

Tipping Superman

Superman stood in the plaza outside the theater wiping the sweat from his forehead with a cowboy-style handkerchief. A Chinese woman with her daughter passed by. He nodded heroically. The older woman clutched her daughter tighter and sped her brisk steps. He tucked the kerchief into the folds of his spandex shirt, where it ruffled and bumped around his waistline. He propped his fisted hands on his hips and puffed his chest as he inhaled. The young girl smiled back and gave a little wave.

A tap on his shoulder turned him to face a blonde wearing a straight-brimmed Dodgers hat, a ponytail pouring out the back and a smear of sunscreen below her right ear. She held up her camera. “Can I get a picture with you?” she asked.

“Most certainly,” Superman said. He fanned out his fingers, displaying a small roll of cash thumbed into his palm. “We work on tips if that’s all right.” Like a magician, he cupped his hands and the money vanished.

“Oh, yeah... sure,” the blonde said. She handed the camera to her friend, a chubby woman whose rotund midriff hung her t-shirt like a tablecloth over a table. She had cut the crew neck collar into a V and Superman could see her slumping cleavage. She giggled as she took the camera and snapped the shot.

“Thank you so much,” the blonde said. Superman smiled and told her it was his pleasure. The blonde walked away without giving a tip and Superman sighed and dropped his shoulders for a moment, remembered his role and stood heroically once again.

Three more women all asked the same favor, and to each he flashed his cash roll. From one he earned a dollar, the husband pulling the money from his wallet as the wife reviewed the

digital photo on her camera. She took the dollar from her husband and handed it the extra foot to Superman. He thanked them and they thanked him and Superman added the bill to his roll.

Batman approached him as a customer departed. “Want to grab some lunch, Dale?” He pulled back a rubbery leather sleeve and looked at his watch. “Slow morning. Might as well grab something now before the afternoon crowd comes.”

As they left the plaza in front of the theater, Batman opened a yellow plastic box on his utility belt and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. From another box, he brought out a black lighter stamped with his yellow insignia. “You shouldn’t smoke, Carl,” Superman said.

“Oh, don’t give me that healthy lungs shit. My wife gives it to me all the time.”

“I don’t mean it like that. I mean it’s not in character. You’re not Batman when you smoke because Batman doesn’t smoke. You’re Carl when you smoke.”

“Well, fuck it I’m on break.”

“There really is no break when you’re wearing the costume.”

Batman looked at Superman, pausing the cigarette halfway to his mouth, lighter ready to burn. But Superman could not discern an expression underneath the mask and make-up. He remained silent and Batman lit up as they walked. Batman stomped the cigarette butt outside the fast food restaurant. They both ordered hamburgers.

As Superman took the last bite of his sandwich, an elderly man approached the table. “May I?” he asked, holding up a camera and pointing to it.

“Certainly,” Superman said. He stood up and leaned down to put his arm around the man. Batman put a second elbow on the table and stuffed a French fry in his mouth and watched the old man hand the camera to his wife. She counted to three aloud and there was a pause while an

orange light blinked. Then a white flash. Superman and the elderly man thanked each other again and the couple left and Superman resumed his seat.

“You should have charged them,” Batman said as he stuck a ketchup-soaked fry into his mouth. “You can’t be a sucker like that.”

“Mr. Incredible got arrested for soliciting last week.”

“’cause he’s a fucking retard and did it to a cop.”

“It was an undercover cop. It could have been anyone and it could happen to us.”

“He was inside the sidewalk line. He was on private property and he knew it. I still say,” Batman chomped his food, “that he’s a fucking retard. There’s a fucking groove in the sidewalk. You can see it. Anyone can see it. How did he miss it? He went right past it and solicited to a cop.” Batman nodded to the recently photographed couple. “You think that old man was a cop with his wife?” He pointed to Superman’s fries spread out on the wrapper. “You gonna eat the burnt crispy ones?”

“No.”

Batman snatched a few blackened bits of potato. He dipped them in ketchup, soaking his finger tips and tilted his head back to drop them in his mouth. He licked his fingers. “You know, we should go on strike.”

“Strike? As in we stop working?”

“Is there another kind? Yeah. We should strike.”

“If I stop working, I stop getting paid. Besides, it’s not that bad.”

“Not that bad? We get paid, what, a couple of bucks an hour? For the services we provide for these people, we’re underpaid and not appreciated and they need to know it.”

“If I stop, some other Superman – or a Batman for that matter – might come along.”

“See, that’s bull. You look like the real Superman. Christopher Reeves and shit. And I do a pretty good Batman. Lots of people tell me I look like Keaton. We got what they want. It’s not just any guy can dress up in some tights and be us. Look at me,” he stood up, held out his arms and rotated slowly. “Know how much this suit cost me altogether? About three grand. Yeah, that’s right. Three grand for this suit. But it looks fucking incredible, right? So no guy is going to come drop that much money if I’m gone for a couple of days. And look at you,” Batman sat back down, picking at the last of Superman’s fries, “you telling me some other punk is gonna take your spot if you’re gone for a few days? No, man. No.” He dropped the fries in his mouth and leaned forward and hammered his index finger on the table. “We got to strike.”

“People strike because they have demands.”

“We’ll demand that people pay us. How many times you get stiffed today?”

“About ten or so.”

“And how much you get tipped?”

Superman reached into his spandex and withdrew his roll. He counted. “About twenty-five.”

“So that’s like...” Batman’s eyes rolled up while he calculated, “a twenty-percent increase in your salary.”

“It’s illegal to solicit services for money. We’d be like the prostitutes off S— Boulevard, just without sex.”

“I’m not saying we change the law or break the law. I’m just saying we need to make people aware there’s an etiquette. That’s all. We bring tourists to this town. Time we were compensated for it.”

“Well, you figure it out,” Superman stood up, and crushed his wrapper in his hands, “and let me know how it would work and I’ll consider it.” He picked up his cup, sucking the gurgling last sips from his drink. “But for now, the eleven o’clock show lets out in a few minutes and I don’t want to miss the crowd.” Batman left his tray on the table and followed Superman out.

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The theater, like all the actors it housed on rolled film, looked bigger on the silver screen than in real life. Images of its historic front came rife with nighttime spotlights illuminating red carpets and well-dressed fans waiting for their celebrities to stroll through and sign autographs and pose for pictures. In the summer daylight and without the carpeting, its shabby red front stood out against the adjacent rows of nondescript second-hand stores and convenient grocers. The sun turned the pavement into a hotplate and tourists skittered and swarmed like disoriented bees. The passing tourists churned through; thousands of solids moving together like a fluid. In the midst of the throng stood the superheroes. Superman and Batman with Wonder Woman and Spiderman and others not so iconic. In the morning a few cartoons, Goofy or Buzz Lightyear. But a short time under the mask in the city’s heat usually sent those men home dehydrated.

The heat did not slow the tourists nor Superman’s smile nor Batman’s discontent. Before the crowds gathered, the men meandered in the plaza in front of the theater, walking as with a purpose, then abruptly turning and looping back the way they had come. They would pose with a tourist, saying “We work on tips” and posing again and repeating “We work on tips” and holding out their rolls of low-denomination bills. The tourists marched through like lost lemmings and Superman always tried to create a small line of customers. Lines set precedent. When new tourists entered the plaza, they saw the attraction – not the tall blue suit and red cape, but the line that curved around him. When the man ahead tipped, the man behind did likewise, thinking

payment is protocol. But if the tipping stopped, it took an overt cash exchange to restart the crowd.

While Superman smiled into each camera and thanked and smiled and thanked again, he kept the line at the forefront of his mind. It was a delicate balance. Too long a line discouraged those waiting at its end. He kept a long line short – dismissing people faster, cutting handshakes shorter and addressing the next-ups sooner. He kept short lines long – agreeing to a second picture or asking people where they were from. On good days, Superman took home two hundred dollars. On regular days, he made much less.

“Stupid fuckers,” Batman said. He had removed his mask as he left the plaza with Superman. “I swear they don’t get that this is a job.”

“How much?”

“Seventy-five bucks. All day for a shitty-ass seventy-five bucks.”

“There’s that premiere here this Friday,” Superman said. “You going to that?”

“No.” Batman said. He lit a cigarette. “It’s too crowded and no one even cares that you’re there. I went to one awhile back and not a single person asked for a photo. A completely worthless Friday. They’re all morons.”

“I’m not going for work. I want to collect more autographs. I have seventeen already.”

“Good luck. If you can even get anywhere close to the people. Those things suck.”

“What are you going to do?” Superman meant it as a rhetorical question; a verbal shrug.

“Strike is what I’m going to do. I already talked to Sarah and Andrew and –”

“Which one is Andrew?”

“He’s the Hulk. They’re with me. We think we’re going to start on Saturday. After the premiere.”

“I don’t know...”

“You got to be in on this, Dale. You can’t be out there alone. That defeats the purpose. Those fucking tourists got to know that we’re freelance. Most think we work for the theater. We got to let them know we’re not just their little playthings for their fucking pictures.”

“Still... giving up a weekend is tough. Money’s the best on the weekend.”

“The money is shit every day of the week. Come on, Dale. You’re doing this.”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Well you just think about this: You probably made less money and took more pictures than I did today. You telling me that’s fair? You telling me you don’t mind it when people use you like that? It ain’t right, Dale. It just fucking ain’t right.”

They parted ways on A— street. Batman walked backwards a few steps, pointed at Superman and said, “Think about it. We’re doing it this weekend.” He flicked his cigarette butt into the street and left Superman.

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Superman had read something somewhere that a man set up a bagel station in office buildings. The man left the bagels out, unguarded, with a jar for people to pay. The honor system. People paid and the man made a living from it – except at Christmas time and other minor holidays. People, the article said, are more inclined to think it’s a gift when it’s a holiday, so they don’t pay for it. To Superman, every day was someone’s holiday; everyone expected their free bagel. The tourists paid for a flight. They paid for a hotel. They paid for food. And he was a full can of soda, HBO, or a basket of bread – another free perk in the whole experience. The whole city thrived on the concept that people felt like they were rich and cared-for here; the beloved-though-unknown celebrity. Money left the tourists pockets with the same abandon and freedom

as the millionaires' across town. He was just another vacationer's street-act peddling the same dream.

His girlfriend Carol had not listened to nor understood Superman's explanation of the bagel allegory. She had only said, "What do bagels have to do with it? You're not a breakfast food and you don't walk around with a jar for people to drop money into. You're not a panhandler. And I think a strike is stupid and you're not doing it. You don't make enough money as it is and now you want to stop working? Ridiculous. How many other people will be right there to take your spot? How many people will even know you're gone? How many people won't come to the theater because you're not there? Don't think you're so big and important. You're an actor. You said it yourself: sometimes you have to take the roles that aren't so great just so you can get your name out there. So... go get your name out there."

"Fine," Superman said. Carol leaned over the counter and kissed his cheek. "How was your day?" he asked.

Carol popped open the microwave door before the timer buzzed and followed Superman's segue into a detailed analysis of a fellow co-worker. The couple sat down to their reheated dinner. They held hands as they said prayers and Carol turned on the television and the couple laughed at a sitcom. In bed that night, Superman lay awake debating options and strategies for the strike while Carol, believing the matter resolved, slept.

He awoke at nine the next morning and made coffee. He ate and drank and read the newspaper in front of the bowl of dyed blue milk. He held the whole paper up in front of his face – never folding it back on itself or removing an inserted inner page – scanning the first few paragraphs of each article until he grew uninterested in the details. Carol sat on the other side of his periodical, spooning her cereal into her mouth as she glanced over a magazine she had spread

out on the table before her. When she finished, she pulled his paper down and kissed him on the forehead.

“I was thinking about the strike last night and –” he said.

Carol stopped at the door and looked back. “No. It’s settled. You’re not doing it.”

She left and Superman took a leisurely shower. Dressed in his costume. Gelled his hair straight back. Zipped up his red boots. Checked himself thoroughly in the mirror. Then he left.

From the moment he stepped from his apartment on the seventh floor, he puffed his chest, shoulders back, chin to the sky, a confident-but-not-vain smile and a forced deepness in his tone. As he exited the building, he held the door for a woman entering and nodded heroically. She rolled her eyes as she passed through the door. The usual car horns, high-fives and “Hey, Superman” shouts accompanied him to the plaza. To each he held his hand high, either to be struck by a smiling pedestrian or to acknowledge and thank a honking car for its attention.

Batman paced in front of the theater. The first movie did not start for another few minutes and the dearth of a crowd put a noticeable anxiety in his steps.

“I don’t even know why I come here before noon,” Batman said. He raised his arms with a shrug and let them drop. They slapped against his rubber suit. “A dollar. Been here a fucking hour and I’ve got a dollar.”

“It could be nothing. At least it’s that.”

“At least it’s that? Would you listen to yourself? You –”

Superman saw a couple approaching. He elbowed Batman and Batman shut up and they both smiled at the approaching pair. The man was the only tourist in the plaza wearing long pants and long sleeves. His wife wore hiking boots. “You with?” the man said in a broken European accent. “Camera? Me?” He wiggled his index finger; the universal sign for picture. The woman

held up her camera and pointed to it, oscillating the camera through Superman, Batman and her husband.

“I’d be happy to,” Superman said with a Superman grin. “We work on tips if that’s okay?” He fanned his fingers to show his small roll of bills.

“Oh yes, okay. Okay,” The man said. He tucked himself under Superman’s and Batman’s arms. They held the smiles while the wife turned the camera on, focused and snapped. The superheroes stood still while man and wife swapped. Another awkward pause and more foreign-language and smiling.

“Thank you, thank you,” the woman said. She smiled more and waved goodbye. The man did likewise. They wandered away, taking photos of the theater from obscure angles and without premeditation; lost souls happy in purgatory.

“I think we need to start asking for money up front.” Batman surveyed the plaza. “That was some bullshit right there.”

“They’re not even from America. They barely spoke English. Sometimes you just have to let it go.”

“Yeah, whatever. I’ll let it go when I’m not living in a shithole apartment in a shithole city and dealing with shithole people.” Batman pointed to three young men entering the plaza. “See these guys?” He did not lower his voice. “Five bucks says they ask for a picture with one of us and don’t give us a dime. College boys out on break or some shit. Rich kids with mommy and daddy’s credit cards and they won’t give a fucking dollar. You just watch.”

A boy in a popped-collar polo approached the idle superheroes. “You guys cool if we take a picture with you?” He chewed a piece of gum with a small sucking sound. Superman

noticed a churlish curve to the boy's smile, like he was participating in a prank. His two accomplices stood a few feet behind, one with a camera at the ready.

"I'd be happy to," Superman said. "We work on tips if that's okay." He held out his hand, his thumb palming the money, and then the money was gone from sight.

"We work on tips," Batman said. His tone was gruff. "Get it? Tips?" He held up several folded bills pinched between thumb and forefinger. He waved the bills in the boy's face and the boy craned his neck back.

"Yeah, I get it. Can I just take the picture?"

Batman and Superman encircled the boy. Superman put hands against his hips and looked above the camera, his face full of pensive bravado as if danger called him in the distance.

Batman held out his fists like a turn-of-the-century pugilist and tightened his lips. The boy held out the forefinger and pinky on each hand, opened his mouth and dropped out his tongue. The photographer snapped the shot.

"Thanks, bro."

As the boy walked away, Batman called out to him. "Hey, dipshit. How about a tip?"

The boy turned around. His two friends shared his look of surprise. "What?" he said, recalcitrance in his voice.

"A tip." Batman took a step towards them. "You know. Like paying someone for services given."

"Yo, Adam West," the boy said, "you spent all of five seconds standing there while my friend," he emphasized the possessive pronouns, "took a picture of me on my camera. A cardboard cutout could have done your job." The boy started to walk away.

From their previous interactions, Superman developed prescience to Batman's anger. Batman clenched his fists at his hips. His arms went stiff straight, his back rigid and the tension in his hands disguised under the rubbery gloves. Superman saw Batman assume the position, holding his own fists down as if they were a separate part of the body; a rogue faction inciting insurrection. Superman stepped forward and put his hand on Batman's shoulder.

"Carl..." Superman said. Batman ripped his shoulder free of Superman's hand and followed the boy.

"Hey, kid," he called out. When the boy turned, Batman's fist came up fast and the boy was on the ground before Superman registered the movement. Batman stood over the boy, whose nose showed the first trickle of blood. "You little shit." The boy looked up wide-eyed and seemed unaware of how he had arrived on the ground. "We work for our money unlike you assholes. Fuck you if you think you're so special. Stand up if you think you're better than me." The boy on the ground and his friends on their feet stared. Batman waited for a response but none came. The boy leaned up on one elbow and pinched his nose with his free hand. "That's what I thought." Batman spat. It hit the boy's shirt.

Superman froze. He felt the weight of the crowd, their eyes on him and not on the assailing Batman or the bloodied youth: the wounded boy's friends, the eyewitnesses close at hand, the flow of moviegoers coming from the theater, the passengers' eyes in the passing cars, the tourists watching the conflict like any other reality show, a security guard stepping from the entrance of the theater and shielding his eyes in the sun.

"Carl..." Superman grabbed Batman's bicep and pulled him back. Batman jerked his arm free of Superman's loose grip and stomped through the plaza and disappeared around the corner. Superman stooped to the fallen boy and held out his hand. The boy swatted at Superman and

Superman stepped back and shielded with his hands; a weak instinctual defense. The boy said, “Fuck off,” with a pinched-nose buzz. The other boys retrieved their fallen friend and a woman came from the crowd to hand them a small bag of tissues. Superman fled as the security guard arrived.

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Superman stood with the throng waiting outside the theater, a head taller than the majority of on-lookers, and his cape catching the breeze and whipping adjacent torsos. Police barricades kept the crowds leashed from the street and the red carpet. A line of limousines filed down the street and from them emerged well-dressed attractive people, their importance measured by the number of flashbulbs firing and the volume of cheers as their feet extended from the vehicle.

Superman held a small autograph book in one hand and a felt-tipped marker in the other. As actors stepped from their limousines, Superman, in the cacophony of the crowd, shouted their first names and held out his autograph book and pen. During a lull, as he leaned against the metal partition, he felt a tap on his shoulder, rough and deliberate. A police officer curled his finger indicating Superman was to follow. They squeezed past the tight-packed bodies. Superman recognized the officer. The security guard he had seen in the plaza the day before. The one to advance in his direction before he ran, and Superman suspected his own arrest. But the man did not seem motivated to action and his face betrayed annoyance, not retribution or justice. He was friendly but phlegmatic, polite but officious.

“Sorry, Superman. New rules. Not allowed during a premiere.” He pointed to the S on Superman’s chest.

“But I’m not here for work.” He held up the autograph book and the pen.

“Sorry, man. Rules are rules.”

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“But I’m here as a private citizen. I’m just trying to....”

“Go home and take the costume off and then come back. You want to be here, you come dressed like everyone else.”

“It’s not a law. I would have heard about it if...”

“The theater is private property. They don’t allow it anymore.”

“I’m not on private property. Look.” He pointed down to grooved cement; a military demarcation line. “I’m on the sidewalk side of the line. It’s public property.”

“Not tonight it’s not.”

“This is ridiculous. I’m...”

He stopped, waiting to be interrupted. The police officer looked at Superman expectantly. His eyebrows up to say, “And?” Superman dropped his shoulders and left. Only its seventeen celebrity signatures stopped him from slamming the book into a garbage can. Half a block away he heard a large eruption from the crowd and knew that he had missed his eighteenth.

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The next morning he awoke at the same time and followed his same routine. Carol kissed him goodbye and he went to his closet to dress. He pulled one of the four blue costumes from the rack. He looked at it a moment, pensive and reticent; a penurious customer contemplating an expensive purchase. He returned the hanger to the bar and pushed aside the costumes, relegating them to a dark corner of the closet. He lifted out a t-shirt and pulled it over his head. It discomfited him to wear loose-fitting boxers and mesh shorts. Outside in the heat, his t-shirt seemed incredibly loose. The air on his knees and through his leg hair felt refreshingly ticklish.

Superman had not been to the plaza without his costume since he first moved to the city. That had been three years ago with Carol. They had made it a point to visit the theater even

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though they had no plans to see the movie playing – they went for the iconography not functionality. They took a picture together with the theater backdrop, Superman wrapping Carol in one arm and extending his other with the camera pointed back at them. They had to take several. The first picture caught only Superman, the second only Carol. Then mixed varieties of the tops of their heads or of their lower chins and necks. It was Batman who approached and volunteered his photographic services. Carol had slapped Superman playfully when she saw their first well-framed photograph ruined because Superman stuck out his tongue and was giving her bunny ears. After one more picture and a dollar for Batman, they left with a well-framed picture and an idea for a job. For their anniversary – after the first few months of Superman’s employment outside the theater – it was a self-taken, misaligned picture he chose to frame and wrap.

Superman sauntered around the plaza. Blending into the ambling congregation unsettled him. As Superman, people had always watched him. Looked at him. Even if they did not want a picture. Even if they were just passing by, he caught everyone’s attention. Without his cape, he was a mere tourist. He was one of the many there to take pictures and buy an expensive movie ticket and over-priced candy and tell friends they had been there.

“Hey, Dale,” a voice called. Superman did not recognize Batman at first. He wore light blue jeans that tapered down and ended at white hightops. Without the padding of his costume, Batman’s hips and calves looked thin and brittle. Without the black eye make up, he lost the intimidating countenance. “What are you doing here, man?” He patted Superman’s back. “Crazy isn’t it?”

“What’s crazy?”

“Look around? What don’t you see?” Batman held out a hand, as if demonstrating that one day this kingdom would all be his.

“No superheroes,” Superman said. He had not noticed their absence, only felt his own.

“No fucking superheroes. We fucking did it, man. All of them. They’re all on board.”

Superman scanned the crowd. People posed below the theater’s bright-lit sign or by the main entrance. Some pointed to the attraction. Some made funny faces. Girls posed as Charlie’s Angels and boys held up their Rock-On hands. Others stood excitedly in line at the ticket office.

“Why are you here now?” Superman asked.

“I’m just making sure no one breaks their agreement. And to make sure no one thinks they can just come and take our spots.” He paused for a second. “Why are you here?”

“I...” Superman did not know why. He had always come here. Every day. For years. It felt unnatural to wake up and not dress for work. He never thought about coming. He just came. “I... came to see the movie.”

Batman turned pensive, as if he were contemplating an enigma neither had the cognition to solve. “Ever been inside before?” he asked.

“No. You?”

“No.”

“Want to come with me?” Superman asked.

“Fuck it. Might as well.” He clapped Superman on the back again.

Superman stood with Batman to buy his ticket for the movie. Metal barriers, disjointed and stacked, sat in a corner, the only remnants from the premiere the night before. The spotlights and red carpet had long since gone. The celebrities had watched their movie and departed; perfunctory appearances and disinterested goodbye waves.

Superman did not enjoy the movie. Batman laughed at few scenes.

On their way out, they were stopped by a tourist. “Excuse me, sir,” the young man said. He held up a camera. “Would you mind taking a picture of my girlfriend and me?” Superman smiled and said yes and stopped himself from saying, “We work on tips” as habit had inculcated him. He took the camera and the young man ran back a few paces and put his arm around his girlfriend. “And can you get the whole theater in the background?” The young man leaned in and gave the girl a quick peck on the neck. The girl pinched her cheek to her shoulder and giggled. Superman brought the camera to his eye. Through the viewfinder he framed the couple in the center and filled the background with the red front façade of the theater. They were so idealistic. So happy to be at the theater in the ninety-degree heat. To be with one another and spending money as if it would never run out. “You get it?” the young man asked after Superman had held the camera to his face for several seconds. Superman pushed the button. The display screen showed the man taking a step toward Superman and the camera, his mouth half-open, his arm letting go of the girl.

“Yeah, I got it.” He handed him the camera. “Enjoy your vacation. Thanks again,” he said, another force of habit. Superman ignored the snide remark from Batman as he walked away from the couple as they huddled together to see their new memory.