

“ORIGIN STORY”

I'm a superhero waiting for my origin story. I've read enough comics to know that I fit the profile: skinny, nerdy white boy with a lot of heart. Maybe I'll be tapped for a secret super soldier program, or bitten by a radioactive ant, or maybe just build myself an exoskeleton. Scratch that last one. It seemed the most likely—until I actually tried to build a prototype. The suit didn't survive the fall from my tree house, but at least I did, two broken legs later.

As the years go by, the origin story is revised. No longer young enough for boy wonder, so I'm hoping for man of steel. I should be taking martial arts classes, or going to a firing range, or generally prepping useful superhero skills, but I figure I should find out what kind of superhero I am first. There's no use becoming a Muay Thai master if I'm going to invent particles that blow me up giant size.

In the meantime, I get a real job: newspaper reporter. Job of choice of would-be-superheroes. After all, you get to know the criminal hotbeds, make buddy-buddy relations with town law enforcement, and a reason to be at the frontlines before the action starts. Most of my assignments end up disappointingly mundane: local elections devoid of any scandal, neighborhood gentrification projects, the success of the local PTAs latest drive. But I stick with it, knowing that with seniority will come my pick of stories.

Then I meet a girl. Susanne. We fall in love almost immediately, but our kisses come with the overwhelming dread that I'm putting her in danger. I should tell her what she's getting herself into. That one day someone might use her to get to me, but since it hasn't happened yet, I'd rather not scare her off. Too many girls are sent running by the mountain of comic books at the side of my bed.

Susanne isn't. The first time she sees my comics, she picks one up and starts to read. That's when I know she's the one. We get married, because that's what you do when you're in

love.

When my daughter Elle is born, I hold her in my arms, and everything changes. From the tips of her pink toes to the tops of her soft curls, she is perfection. If any harm were to come to this beautiful thing in my arms, I think this would become a different sort of origin story; one with a dark mask, and a darker purpose.

Elle is four-years-old, and we walk home from the park. It's not the most beautiful day. A storm is brewing overhead, and the first fat raindrops have begun to drop from the sky. I've had to pull her away from the playground. We've been playing her favorite game: Supergirl. She lies belly down on the swings, and I give her a big push so she can fly.

As we pass by an out of business gas station, I pick up Elle and hold her close. Her cape tangles briefly around my arms. I should not have come this way. I've covered drug busts occurring in this very spot. My heart sinks when I notice there are a pack of roughs standing around, so I put on my "we don't want any trouble, we're just passing by" look and move as fast as possible.

But they don't get the message. They start to follow after us. Mocking us. I ignore them and start walking faster. They give chase. I'm running now.

"Daddy, why are they chasing us?" asks Ellie. She is not yet capable of understanding why you would want to hurt anyone, and I've always hoped, impossibly, that it would be able to stay that way.

"Hush," I say, "They're bad men, but I'm not going to let them hurt you" and push myself to run harder. The rain is starting to fall harder.

They catch me. They flash a gun.

"Empty your pockets," snarls the meanest looking of the bunch.

When I go too slowly, he points the gun at Elle. That triggers something in the brain to

snap. I snarl, “Don’t you dare point that at her, you God damn coward.” I’m not sure where it comes from. Something primal gives a jerk. It’s maybe the stupidest thing I’ve ever done, next to jumping out of a tree house in a wet suit.

He returns the gun to me. If it goes off, the bullet will hit my stomach. I hear that’s a horrible way to die. “You’re not in charge here. You’re the one shitting yourself, about to throw your wallet on the sidewalk. So, just who the hell is the coward?” He punctuates his words with jerks of the gun.

My wallet comes out. I throw it, but not on the ground: at his chest.

The gun goes off. The bullet hits me, and the air leaves my lungs. I fall and hit the ground, hard. One of them grabs my wallet, and they bolt. Over the sound of my own blood rushing in my ears, I hear Elle crying. Then I can see her face.

She is curled over me. “What’s wrong? Why are you bleeding? Please be ok, daddy.”

“Honey, go to that house, get an adult. Ask to use their phone. Get help.” Elle looks at me, nodding resolutely, even though she is still crying. She runs. She looks so strong, so determined. She’s so much stronger than I am. She tries to save birds that run into our windows and butterflies with torn wings. I never did any of that. I’ve always wanted to be a superhero, but only for myself. She’s different. She’s better.

Soon, Elle is back, with an older woman, who kneels beside me. “My husband is on the phone with the ambulance. It’ll be here soon.”

They do their best to make me comfortable. Elle is there, and she’s holding my hand, and I try to hold on, but I feel myself threatening to slip away.

I black out for a moment. When I open my eyes, Elle’s tears have stopped, but their trails remain in the layer of playground dust on her cheeks. Her red cape flutters behind her, raindrops dripping from its hem. I hear the sirens in the distance, but they feel a world away.

They will never get here in time.

Elle looks in the direction that the roughs fled and raises a tiny fist, shaking it. Then she looks back at me, strokes my forehead, and whispers, "I'm going to get them for you daddy. I promise. The bad men won't hurt you. They won't hurt anyone's daddy ever again."

And that's when I realize just how wrong I've been this whole time.

I am the origin story.