paused for a moment. “I caught hell about that Playboy the next day, though. She may not have seen me but when I melted away but I left the light on and the Playboy on top of the bed.”

“I see” the doctor said thoughtfully. “And how about your father? Did you have a good relationship with him?”

“Sure. Dad and I got along great. He travelled a lot, though. He was a salesman. Most of the time it was just Mom and me around the house.”

The doctor waited a long time to see if Randy would say more about his father, but Randy remained silent and started eyeing some magazines on a table. The doctor decided to try a

different subject. "So once you found you could 'melt away' as you put it, did you do that often?"

"No, I mean I could do it whenever I wanted to, but I'd done enough research to know that all kinds of bad things happen if people find out you have special powers. I'd do it in my room sometimes, or if nobody was looking I might use it to escape a bully or to sneak out of the house, but I had to be careful."

The doctor scribbled some notes on his pad. "This research you did, was it by reading comic books?"

"I prefer to call them illustrated journals."

"But you know that the people in these stories are not real."

"Oh sure. But I think they're based on real people. There's too much material there and it's too consistent for it to be pure fiction. I don't think these people run around in capes and win fistfights against villains with machine guns, but I think there are people with special powers. I mean, look at me. I have a special power. And if I had a chance to use it to catch a villain I would."

The doctor was writing furiously on his note pad. "And how did you get your special power?" he asked.

"I told you, I just discovered I had it."

"Yes, but the people in these stories, they all know where their power came from. They were born on another planet, or they were exposed to radiation. Do you think you were born on another planet? Were you bitten by a radioactive spider?"

"I was born in Cleveland!" Randy snapped back. "And I'm not Spiderman. Anyway, spiders can't transform themselves into a gas and slip under doors." He paused for a moment and became absorbed in his thoughts. "Octopi can spread themselves so thin they can slip under doors. . . but that's not the same thing. Anyway, I don't think I was bitten by a radioactive octopus. I'm pretty sure I would have remembered that. No, this is probably just a genetic mutation I was born with."

The doctor waited a bit to see if Randy would say more about the origin of his power, but the expression on Randy's face indicated he was through with that line of discussion. The doctor decided to try a direct approach. "Can you demonstrate this power for me?" he asked.

"Here?" Randy answered with surprise. "In this room?"

"Yes" the doctor replied. "Why not here?"

"That would reveal my secret identity!" Randy protested.

"But you've already told me about this power" the doctor countered. "You would not be revealing anything. I already know you have this power, and there are only the two of us in this room."

“And how many people are behind that mirror?” Randy asked. “That’s a one way mirror, isn’t it?” The doctor didn’t respond. “No” Randy continued, “I think that’s something I need to keep a secret.”

“How can it be a secret if you’ve already told me about it?” the doctor tried to keep the exasperation out of his voice.

“It doesn’t matter that I’ve told you,” Randy answered “because you don’t believe me. If I demonstrated my power you’d believe me, and my secret identity would be blown.

“Is it such a bad thing to reveal your secret identity?” the doctor asked innocently.

“It’s one of the worst things that can happen” Randy insisted. “I mean, look at Iron Man. He revealed his secret identity and the next thing you know dozens of bad men in helicopters shot his house up with rockets and machine guns. I don’t want that to happen to me. My God! I rent! I’d never get my damage deposit back!”

“It’s OK. You don’t have to reveal your secret identity.” The doctor spoke in a soothing voice, as Randy had become visibly agitated. He had stood up and started pacing.

Randy slowly relaxed and sat back down on the wooden chair. “Besides” he added calmly. “I’ve vowed to only use my powers to do good.”

“And convincing me that you have this power would not be good?” the doctor asked.

“It might be good in the short term, but I don’t think it would be good in the long run.”

The doctor thought for a while, thinking how to phrase a question so it would not imply any kind of a promise. “If I believed you had this power, it might be easier for me to believe your story.”

“Yes, but then what? You’d have to tell others about me. That’s your job. Soon everybody would want me to show them my power. I’d probably even be a guest on some late night TV show. Then somebody would kidnap me. Or they’d kidnap someone I like and threaten to hurt them if I didn’t slip into a bank vault or something. No, it’s probably better this way.”

The doctor decided to try a different approach. “So you only use your power for good. Can you give me some examples of good things you’ve used it for?”

“That’s a tough question” Randy answered. “When I was little, I could convince myself that anything I wanted was good. Like hiding from my mother when she was mad at me. Except that deep down, I knew she was mad at me because I’d done something bad. So how could getting away with something bad be good? Hiding from bullies was good. It kept me from getting beat up, which was good, and it kept them from beating me up, which would have been a bad thing so preventing it was good. Except, there really weren’t that many bullies to hide from, and when I did see one there were usually people around so I couldn’t hide without revealing my secret identity. And you don’t feel like much of a superhero if all you do is hide from bullies. Can you imagine the Flash using his super speed just to run away from villains? In the books it was always so clear cut. Superman fought Lex Luther. Batman fought The Joker. Captain America fought the Nazis. The villains were always evil, and the superheroes rescued the good guys. Once I thought I had a chance to do good. Our neighbors, the Jordans, left for a

two week vacation. As I was walking to school I heard mewing from inside their garage. I realized that a stray cat I'd seen around the neighborhood must have gotten trapped inside. He would starve to death before the Jordans returned. I turned into a gas, slipped under the garage door, turned back into myself, and carried the cat out through a side door, being careful to lock it behind me. I felt like a hero! The next day I saw the cat trot across our back yard with a baby bird in its mouth. I had saved a cat, but killed a bird. And the cat would probably kill many more birds in its lifetime. So had I really done good? It was all so confusing. Sometimes when you do good for one person, it's bad for someone else. So then I vowed to only use my powers for the good of all humanity. But that's even harder to determine. When Captain America killed Nazis that was, on the whole, good for humanity, but not for all humanity. It wasn't good for the Nazis, and like it or not, they were part of humanity."

"And were you doing good for all humanity when you broke into Mrs. Maitherwhistle's house?" the doctor asked.

"I told the police, I didn't break into her house!" Randy answered angrily. "I slipped under the door. I didn't break anything. And I thought it was my house. My friend Bill won \$1000 in the lottery so we went to a bar to celebrate. We shared a cab home. I told the cabbie I lived on twenty-seventh street, but I guess he didn't hear me correctly because he took me to twenty-second street. I may not have been pronouncing my words very well, and I had the hiccups. Anyway, it sorta looked like my house, or at least it did last night, but my key wouldn't fit into the lock. I thought maybe I had the wrong key and I was going to ask Bill to help me find the right key, but he'd already taken off in the taxi. So I just slipped under the door. It was dark inside, of course. I tripped over a sofa that shouldn't have been there and I must have stunned myself, because the next thing I knew all the lights were on and some lady was screaming bloody murder while she called 9-1-1. I tried to tell her it was an accident and calm her down, but she wasn't in the mood to listen.

"So now you're in jail, charged with breaking and entering, and you won't tell the police how you got in to that lady's house" the doctor said without emotion.

"I didn't break anything!" Randy insisted. "And I told the police how I got in."

"You said you'd only use your power for good, but you used it to break into someone else's house. Don't you think that's wrong?"

"I thought it was my house."

"And is breaking into your own house using your power for good?"

Randy shrugged. "I thought it would be better than sleeping on the front step. A lot of things that seem crazy today seemed to make sense last night." He put his elbows on the table, and slumped forward with his face in his hands. It seemed to ease the pounding in his head a bit.

The psychiatrist sensed that there was nothing to be gained by talking further. He nodded to the mirror and a plainclothes detective opened the door to let him out. Two uniformed guards ushered Randy back to his cell.

The psychiatrist found it difficult to write his evaluation. The first sentence was easy. "In my opinion, Mr. Randy Kirkpatrick is qualified to stand trial." This sentence had to be unequivocal, or the District Attorney would never hire him again. Now came the difficult part. Backing it up. "Mr. Kirkpatrick clearly understands the difference between right and wrong. In fact, he spends a great deal of time thinking about it, although he thinks of it in terms of good and evil. Unlike sociopaths who do not believe anything they does is wrong, Mr. Kirkpatrick worries that nothing he does is truly good. He worries incessantly about taking any action, which indicates he is not a threat to himself or to others. He clearly understands that it would be wrong to hurt anyone, including himself.

On the other hand, Mr. Kirkpatrick is also delusional. He was bullied as a child, possibly by his mother, and he felt abandoned by his father. He escaped into a world of superhero comic books. He dreamed of having a superpower himself, and eventually convinced himself that he was capable of changing into a liquid or a gas and seeping through cracks in doors and windows. He uses the concept of a "secret identity" he learned from these comics as an excuse not to demonstrate this power for others, which of course also allows him to preserve the delusion for himself. He also subscribes to the comic book philosophy of only using his superpower to do good, which is another reason why he does not pose a threat to himself or to others.

As to his openness to a plea bargain, I think Mr. Kirkpatrick would be consider offers to lessen the charges as long as they did not require him to show how he gained entrance to Mrs. Maitherwhistle's house. To do so would destroy his delusion because he would have to admit that he does not possess super powers."

The psychiatrist reread his report. It wasn't great, but it would do. They only paid him for a 15 minute interview and a one page evaluation, so they had no right to expect "Crime and Punishment" in return.

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If the psychiatrist's task was difficult, the task faced by the Jefferson County Sheriff was more difficult. He had to explain how a prisoner had escaped from a locked cell inside a locked facility with two deputies guarding the only entrance to the facility. To make matters worse, there were no clues as to how he got out. All doors were still locked, there were no tunnels, and the security cameras showed the main entrance had remained closed all night with fully alert deputies on either side.

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Of course, Randy had the most difficult task of all. He had to establish a new secret identity. A new name, a new home, a new job, and new friends. He also had to wrestle with his

conscience yet again. Was he really working for the good of all humanity when he slipped under the door of his jail cell?