

Everyone Likes to Feel Useful

Andrew Salomon

The studio audience cheers and applauds.

A warm glow suffuses my body. I blush, feeling relieved that my mask hides this from the fans who have packed into the studio and the many thousands ó perhaps even millions ó who are watching at home. It gets you every time, the public adoration. Some superheroes might be indifferent to it, but I am definitely not one of them.

Sharon turns away from the camera and leans in closer to me. “Well, Courage, it’s only been a couple of weeks since we last had you on the show, but I think it’s safe to say that you’ve been missed.” I give a slow, and what I hope comes across as a humble, nod. “It’s just good to be able to be of service to the people of our city again, Sharon.”

The prime-time host motions to the spatters of dried mud streaked across the chest and arms of my tight-fitting, friendly blue and yellow superhero suit. The spatters add a sense of honest manliness to the spandex that I hope will show up well under the studio’s bright lights.

“And you certainly were today,” she says. “Let’s have a look.”

We turn our chairs toward the enormous screen behind us. The news clip starts off with an aerial shot of Constitution Hill: the greenery on one side of the hill has been replaced with a wrinkled brown mass. The news helicopter’s shadow glides over broken tree branches and boulders embedded in the muddy soil. On the lower slope of the hill, the landslide has been halted by an irregular line of rectangles. The helicopter hovers for a few moments above the rectangles, revealing them to be a long row of outsized dumpsters, filled with building rubble and standing end to end to form a retaining wall. The camera pans a short distance down the hill from the row of dumpsters to show a suburb of orderly houses with neat lawns, and then zooms in to show children playing in a front yard.

Sharon turns back to the studio audience. “According to onlookers, the landslide started without any warning at around five o’clock this afternoon. The advance of earth and rocks was

held back for a few minutes by the Douglas-firs trees growing along the top half of Constitution Hill. Those few minutes gave Courage the time to save the suburb of Meryvale from complete destruction.

She looks at me with an air of condolence. "Such a pity our camera crew did not get there earlier to catch you in action."

I hold my hands up and shake my head. "Seeing those homes and the families in them safe is the only important thing."

"Was it difficult? It looked terribly dangerous."

"Not really, Sharon. I run my hand over my chest. "I think the hardest part is going to be getting this mud out of my suit."

Sharon grins and the audience laughs.

"How on earth did you ever think of using those dumpsters to stop the landslide?"

"In a situation like that you don't have much time to think, you just use whatever is at hand. It's a good thing that new mall development at the western foot of the hill uses a lot of dumpsters. They're not all that heavy, so I could sprint while carrying two at a time, one in each hand. Fortunately, it worked."

"I'd say." Sharon leans back in her chair, signaling a change in topic. "Now, the city is abuzz with speculation about this latest supervillain ó Daunt. We haven't had a new villain on the scene for quite some time and I'm sure everyone would like to know if the two of you have ever met."

"I haven't yet had the displeasure. He seems to have a knack for carrying out his nefarious acts when I am not in the vicinity."

"Well, that might be a good thing, Courage. He certainly gave Guardian a terrible beating last week when he tried to foil Daunt's diamond robbery downtown. Apparently the doctors are not sure when, if ever, he will come out of his coma. Let's take a look at our exclusive footage."

We turn as the screen behind us jumps to life once more, this time with wobbly footage of two masked figures trading punches between sparkling heaps of broken glass and mangled cars. One is wearing a black suit with flame patterns running up his back, the other looks suitably heroic in white and gold.

Sharon puts her hand to her mouth, almost covering the mike on her lapel. "Here it comes," she says, her breath little more than a whisper.

The figure in black ducks under an ill-timed left hook and delivers one humdinger of an uppercut to his adversary's jaw. Guardian lifts a few feet off the ground before falling into a crumpled heap in the street.

A collective *Aah* escapes from the audience.

The camera zooms in on the broken figure, surrounded by twinkling glass. His white and gold cape has twisted over his head, covering him like an expensive shroud. Then the picture zooms out to show Daunt striding towards the camera. The shakiness of the scene increases as a large, black-gloved hand reaches out and the picture goes blank.

—Thank goodness he only crushed the lens, Sharon whispers, while in rapt attention to the screen. Then she notices the audience and hastily adds, —And did not harm our brave Channel Eight cameraman.

I nod in agreement. —That is indeed fortunate.

Sharon pauses for dramatic effect before asking: —Have you been to visit your fallen ally at City General?

Why do people always assume that the good guys get along?

—I haven't had the chance yet, but my thoughts are with him, as well as my wishes for a full and speedy recovery.

This is a good opportunity for Sharon to look solemn. —As are ours.

The moment passes and Sharon asks with barely-contained glee in her voice. —So, what do you think of your chances, should you and that villainous Daunt ever cross paths?

—From what I've heard, and from seeing the results of his fiendish actions, I'd say we're pretty evenly matched.

—Well, I know whose side the audience and I will be on, Sharon says.

Huge, spontaneous applause fills the studio, along with a few cries of —You get him, Courage!

—I'm sure your heroic act today, and what happened to poor Guardian, will make those insensitive reporters think twice before criticizing superheroes again. One even went so far as to say that with most villains locked up, heroes are falling over each other to be the first on the scene of natural disasters, and that they are fast becoming redundant. What would you say to that?

I shift in my seat and blink a few times against the sweat under my mask. The bright studio lights show no mercy to masked heroes.

“I guess you could say that, Sharon, but I think I speak for all the heroes out there when I say that we don’t dread the day when the city is safe from superhuman scoundrels.” I pause for a moment. “Although I will admit that it’s good to feel useful, to feel wanted.”

Sharon puts her hand on my knee. “I’m sure we will always be glad to have you around, especially while Daunt is stalking our streets,” she says, motioning to the now-blank screen.

She gives my knee a squeeze before shifting her hand to the microphone in her left ear. “Oh dear, it seems we’ve run out of time.”

Sharon smiles at me and then turns to the audience. “I’d like to thank Courage for taking the time to be with us.”

Applause and cheers again. No warm glow now, just relief and a desire to get home.

“This is Sharon Blake wishing you a safe evening from everyone on the Channel Eight Nightwatch team.”

I take the bus home. The studio offered to have me chauffeured, but using public transport is one of my favorite pastimes. I ride for free; my chest swells when the driver says there is no way I am paying for my ticket on *his* bus. While the bus makes its way through the quiet city streets I sign some autographs for the driver and most of the passengers.

I get off four blocks away from my house. The passengers still on the bus wave at me as it pulls off. I hold up a hand in farewell. Then I set off. Years ago, I worked out an elaborate route home; ducking down alleys, doubling back and climbing up and over buildings. So far this has worked to keep villains and overzealous fans away from my front door.

The house is dark and quiet as I enter. I switch on the hallway light and pull off the mask. Then I go into the kitchen to make a strong cup of coffee. My naked face stares back at me from the smoked glass of the microwave door.

I go down to the basement, where an industrial washing machine occupies one corner. It takes some effort to peel off the muddy, sweaty suit without tearing it. The fresh scent of washing powder escapes as I open the round glass door and toss the suit in. I measure out a generous heap of washing powder and a full cap of fabric softener into the machine. The stone floor is cold under my bare feet and my exposed skin is covered in goose bumps.

A tall, reinforced steel cabinet stands against the far corner, its doors secured with a hefty titanium lock. I search for the key in the usual secret spots but fail to find it. I grit my teeth in frustration; those locks cost a small fortune. Not for the first time, I wish I had superhuman memory to go with the superhuman strength. I grip the lock, close my eyes and take a deep breath. It snaps off with one firm pull.

There are two items inside the cabinet: a cereal bowl brimming with diamonds that I still have to convert into cash, every cent of which I will donate to charity, and a clothing item suspended from a coat-hanger. I pull it off the hanger and hold it out in front of me. The flames on the back of the dark suit look subdued under the gloomy basement light.

Before adding the second suit to the washing machine, I brush off some of the tiny flecks of broken glass embedded in the fabric. I turn the machine on and watch through the circular glass door as it starts filling up with water. My toes have gone numb on the cold floor and my muscles start to shiver. I hardly notice this. All my attention is drawn into the machine as it fills up entirely with water and starts to turn, the two suits entwining ever more with each revolution.

Author's note: This was my first published story and appeared in the quarterly journal of superhuman fiction *A Thousand Faces*, edited by Frank Byrns. I learned a lot writing this one, especially: if you want to have a story published in a particular publication, give them what they want. I had initially submitted a different story, titled *Newborn*, that later found a home somewhere else where it was a better fit. Frank Byrns passed on that one, but included a note: 'I look forward to reading your next one.' – showing how much a few words of encouragement from an editor can mean to an aspiring writer. Thank you, Frank.

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