

Finally Grateful

By Steven Connell ©2008

I remember being that nine year-old boy,
reading Superman by flashlight.
Every night
I would turn off the light
and with eyes closed tight
I would pray,
I would say,
“Dear...God, DC, Marvel, Stan Lee,
please understand me.
No disrespect to my family,
but they didn't make me strong enough
to do everything that I need to do.
I want to be like everything that I read and you
have to help.
Please make me better than myself.”

Then one morning I woke up knowing
that it would never work.
I was disappointed that I would have to be me all day.

That morning I sat upon my mother's lap and asked her,
“I'm never gonna have superpowers, am I Mommy?”
She leaned down and whispered in my ear.
“There is no Superman or Wonder Woman or the like.
No Ronald McDonald or Mickey Mouse.
No magical Land of Oz.”
“What about Santa Claus?”
“No, my son, there is no Mr. Claus.”
With my little boy lungs of steel dented just enough
to prevent me from ever taking full breaths again,
I vowed:

“I henceforth put an end to believing.
I do hereby resolve to be nothing special.”

I then flushed my Justice League chewables down the toilet,
and despite the fact that it was 9 a.m.,
I bid my mother and father good night and went to bed.

At exactly sunset, I crept from my room
holding all the superheroes Underoos
my little boy arms could carry,
passed my mother in the hall and asked her,
“Mommy, where do we keep the kerosene?”

With that my mother sat me on her lap and, like a surgeon, whispered words
to remove my damaged lungs.
She rolled them out flat and reshaped them as a bird and
put them back and now
whenever I inhale I am lifted slightly.

She whispered,
“My little baby with such big eyes,
though I take away your mythology,
I replace it with something even better.
What I give you now is real.”
She tells me there are heroes you will not find in comics.
There is a man in mismatched socks,
wearing a suit he bought at the Salvation Army,
a dented clarinet wrapped
in newspaper sitting on his lap.
The last time he saw him, his son had mentioned
wanting to play and though it has been a year,
the social worker promised, “I will get the gift to your son
if you get it to me by 6.”
It is now 6:11.
There was an accident on Wilshire.

The man is humming "Silent Night" to keep from crying.

My mother says,
"Santa Claus isn't a fat guy with a beard
but that man in mismatched socks."
She whispers,
"I am your Santa Claus."

Fuck X-ray vision, magic rings, invisible jets.
I no longer want to web sling through sunsets
or leap tall buildings in a single bound. Not anymore.
I am finally grateful for my flesh, bones, and bruises;
for nervous laughter and migraines,
the ordinary shortness of breath...
my mom.

My mom told me today that she hasn't cashed a
paycheck in months
because her full-time job is running
a shelter for teen addicts.
And she doesn't pray
for superpowers at night.
She prays for someone brave
enough to put twenty thousand dollars in her hands
so she can keep the shelter open.
She hasn't found someone to give her that money
So every week she takes her own paycheck
And donates it to herself and the doors don't close.
She can afford to do that so long as my dad, seventy,
just diagnosed with Parkinson's,
continues to teach his three classes a week.
He doesn't pray for superpowers either.
He prays for a cure.

My parents' lives have been a lesson
in reading comic books backwards.
The fight for a better world begins
when you move out the phone booth as Clark Kent.

I get it now.

My mom wasn't saying there was no Santa Claus;
He just shops at JCPenney with her credit card.
She wasn't saying there was no Superman;
He just sits across from me at the dinner table.
She wasn't taking away my heroes.
She was refocusing my faith.

My hero is the one with the trembling hands.
The one not invincible that still fights the bad guy.
The woman with Kryptonite lip gloss and a dry mouth
who still finds the words.

Nowadays
it's the photos of Dr. King that have me up nights
under covers with a flashlight.
Only it's not Dr. King that I'm looking at;
it's the people around him.
I'm studying the faces of the ones unsung
who risked their lives as well for the belief
that their better world demands it.

I've got new heroes now.

A mother of four who works the graveyard shift at
Denny's.
That's my Superman.
Batman is the firefighter who made his wife a widow
so some stranger would live.
The girl who wears her scars about her like
victory ribbons
is Wonder Woman now.
The guy next to Martin is the Green Lantern.

And the Justice League is comprised of the quiet mighty
who swallow struggle like vitamins and keep on.

My mom is Santa Claus and my dad
The motherfucking Flash.

These are my heroes because they teach me what my
comics never did:

It's not heroic to take a bullet
when you know you can't be killed;
being bulletproof is easy
when you're bulletproof.