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The Preterite

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The Preterite

As a child I was filled with a yearning. I wore my blue and grey Eagle Underoos with a homemade eye mask while I tuned in faithfully to the Friday Night News Hour and watched the world get saved from impending doom every single week. I remember titans clashing before a backdrop of glittering glass, gleaming steel, brilliant cityscapes that represented the pinnacle of humanity's achievements, the scope of what they were fighting for. I collected trading cards of all my favorite superheroes. I dressed as them for Halloween. If I close my eyes I can still smell the stale plastic of my Metaman action figure. I didn't grow up wanting to be a supervillain. Nobody does. It just happens.

End of Summer, Twenty Years Ago

On nights when I couldn't sleep I'd sneak out of the house and wander the silent streets surrounded by the unearthly yellow glow of the street lamps. I told myself I was drifting aimlessly but I always, inevitably, ended up at Willow Park. I'd take my shoes off and walk across the long, plush grass. I'd listen to the crickets and feel the soft wet dew gently cool my feet. I would sit on the swing set and lazily spin reveling in the night air. I'd make my way to the edge of the wooded area, where a cluster of electrical transformers hummed and whirred. I'd lie on my back, feeling the power vibrate up and down my spine as I stared at the night sky for hours, watching lights trace across the darkness hoping for shooting stars or spaceships, meteorites or flying saucers; anything more than just an airplane.

Hillcrest Valley was a place like so many others. Split level and ranch houses with attached garages containing minivans and sensible sedans, the occasional BMW. The landscape consisted of well-cut lawns, sidewalks that were mostly decorative, telephone wires stretching as far as my only too human eyes could see. People would water their lawns, they'd wash their cars, walk out to their mailboxes once a day and wave at anyone they saw before walking back inside. By day, I'd walk down those empty sidewalks, staring at the cracks, scuffing my shoes. I'd wonder, isn't there someone to fight evil here?

The day before 7th grade started we had Orientation. After elementary school, our small school merged with four others for Junior High. There were lots of new, strange looking people and after three months of summer even some of the familiar faces had strange new bodies attached to them. I noticed Amy Pagano was wearing earrings now. She must have managed to quit biting her nails. That was the deal she had made with her dad so that he would let her pierce her ears. I knew this from when we talked on the phone last spring when I helped her in math class and we talked about our lives. We hadn't kept in touch over the summer. Now she didn't even notice me when she entered with a group of girls clustered together whispering to one another urgently. We sat in this giant room with off-white walls and ugly red carpet. Fluorescent lights buzzed above us.

The boys punched each other in the arms and horsed around and showed off as loudly as they could. I tried to tell the guys around me this new joke I heard about a guy that was remodeling this house for a really connected mobster. He could find all of the items requested except for the most important one: something called a Halo Statue. As I revved myself up for the punchline, I was interrupted by a tall, red haired kid who started burping the entire alphabet. His face was mean and pockmarked with acne I wasn't yet physically developed enough to have. All the kids turned and laughed, the joke I'd been practicing for days instantly forgotten.

Shortly after, Principal Mackie came to the podium and everyone stopped what they were doing. He had the kind of presence that could make a bunch of 7th graders be quiet without even having to ask for it. He was well over six feet tall, he had piercing blue eyes that instantly entranced Amy Pagano's gaggle, a square jaw, and a perfect, reassuring smile. He opened with a joke. It was about a guy remodeling a house for a well-connected mobster. Nobody interrupted him, and when the mobster finally explained it was a device that rang and you picked it up and said, "Halo, 's that you?" everybody laughed far more than his delivery of the joke deserved. Far more than they would have for me.

Then he got serious for a minute. He spoke of respecting each other. He spoke of working hard. He talked to us about the joys of knowledge and the responsibility that comes with it. It was the kind of thing I'd heard in the public service announcements my heroes used to make. At that point in my life, I believed in this stuff earnestly and sincerely. But I never said any of it. I knew if you said that kind of thing, you'd get laughed at or worse. So now I was

going to be the one to do the laughing. I smirked and wracked my brain trying to think of something funny to say when I realized that nobody around me was smirking at all. Not even the big, red headed kid. They were hanging on this guy's every word.

Couple Months Ago

The train had stopped inside the tunnel. There was no announcement, no reason why. My cell phone didn't get reception so I couldn't tell how long it had been. I could ask someone if they had a watch, but it didn't matter. It had been enough to make me late for work, yet again. Knowing by how much wasn't important enough to break the silence that had cast itself over us. It was just my life. Crowded alone in the dark with so many others baking in the heat, all of us quiet and complacent, that didn't feel like much at all.

The train lurched forward, stopped, and started again. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, it made its way out of the tunnel and into the light. There, at the entrance of the tunnel, holding onto an impossibly heavy and vital support beam was a superhero. It was one of the newer ones. I don't know which one. I had long ago stopped keeping track. He wore blue and yellow and red and floated happily above us. Everybody burst into applause. He grinned and waived at us, soaking up their admiration. I sat uncomfortably in my sweat stained button up shirt and quietly dreaded another day at work.

Third Day of 7th Grade

None of my friends from last year had the same lunch period as me. The first two days of school I had hidden in Spanish class, eating lunch out of the brown paper bag I had brought, trying my best not to be noticed. But then Señora Dillworth caught me and made me go eat in the cafeteria with everyone else.

I had a bit of money and wanted to stall for time so I went through the lunch line and bought a plastic looking yellow pizza and a cardboard box full of chocolate milk. The line moved far too quickly and I came to the moment I had been dreading for days. I had to find someone to sit with for lunch. I stood momentarily in a daze, looking out with terror at a sea of unfriendly faces. And then, not noticing I had stopped, Little Stevie Kramer came out of line after me and ran right into my back and dropped his tray, the silverware clattering on the floor, his turkey cutlet and bowl of jello splattering all over his legs. The

entire cafeteria burst into sarcastic applause. I walked away from Stevie as quickly as possible, hoping people would just think he was clumsy.

I tried to make for an open spot at a table at the far end of the cafeteria when a loud, mean sounding voice stopped me.

"Hey you," it called out in a too deep for middle school tone. I turned to see it belonged to the giant, scary looking pockmarked red headed kid. "That was awesome. Come sit here."

That's how Mike Saunchgrow and I became friends.

May 4th, 2010

I take a look down at the city below me. I hover in the sky above them all, completely unnoticed. Story of my life. The people look so tiny from my vantage as they walk to work, window shop, clutch their coffees and scuttle about their little lives. I watch them and I want to feel something, but all I can feel is the cool steel trigger of the death ray as my finger presses against it.

Sometime in the Fall, 7th Grade

It was the first time in my academic career that I had been sent to the Principal's office and it wasn't my fault. Mike Saunchgrow dared me to pull the fire alarm right before our 3rd period physical science test. I told him I wouldn't do it because I knew about the red dye that sprayed all over whoever pulled the fire alarm. That's how they discouraged false alarms. I wasn't stupid or anything.

Saunchgrow didn't believe me about the dye and wanted me to show him where it was. I got really close to the alarm and pointed at the dye pack, just behind the lever. Saunchgrow still couldn't see it. He had me half convinced it wasn't there. So I bent down, eye level with the lever to make sure it was there. That's when Saunchgrow pulled the fire alarm and ran away, leaving me standing there with incriminating red dye all over my face and t-shirt until I was escorted to Principal Mackie's office.

I sat his office across from his great big wooden desk waiting and wondering if I would get detention, or suspended, or expelled. I wondered what happens to kids that get expelled. Do they have to go to school somewhere else? Do they just sit at home with nothing to do and nothing good on TV all day? Do they

have to go to school at Juvie? What would they do to me at Juvie? Would I be stuck in a whole school full of Mike Saunchgrows?

I got up and started to snoop. If I was already in trouble, I might as well see if there was anything interesting I could find in the Principal's office. I looked through the drawers of his desk, but there wasn't much there but a bunch of reports I couldn't understand. I walked over to the wall opposite the desk where he had a trophy cabinet. There were plaques he got for being a great educator and a service to the community. There were some trophies that the math club and the chess club had won. I guess they were in here because the trophy case in the main entrance was all filled up with stuff the basketball and soccer teams had won. Then there was this long flat panel section between the display parts. It seemed weird, to waste space like that. I knocked on the wood and it made that sound you hear when something is hollow. I got up close to it and noticed a little keyhole on the side.

One of the good things about hanging around Mike Saunchgrow that year was that I had gotten pretty good at picking locks. I raided the desk for some paperclips and had that case open within minutes. Then I stood awestruck by what was inside. I barely registered it. I stared at the blue and black lycra outfit, the grey eyemask, the newspaper clippings, the photo of him smiling and shaking hands with the mayor.

"Oh, I see you've found my little memorial to my glory days," Principal Mackie's voice came from behind me. Then I turned and looked at Principal Mackie, at that square jaw and too blue eyes, the same as the ones I had been so impressed by as a kid watching the Friday Night News Hour.

"You were the Eagle?"

"In another lifetime," said Principal Mackie. "I know it's a little vain, keeping that stuff around, but it just comforts me sometimes to know it's there."

"Why did you stop? Can you still fly?" I asked.

"I was cured," he said. "Voluntarily. See, what you have to understand is that the good people in this world, they don't want people with superpowers running around fighting each other, causing serious property damage and massive traffic jams. What they want are clean streets, stable property values and good school districts. Which, of course, is where I come in. Sure, it's not a life filled with adventure, but I like to think that in my own small way, I'm still contributing to the community, that I'm still being a hero, only now in a less

obvious, yet more productive way. Besides, nobody wants to look to the sky and see someone flying around, reminding them of all the things they aren't. Not in Hillcrest Valley anyway. Now, let's talk about your own little bout with misanthrope, why don't we?"

As he continued his lecture about the dangers of pulling fire alarms, peer pressure and the need for strong moral character, I stared at the grey in his hair, the wrinkles underneath his eyes, and I realized what I was looking at: a superhero, all grown up. I couldn't think of anything sadder.

Late Fall

My first bus ride after suspension I was stuck sitting next to Little Stevie Kramer in the front seat because the bus driver was on strict orders not to let me sit in the back anymore. Stevie was plastering me with annoying questions about the fire alarm and what Principal Mackie's office was like. I was doing my best to stay quiet when something else shut Stevie Kramer up.

Sometime in the night the power station at Willow Park had been smashed by a meteorite. It was surrounded by fire trucks and police cars cordoning off glowing green fragments of space rock.

"Wow!" said Little Stevie Kramer. "Would you look at that?"

"In the summers I used to go there to sit and look at the night sky," I said.

"Lucky you weren't there last night," said Little Stevie Kramer.

"Yeah," I said. "Lucky."

Sometime That Winter

We skipped school and hung out at Mike Saunchgrow's where we listened to Iron Maiden, played Nintendo, and learned how to smoke cigarettes. His dad came in with a girl that was far too young to be Saunchgrow's mother and grabbed a beer from the fridge. He didn't seem too concerned that we weren't in school. What did concern him enough to momentarily ignore his lady friend was the videogame we were playing. It was one of those now-hilarious licensed superhero games with the blocky, cheesy 8 bit graphics. Back then everyone thought that was awesome. Everyone except Mike Saunchgrow's dad.

"Man, fuck superheroes. Those guys are pussies. You ever notice they always go four on one against the villains? Or like, if it's one on one, it'll be like a guy with no powers against some guy that can fly and shoot lasers from his eyes and is strong enough to toss cars around like they're nothing. Meanwhile, all the villain has are his brains and whatever awesome killer robot he can invent with them. I mean seriously, who exactly is the brave one there?" He barely took a breath and when he was done he didn't look around to see if anyone agreed or disagreed. He just left, his girl trailing behind him while I sat stunned staring at the videoscreen.

I had never thought of it that way before.

May 4th, 2010

I float above it all - the orange and purple hued explosions, puffy black clouds of smoke, the red and blue flashing lights of ambulances, debris from buildings falling like shooting stars and rewriting the landscape - painting pictures out of explosions to rival all the lights I've ever seen in any summer night sky. The colors of the chaos and destruction wrought below; it all looks so beautiful to me.

Close to Valentine's Day

Some kids looked up to gangsta rappers. We had supervillains. We'd patrol halls, looking for those weaker than us, and then we'd prey upon them. Don't worry. The preying didn't really amount to much. Just the usual stuff: noogies, or wormburners, or slapping all the books out of a kids hands and running away. I dreamed of stuffing somebody inside a locker, like I'd seen on TV once. Lockers at school were way too small for that though but I still wanted to try. "Come on, man. Little Stevie Kramer is gonna be walking down A Pod any minute. I'm sure we can fit him. Dude's tiny!"

I said to Mike Sauchgrow.

"I don't know, man. I saw Principal Mackie walking around the halls saying hi to students."

"So we wear our masks," I said. I had mad a few villain masks and started putting them in my backpack by that point. You got a problem with that? "He won't be able to catch us anyway."

"I'm not worried about getting caught," said Mike Saunchgrow. "I just think he'd be disappointed."

Twenty-Five Years Ago

When I was six I ran outside in the middle of an electrical storm. I stood near the tallest tree in the yard and waited as cold, hard drops of rain pelted my skin. Eventually my father came out, grunted and carried me inside. My mother screamed and wept. Just as we stepped in the doorway a deafening flash of lighting hit the spot where I had so recently stood. My mother freaked out. Didn't I know I had almost gotten myself killed? My father grunted. How could I be so stupid? How could they be so stupid? Didn't they know I had almost gotten superpowers?

Nineteen Years, Two Hundred Forty Days Ago

Even though he'd been really boring lately, I had enough dirt on him to get Mike Saunchgrow to agree to one last job with me. We picked the lock to get into Physical Science class after school and then I broke open the cabinet under the lab table right by the back door. There was a vacuum cleaner looking thing that was used for alpha wave demonstrations.

I took out a walkie-talkie I lifted from Radio Shack earlier in the week. Radio Shack was still cheap enough to use omega waves on some of their lower end items and I was pretty sure I could use them to re-rig the alpha wave generator into a feedback loop that would create gamma rays.

"How do you know all this stuff?" Mike Saunchgrow asked.

"I read about it in this book in the library."

Mike Saunchgrow looked at me suspiciously.

"I was looking for the Anarchist's Cookbook and it was right next to it," I explained. That seemed to be good enough for Mike Saunchgrow. Trying to find the Anarchist's Cookbook was the only reason anyone should ever have for going to the library.

"You think you can figure out a way for it to make me burp lasers?" said Mike Saunchgrow. "I've always thought that would be awesome."

"I don't know. It's hard to tell what you can get. If anything at all. You might end up just getting hurt really bad." "This sounds like an awful idea, dude," he said. "Maybe we should just cut our losses and check that new snow cone place they opened across the street."

"What are you? A pussy?" I said.

I had managed to get the alpha generator open and rewire the omega line across its polar axis when Principal Mackie and a security guard came striding through the front door. In a panic, Mike Saunchgrow tried to push past me to get to the back door. Instead, he tripped on a power chord, and knocked me clear just before the generator fell. There was a, uh, small explosion. Before I had a chance to see if Saunchgrow was OK, he was already standing up. He looked at Principal Mackie. His skin glowed redder than his hair.

"You saw that. I was trying to stop him. He was going to get hurt. It wasn't me. It was all him. I saved him. I saved him," Saunchgrow said. Then he flew right out the window leaving me to face the music.

Couple Days Later

Everyone had been talking about it, though. My mom had even heard the rumors. She told me about them in between reassurances that no matter how disappointed they might be, they'd always love and support me. My dad still wouldn't bring himself to come see me at Juvie. Wasn't it exciting, having a real life superhero in my school! My mom hoped that would be reason enough to work hard and behave so that maybe I could come back next year.

Whatever. There was no coming back. I didn't believe in superheroes anymore. I mean, sure I believed in them. They were everywhere. Even at my old school. But I couldn't believe that they were chosen. I couldn't believe that fate had a reason for everything. That day I had seen through the lie of that. Mike Saunchgrow couldn't have been chosen. He wasn't ready for it. He hadn't been waiting for this the way I had been my whole life. He was only being a superhero instead of a villain because that was easier, plus he probably wanted to impress Principal Mackie and maybe Amy Pagano. No.

There was no order, no reason behind anything save for what we make. And if you have to make something out of all this chaos, why not more chaos? Isn't that the easiest thing to do? And don't you get paid off for taking it easy? Mike Saunchgrow sure did. So why not just go with the natural order of things? It worked for everyone else. Why wouldn't it work for me?

Right Fucking Now

And the way everything was supposed to get better in college once I had worked my way back into the good graces of the system but instead but instead was only more of the same only worse with its drunken frat boys and the vapid women who found them so entertaining, the fascination with sports that nobody in the rest of the world remotely cares about, assertiveness passing for intelligence, and success outracing knowledge and physics professors that aren't the least bit helpful when it comes to building death rays.

And the boring, mind numbing jobs, no talent jobs that it takes to pay the rent. The overwrought bosses, the gossiping coworkers, the depressing 15 minute birthday parties in the break room and not getting a cost of living increase for the third year in a row. And the landlord that is so slow to call the plumber about that drain but so quick to deposit my rent checks. And the girls that tell you they just don't see themselves ever feeling the same way about you. And the ones that won't even talk to you long enough to tell you that. And the million channels on my TV pumping out the only human voices that have ever been heard in my empty apartment, saying in so many different ways that I'm not smart enough, not funny enough and nowhere near handsome enough, but if I can stick around after the commercial break I might just become empty enough to fit in with the rest of the country. And the million other lonely souls walking through this city looking just as dead eyed and desolate as me and the even more terrifying possibility that they aren't, that they're just fine and I'm all alone in this.

And the way Mike Saunchgrow only had two or three years as a superhero before fading away into mediocrity and obscurity and how I never had a chance to face up to him, to gain my revenge, or at least pit myself against a worthy adversary. The way Principal Mackie worked another twenty years before quietly retiring. Twenty years and thousands more students. He probably didn't even remember expelling me.

And. And. And. Ask me for a reason why, a moment it all went wrong and I can't give you one. I have millions. You want the one moment in my life that led me to this? How about every moment of my life?

Ten Seconds From Now

It all goes wrong. The engine of my hovering platform makes a noise. It's sort of a slow hiss, like the sound of air being let out of a bicycle tire. It's the first nosedive it's ever made and it goes quiet again soon enough. But this quiet is different.

This is the quiet you hear when nothing at all is working. My stomach drops first as gravity tears me from the sky.

This is how it ends. No epic battle. No final showdown with one of the city's defenders. It didn't take a superhero to defeat me. All it took was this crappy equipment I had to buy on ebay because I could never make anything of my own ever work in my entire life. Ten seconds until I'll pay the price for never learning how to fly.

Still, there will be time to look across at this breaking city, this broken world, all this teeming, painful life. There will be time to try to find some comfort in all of this. There will be time to try to answer one last question. Was it all worth it? Ten seconds to decide. Ten second until the last thing I'll ever remember. Ten seconds until I die a lonely and stupid death.

First Thing I Remember, Last Thing I'll Remember

I'm in my father's arm and I can hear my mother pleading with him to be careful as he tosses me into the air and I laugh and shout in my prelinguistic way for more, more, more and my mom can't stop worrying every single time as I stretch and reach and strain to fly, fly, fly as high as I can before I have to return to my father's waiting arms.

About Steve Gillies

Steve Gillies is a writer based out of Chicago with an MFA from University of Pittsburgh. His previous work has appeared in *Artifice Magazine*, *The AV Club*, and the *American Journal of Orthopedics*.