

## Superman

When the words which Tristan could never understand because they were transformed into meaningless sounds that still retained the angry force that sent them to him, Tristan covered his ears and sang. Sometimes it was "Old McDonald Had a Farm," and he occasionally imagined that the angry words were not his parents shouts, but from some strange, new barnyard animals. Sometimes it was snippets of the pop songs his parents listened to, but only snippets because he could only remember parts of the chorus. And sometimes he simply made up songs.

One night, when singing didn't help, he snuck into his sister's room and stole the red cape from a little red riding hood costume that she wore for Halloween (despite her protests that she wanted to be a princess in a pink dress, her mother insisted that she would be little red riding hood and her brother would be the woodsman. He had wanted to be batman. This theme would continue for several years, their mother insisting on living her vicarious Halloween dreams though her kids until both children refused to dress up anymore, preferring to stay at home and hand out candy). Tristan draped it over his shoulders, stretched out his arms and imagined that he could fly. He swooped down, running on the balls of his feet so that his parents wouldn't hear. Knowing that Melissa wouldn't miss the despised cape, he kept it on and went back to his room.

Now he would be safe because he was a super hero. He sat on his bed and imagined that he had super powers. He could fly. He could stop the bad guys with his super strength. And when super strength didn't work, he could shoot laser beams out of his eyes and turn the bad guys into jello. Cherry jello, his least favorite flavor. He tiptoed around the room, but quickly, trying to make the cape catch enough wind to help him take off. And of course, he would change his name. He would not be Tristan but Zack. Tristan was such a girly name, a name chosen by his mother because she liked the way it sounded. But Zack. Now that was a tough name. No one would mess with him if his name was Zack.

"What the hell are you doing up there? Get to bed!" his father called up.

So he dropped the useless cape to the floor, climbed up into bed and looked out the window at the stars. He closed his eyes and said "I wish..." before pulling the blanket over his head. His parents were no longer arguing, but he felt safer cocooned in.

At the age of 7, Tristan began to suspect that wishes didn't work. His parents told him to make a wish and blow out the candles on his cake and if he blew them all out, his wish would come true. He wished that Melissa would become a boy because he wanted an older brother, but that didn't happen.

Melissa told him to wish on the first star in the night sky and to recite the words "star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight." Melissa knew a lot more than he did, and so he tried it and wished to be able to grow taller so that he was no longer the shortest in his class. It didn't work.

His friend Emily told him to blow on dandelions and make a wish. She told him that the best dandelions were the ones that had some risk involved, like crawling out on a cliff to reach it. He plucked a dandelion from old Mr. Treadle's lawn, fearing the old man and his orange striped cat that hissed at Tristan whenever he came near. After Tristan had it in his hand, he ran back to his own yard, closed his eyes and as he took a deep breath to prepare to blow on the dandelion, he wished to be able to fly. He remained earth-bound.

Nevertheless, he continued to try to find the magic thing that would allow his wishes to come true. He continued to wish on stars and dandelions and at certain times of the day and

before he ate the tip of a piece of pie and any other time that seemed to have potential. One night, with Melissa's cape around his neck, he crawled under his bed. The hardwood floor was cool and covered with dust which made him sneeze. His mother never cleaned under the beds, so the dust formed dust bunnies. Tristan didn't know why they were called dust bunnies. They didn't hop. None of them looked like they had ears or noses. He thought dust tumbleweeds would be a better name for them. He blew on one, a light puff of air to not break it apart, and imagined it was rolling down the street in the wild west. He was the sheriff of the town.

"Put 'em up, pardner," he whispered to the outlaw that was threatening their peace.

When the outlaw refused, he whipped out his silver pistol and began to fire. He didn't kill the outlaw however, because these were magic bullets that would only make him do what Tristan wanted. And Tristan just wanted him to behave.

When the outlaw was stunned by the bullets, Tristan said "now you behave yourself." The outlaw simply shook his head and began walking away. He stopped about 15 feet from Tristan, noticing some trash on the ground, and he picked it up. The outlaw put it in the trash can and turned to look at Tristan. He gave Tristan a nod, tilted his cowboy hat, and continued on his way.

Safe from the imaginary outlaw, Tristan decided to rescue one of the dust bunnies. He cupped it in the palm of his hand and scooted on his belly back out from under the bed. He could imagine Emily saying "what are you doing?" and he would respond the way he usually did "I don't know" since he often didn't know what he was doing or why.

Still holding the dust, he sat on his bed, trying to figure out what to do with it. Put it back? Throw it out? Put it on Melissa's bed?

Tristan got off his bed and walked over to his window. Carefully so that the delicate ball did not disperse, he placed it on the desk and opened the window and lifted the screen. After thinking about which hand would most likely allow him to get his wish, he scooped his treasure from under the bed in his left hand because he was right handed and thought that the left hand was therefore the underdog, less capable than the right; perhaps the wish fairies would take that into account as they decided whether he was deserving or not. He leaned out the window, held his hand out in front of him.

"I wish I was a superhero," he said.

He took a deep breath, brought his left hand close to his face, closed his eyes, and blew on the dust bunny, which dispersed in the night.

The next morning, before he even went to the bathroom, he checked himself. He looked in the mirror, concentrated very hard, and tried to use his laser vision. His green eyes just looked back at him in the mirror. He held out his arms and jumped, trying to fly. He came back down quickly. He tried to wrench the toilet out of the wall. It stayed there. He closed his eyes and tried to will any of the other potential superpowers, like invisibility or blowing things up with his mind or shooting spiderwebs out of his hands, but nothing happened.

"Stupid dustbunnies," he said before leaving the bathroom to go downstairs to get his breakfast.

"You're gonna be late for the bus," his mother said when he came into the kitchen.

Tristan took a few bites of cereal before grabbing his jacket and backpack and running out the door.

"Kiss," his mother said and so he stopped and let her kiss his cheek.

He ran down the sidewalk, his jacket unzipped, his backpack bouncing against his back

as he ran. He watched his feet, careful to not trip on the pavement that had been pushed up by overzealous tree roots. And then he ran into something.

"Woa. Careful," the thing said.

The thing, which was actually an old woman, took both of his arms in her twisted hands.

"Gotta watch what's in front of you, not what's underneath you," she said.

"I'm late," he tried to pull away.

"Gonna get sick, too few clothes. Worrying too much about lateness, not enough about the things that matter. Here," she said, taking the scarf, woven of black, blue, and gray wool, off her neck, and wrapping it around him, covering half his face.

Tristan simply looked at her before he pulled away and started running again, faster, because now he was even more late.

He missed the bus.

He ran faster, faster, hoping that maybe his new superpower was superspeed, but it wasn't. And he knew that he would get in trouble when he got to school. That he would be sitting in detention. That he would have to tell his mother, who would punish him, sending him to bed early, which was not really a punishment because maybe he could get to sleep before his parents started fighting. Still, even though the punishment didn't bother him, he really, really didn't like it when people were mad at him. Their anger made it hard for him to catch his breath, like it was a beast sitting on his chest, its weight crushing his ribs.

Perhaps his teacher was in a bad mood, nothing to do with him, but that day, rather than calmly assigning a detention, she raised her voice.

Perhaps his mother was upset about other things, but when she found out he got in trouble for being late, she didn't just tell him he was punished. She said things like "what's wrong with you?" and he felt the anger pressing on his chest as he trudged up the stairs to an early bedtime.

After dropping his backpack and taking off the scarf that the strange old woman gave him, he got into his spiderman pajamas and slipped under the sheets, crossing his arms over his chest, hoping that he would breathe more easily and closing his eyes to try to beckon sleep.

But it didn't come before he heard his parents arguing. He heard his name and thought they were arguing about him. The pressure on his chest increased. He thought about crawling under the bed. He thought about putting on his superhero cape. But he did nothing, simply lying there, gasping for breath and wanting them to stop.

His father's voice got louder.

He didn't hear his mother.

His father shouted "answer me!"

His mother was silent.

He heard the sound of flesh on flesh. Just once. But that was enough.

He pulled the sheets over his head.

Sleep finally came.

In the morning, when Tristan went downstairs to get breakfast, he said "mom, can I have eggs instead of cereal?"

She nodded and took the eggs out of the fridge.

After breakfast, he said "bye mom. I love you."

She said nothing, just kissed him on the cheek before she took his face in her hands and looked at him. He pulled away and went to school.

That night, at dinner, his father asked, "still not talking?"

His mother's eyebrows pulled together and her lips pursed, the look she got when their dog died and she wouldn't cry because she needed to be strong for the kids. She shook her head.

"Your silence won't solve anything," he said.

She looked at him and then looked down at the chicken and peas on her plate. She pushed the peas around on her fork.

"Fine. If that's the way we're going to play it," his father said before he shoveled peas into his mouth. He said nothing else either and after he was finished, stood up, took his plate to the sink and placed it on the counter before he went into the living room and turned on the t.v., so that sound finally filled the house again.

That night, Tristan was unable to sleep. He went to Melissa's room and stood in the doorway, where she was in bed reading a book. He didn't speak until she looked up.

"What?"

"Liss, why won't mom talk?" he asked.

"You think I know?"

He looked down at the floor and started pulling on his pajama top.

"Look. Maybe she just got tired of fighting. Just be glad it's quiet tonight."

"Liss, do you think it's my fault?"

"What?"

"I wanted them to stop fighting and they did."

"Silly. Go to bed." And she lifted her book and continued to read. Tristan stood in the doorway a few more seconds, staring at the floor, before going back to his own room and closing the door behind him.

His mother spoke the next day.

"What do you want for breakfast?" she asked him.

He hugged her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?"

"For getting in trouble."

She rubbed his head. "Eat. Get to school on time."

Before he left the house, he wrapped the old woman's scarf around his neck, noticing that it was starting to smell like him.