

Emily Wang

Calgary, AB

## Heroes

'ANYONE CAN BE A HERO', the holographic billboard proclaimed in flickering letters to monotonous civilians as they walked past. A man grinned down at them, muscles bulging behind red spandex, hair perfectly coiffed even as the screen wavered. Across his face someone had scrawled the word 'FAKE' in Extra-Hold spray-paint.

"Look at that," a teenage boy scoffed as he walked below it, gazing up past the thick lenses of ResistaGlass goggles that rested on his forehead. No one cared for the old sign anymore; pigeon poop littered the corners like postage stamps. Acid rain had melted away at the corners, the smile of a once-hero bleached pale in the sun. "What a joke."

He gazed up at the wavering image of the superhero, one of many. They used to be abundant in the city years ago, when he was just a child, but it wasn't long before they vanished with the ice caps. Some people thought that they had gotten tired of the job, fighting giant robots terrorizing City Hall all day. Others theorized that the superheroes carried a special gene that was wiped out. Maybe they were all on vacation right now, soaking up sun and drinking Macronutrient Margaritas while everyone suffered.

Either way, there were no heroes here anymore.

"Anyone can be a hero," the boy taunted in a snarky voice. "Yeah, then what happened to you, 'Resistor Man'?" He scowled up at the aforementioned superhero, one eye looking down on him through the paint. He'd disappeared three years ago after a battle with Dr. Nucleus. Hadn't been seen since.

The boy shook his head, looking back down to the pockmarked pavement as he made his way home. He wasn't allowed to dawdle on the streets after school; the city was dangerous in the evenings, ever since the handful of masked heroes had disappeared for good.

"Nathaniel, I told you not to hang around after school again!" A voice travelled to the entrance from the kitchen as Nathan swung the door open. His mother stepped into the hall, one hand on her apron-clad hip, the other pointing at him accusingly with a ladle.

"Sorry," he replied grudgingly, kicking off his shoes as he dropped his backpack carelessly to the ground.

"Just don't do it again," she said, crossing her arms. "You know it's dangerous out there. And a big storm is coming tonight too."

Nathan nodded and watched his mother step back into the kitchen, catching sight of the kitchen T.V. over her shoulder, an automated voice listing out the robotically-accurate weather forecast flatly on the shining blue screen. Storms were dangerous these days, he knew. After the incident of 2035, where Dr. Nucleus let loose a toxin into the clouds during an experiment to control weather, only acid rain fell upon the town. It burned through most everything, so these days all the houses had a special coat of RainResistant paint, and playgrounds were pretty much obsolete.

"What's for dinner?" Nathan asked as he walked into the kitchen, switching off the television with a flick of his finger over the motion sensor.

"Chinese." He watched his mother insert two thin packages of InstaMeal into the microwave, popping them back out after a minute when they had doubled in size. Steam spilled out of the silvery plastic as she dumped Chow Mien onto two plates. Microwaved meals were the only food group on their diet, but Nathan's mother still liked to wear an apron when she dished it out. "We need to cling onto at least a little piece of normalcy," she told him at once. She looked so desperate that he didn't have the heart to tell her no.

Dinner was eaten in silence, as usual. Nathan was left to the sound of the clock buzzing with the lunar position and the terrible aftertaste of synthetic Chinese food on his tongue. Everything was synthetic these days. There had hardly been a leaf on a tree when Nathan was born. The citizens liked to blame Dr. Nucleus and all his experiments, but really it was everyone's fault for neglecting the earth. Now all food was provided by factories and tasted like salted cardboard.

*What genius creatures we are*, Nathan thought bitterly to himself. He dumped his empty plate in the sink, muttered a quick, "thanks", and shuffled down the hall to his room. When he opened the door his foot landed on something sharp and hard, and he yelped out a curse before looking down.

It was Resistor Man.

Or rather, a Resistor Man action figure.

It stared up at him with painted-on eyes and a cheesy smile, cape and mask intact, caught in a fake factory wind that had moulded his plastic hair and clothing windblown. Nathan reached down to swipe it up and his finger found a familiar button on the back. When he pressed it, Resistor Man said in a voice crackly with age, "Anyone can be a hero!"

Nathan glared down at it. "What a joke." He walked over to his closet and opened the door, dropping the action figure inside to lie among boxes full of other super hero merchandise. Everything from T-shirts to running shoes to collectible cups peeked out from the open flaps of the cardboard boxes, taunting him even in the dark like little children playing hide-and-seek.

He slammed the closet shut, and just as he did, a bolt of lightning flashed past the window, followed closely by a growling roll of thunder. It illuminated the room in an eerie blue-white spotlight for a moment, before Nathan was left to be a silhouette against the window pane.

*There goes the acid rain*, Nathan thought, turning to the specially-manufactured window to gaze out into the dark. A few streetlights glistened white against the pavement as rain pooled into the storm drains. Green eyes watched apathetically as blades of new grass wilted black almost instantly under the torrent of acid.

Nathan was turning back to his bed when movement caught the corner of his eye, and he swivelled his head to the other side of the window to see...what was it? A rabbit? It was curled tightly in a ball under one of the fizzed-out streetlamps, shaking as the rain hit and tiny streams of smoke rose from its trembling surface. Nathan squinted. It seemed too big to be a rabbit. But who would be stupid enough to be caught in this storm?

He was just about to look away, passing it off as another statistic to add to the high count of animal deaths after a rainstorm, when it shook violently and he saw something poke out.

A boot.

A child's rain boot.

Nathan froze.

There was a split second of pure fear before he could think again. He looked frantically outside for the kid's mom, maybe a police man, but there was no one to be seen. Why was the kid outside? This late, and in a storm no less?

He thought back to the Weather Survival Training he – and every other kid in the country – went through in grade school, but all he could remember about acid rain was that it could burn a kid to a crisp in seven minutes, flat.

*He's gonna die*, Nathan thought, grimacing. But what could he do? If he went out there he'd be burnt by the falling acid too. No one could save that kid now.

Then, from somewhere deep in his mind, he remembered:

*Anyone can be a hero.*

The motto reverberated through Nathan's mind as he remembered the day that he'd been saved by a man in red spandex, hand outstretched and smiling wide before a backdrop of urban waste. He was only a child...it was so long ago...

But maybe it was his turn to do the saving.

So he shoved on a flimsy coat, darted out into the hall past the electric clocks and the digital picture frames and the empty packets of InstaMeal, ignored all the voices in his head that reminded him of his empty promises and failed dreams, and with a determined curl to his lips...

Dashed out into the rain.