

# THE SUPERHERO

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A McGraw-Hill SHORT STORY  
BY JACKSON ALLEN

# The Superhero Shrink

*Author's Note: I wrote this in response to a call for short stories at an upcoming anthology. They decided to pass, so I decided to release it as a short story. I hope you enjoy it. :)*

*Best wishes,*

*Jackson*

My next patient arrived early. He always does.

I space out my sessions. Professional therapists need time to write up notes, chill out and keep composed. These guys always come with baggage. It takes time and effort to help them. I could hear the swooping of his wings as my next patient lights on the front porch. He eased his massive frame through my people-sized door. My visitor was a giant of a man in black-and-gold spandex with wings as wide as football uprights.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” I called through my door. This patient couldn’t fit into my cozy office space, so we held sessions in the waiting room. It took a bit of scheduling work to ensure that nobody else would be visiting at the same time. I don’t do this for everyone, but the program

pays triple my average billing rate, so it all works out.

I glanced over his file, reminding myself of what I need to know to help my patient. NightAngel's real name is Herschel, and he looked up when I open my office door. His brutish eyes glare at me from behind his mask, and I suppress a sigh of frustration. He went back to wearing his mask during sessions. That wasn't a good sign.

Time to do my job. "Hello, Herschel," I say, sitting in one of the waiting room chairs. "I see you're still working on your vulnerability issues."

"Don't start with me," NightAngel grumbled. "It's been a rough week."

"So I hear. Two bank robberies and one train hijacking."

“And it’s only Wednesday! God, I really hope the weekend is quiet because I need some down time.”

“Doesn’t the Superhero League guarantee you some paid time off?”

NightAngel snorts. “Read the fine print. PTO is subject to existing conditions and safety requirements. Approval of vacation time gets rescinded in the event of an emergency.” He leaned back against the wall of the building, causing the studs to squeal in protest. “They never run out of excuses to keep me stuck in the barn.”

I nodded, jotting notes on my yellow legal pad. “Talk to me some more about that.”

“There’s nothing else to tell. They need a flight-capable superhero on call. Quasar and Lightspeed are off on their publicity tour. I’m the guy.”

"You've talked about this before." I wanted to keep the conversation focused. "That this schedule impacts your personal life."

"That's right."

"Is it still doing that? Impacting your personal life?"

"What personal life?" Herschel laughed bitterly and slapped the floor in frustration. The entire building shook. "I haven't been out there on one date since the divorce."

"Right." I consulted my notes. "You haven't been in a relationship with anyone since your ex-wife Clarice?"

"Clarice doesn't even know me. Part of the divorce required extensive neural pathway regeneration."

I shot NightAngel a puzzled look. "What does that mean?"

"They wiped her memory!" he yelled in frustration. "I kept the memories; she kept the checkbook and the house."

I nodded. "I heard they do that."

"Yeah, you and everybody else."

NightAngel surprised me by removing his mask. He held it in his mighty hands, staring at the spotless nanoplastic eyeshield. "Sometimes, I wish it'd never happened to me."

"What, the call?"

"Yeah," he made a face. "I never got a 'call.' It just happened. Aliens arrive from some planet nobody's heard of. They blast me with a purple ray. One minute, I'm a nerdy kid from Scarsdale, New York. The next,

I'm NightAngel, the biggest, baddest flying hero on the Eastern Seaboard."

"Sounds like a dream come true."

"More like a nightmare. Had to drop out of college. I'll never be able to get a regular job. They relocated me to Chicago ... too many supers in NYC already. My folks never get to see me. I used to be afraid of flying. Now everyone wants to see me balance a 747 across my shoulders. 'Do the 747 trick, Nightangel, do the trick!' I'm not a circus monkey, but they have me working for peanuts."

"Oh yeah, the union wage rates."

"They're brutal. You ever try to find an apartment near the Loop on a Tier Three salary? It's impossible."

"Why not live out in the suburbs?"



"Response times!" NightAngel snapped. "It's all about the response times. I have to arrive within 20 minutes of the first call. Otherwise, I get penalized. You can't make the Gold Coast or Lincoln Park in twenty minutes from Oak Park."

"Of course you can."

"Doc," NightAngel leaned forward. "Who's got the wings here, you or me? I'm talking about twenty minutes from the first call, and they're usually in the middle of the night. You've got to wake up, suit up, read the notification report and decide what tools to bring. They want you to check FAA clearance around the target before you take off. Can't run into a jet from O'Hare on your way over. All that work takes time."

I pulled at my beard, thinking about how to help my patient. "This might sound

dumb, but why don't you sleep in your suit?"

"What?"

"Sleep in it ..."

"Are you crazy? You can't sleep in this nano-neoprene. It's all skin-tight, so after a few hours it starts to ... you know, bind different areas."

"Ouch."

"More like go numb," NightAngel grinned sheepishly. "I need to get it refitted, but I'm still paying off this suit. The material is designed to repel bullets and acid blasts from Dr. Torpedo, not for lying in bed."

"You mean they don't give you the suits?"

"Give the suits? For free? What planet are you from?"

"I see your poi-"

"No, I'm serious," NightAngel interrupted. "What planet are you from? Are you from earth?"

I stared at him. "Of course I'm from earth. What kind of question is that?"

"You never know these days. Too many heroes are coming in from off-world or the SpectreZone. Anyway, no ... they don't 'give us the suits.' We pay for them. The Union subsidizes the cost with the outfitter, but the rest comes out of my pocket."

"And it's that expensive?"

"This material ain't cheap." NightAngel tapped his chest with precision left over from his time as a Scarsdale High color guard. "Spandex on top for flash, everything underneath is armor and

nanotech. Protects us from whatever the villains bring the party."

"Nice."

"No joke, Doc. This suit probably costs more than your house."

I shook my head. "You live in a different world, my friend."

"What have I been saying since I got here? No offense, Doc, but sometimes it's like you don't know what life is like for us."

"I'm sorry if I made you feel that way," I answered with professional detachment.

"This is your session, Partner. Tell me what life is like for you."

"It's just ... I dunno, everything," NightAngel began. "All I wanted growing up was to be a superhero. Now that it's happened, all I want is to be a regular

person again. A normal guy with normal problems. I'm starting to get PTSD symptoms from all the times I've had to rescue the city. All these last-second escapes are burning me out."

"I can imagine ..."

"No, you can't. Do you have any idea how many times I've almost killed a civilian?"

"We all have accidents."

"I'm not talking accidents. Sometimes these people are so ungrateful that I want to put them right back into the danger I pulled them out of. Last week, I had this lady try to send me her dry-cleaning bill. She got dirty when I pulled her out of a wrecked bus, and somehow that's my fault."

"Didn't the Superhero Union resolve that?"

"Yeah, but I got this private dressing down by the Inner Circle. You know, the five supers that make up the leadership council?"

"I know."

"They're like 'it's all well and good to save the day, but we have to remember what makes us super.' Like it's my job to worry about her generic yoga pants when a diesel bus is about to explode!"

"Ouch."

"Exactly. It goes even deeper than that. We get no training after the Orientation. Nobody tells you about how to deal with the problems ... the fear."

"What fear?"

NightAngel shifted uncomfortably on the floor. "Well, let me ask you. How serious is that patient confidentiality thing?"

"It's against the law for me to reveal anything we talk about," I reminded him. "The only time I break that is if you're admitting to a crime or you present a danger to yourself or other people."

"Right ... well ... this is hard to say." NightAngel tugged at the collar of his suit. "A few times, I've been so scared that I've peed myself."

I blinked at my patient. "Really."

"Yeah. Not gonna lie, it's happened. I guess it's natural."

"Sure."

"Put yourself in my shoes. They send you after some evil overlord trying to take over

town. You fly into in a toxic waste fire with a nuclear device on top of your head and every jagaloon in the city shooting at you. You're scared; you're frustrated. Natural human reaction."

I nodded to be sympathetic. "Absolutely."

"Except we're not natural humans!"

NightAngel suddenly roared, making me jump. His signature titanic voice knocked a painting off the wall and cracked a windowpane.

"Whoa, whoa!" I held out my hands like a traffic cop. The Superheroes Union would have to reimburse me for the window later. "Steady, Herschel ... go easy, dude."

"I don't *want* to go easy!" NightAngel bellowed, cracking another window. "I want it to stop. I want a vacation. The



crooks get more R&R in this town than I do!"

"I know that," I said, righting a fallen chair. "I know it. But for right now, we're talking about you and me, not the bad guys. You aren't a bad guy, are you Herschel?"

"No."

"You sure?" I asked. "Sometimes it seems like you feel that way."

"I get treated like a bad guy," NightAngel snorted. "I brought up my complaints to management. Now I'm the scapegoat for anything that goes wrong."

"Wow," I made a note on my pad. "Yeah, you should talk to your union rep about that. It sounds crazy."

"Who, GoldLion?" NightAngel shook his head in contempt. "He's an old-timer. Ask

him for anything, and he starts telling war stories from the old days. 'You young kids have no idea what it was like back then. We fought for your rights and don't you forget it.' That guy's been off the street for so long he doesn't even know the difference between a bad guy and a villain."

"That's interesting," I wrote on my pad. "I didn't know there was a difference."

"You aren't a super, so I wouldn't expect you to know. But he should."

"I guess you're right."

"Yeah, no worries. I know you didn't know. It's just crazy. I can't work a regular job, and I can't support myself on my salary. They tell me I'm paying my dues, but it's been ten years. When do I get to see daylight?"

I glanced at the clock. "We're coming up on our time. Let's talk about what you want to accomplish between now and next time."

"I don't want to accomplish anything, Doc." NightAngel's face twisted in sudden anguish. "I want ... I want to go back. I want to stop. Can't you help me stop?"

"Herschel, you've asked this before," I sighed. "We both know it can't happen. The Bureau of Advanced Lifeforms won't allow an unlicensed superhero running around Chicago. If you're a super, you're licensed. If you're licensed, you work. 'Supers must benefit all,' as they say. That's the balance we've struck between the supers and humanity."

"Yeah, but aren't I part of that 'all?'" He shot me a baleful look like I was responsible for the rules of the universe.

"Aren't I supposed to benefit at some point? Where's my benefit?"

"Those are excellent questions," I murmured. "I suggest we leave them for next week. You think about it and tell me what the answer is when we talk again."

"You really think there's an answer?"  
NightAngel looked at me with naked, raw appeal.

"Definitely," I assured him. "But it has to come from inside you. I can tell you what I think, but that won't help you. You need to figure this out for yourself."

NightAngel smiled and nodded, wiping a tear from his eye. He was pretty vulnerable at that moment. It's times like those when I could see the nerdy, scared kid peeking out from behind the mask. Herschel has hopes, fears, dreams, and regrets. This

superhero wanted people to see him as a person, instead of a crime fighter. He wanted to be understood and accepted, like anybody else. That's something I can do for him. Helping guys like NightAngel is one of the reasons I'm glad that I do the job that I do.

"I'd like to figure this out," he said. "It's like ... I'm here on this planet for a reason. I want to know what it is."

"That sounds like an excellent goal. I'll see you next week."

After that session, I take a two-hour break lunch break. It's a crisp fall day outside, and I take a walk around the neighborhood to clear my head.

My next patients are a couple: Mr. and Mrs. X. Those aren't nicknames. Those are actual names.

In a perfect world, I would call this 'couples therapy.' This relationship, however, defies all rational descriptions. They met at a Superheroes Mixer several years ago and tied the knot after a whirlwind romance. His power, complete understanding of any math, has several criminal justice applications. Mrs. X can metamorph into a spectral being. They're superhero celebrities. Netflix is developing a series called 'Fuzzy Math' based on their exploits.

If only reality were that simple.

On the outside, Mr. X looks like a total catch. Besides being a numbers whiz, Mr. X is also a billionaire playboy. Mrs. X. has the mix of beauty and bravado you need to be a decent crime fighter. Most superhero romances rarely rate media attention. The X's wedding made People magazine's front

page. Mr. X solved all the DARPA math challenges in ten minutes flat on a dare, and he may really know the last digit of pi. But that doesn't mean Mr. X understands women.

We were ten minutes into this week's session when Mrs. X launched her artillery. "You treat our relationship as an equation," she hissed. "It's not a math problem. It's not supposed to be quantified!"

"I'm just trying to understand how it works so I can figure out how I fit in," Mr. X whined. Even with his patrician good looks and stunning physique, my patient is a bit of a crybaby. After two years with this couple, I could see first-hand how all the money in the world can't make you happy.

Part of Mr. X's issues stemmed from the fact that he knows too much.

Relationships can't be spontaneous when you know the probability of your partner's reactions. Neuroscientists studied him and concluded that too much knowledge actually makes people miserable. They had to invent a whole new branch of anti-depressants for him.

I still had a job to do, so I changed the subject to find some wins to celebrate. "How have the last two weeks been for you guys?"

"Not bad," Mrs. X said. "We've had a couple of date nights, and Mr. X is doing better at initiating intimacy."

"That's good." I wrote on my pad. "Mr. X, how do you feel?"

"Well, I'm good, but I'm still having trouble reconciling our history. I still find myself wondering what Mrs. X is doing



when I'm not around." He was talking about Mrs. X's emotional affair. They committed to working to build trust, but it's rough.

"I don't know what else you want from me," Mrs. X complained. "Don't we text throughout the day? Don't we have our regular lunchtime phone call?"

"I just feel an emotional distance from you."

"You're imagining things."

Mr. X looked down his nose at her. "You know I don't have an imagination. I'm still trying to parse reality."

I suppressed a sigh. Mr. X wanted respect, and Mrs. X wanted an emotional connection, but neither of them could give an inch. It's understandable: they fight with super villains who exploit any sign of

weakness. Their ability to be tough when fighting crime also made them inflexible. Settling their arguments is like playing Jenga with a fussy toddler.

This is the part of the job that sucks. Their sessions were always a battlefield. I did what I could to hold their marriage together, but no one told me why. The Union had some obscure rule about these two remaining married, and they refused to explain. It benefitted somebody, no doubt, but these two people were in pain.

We wrapped up the session with pointers on how to build trust, and then I was off again for another couple of hours. It gave me a time for a cup of coffee and my weekly check-in with the Superheroes Union.

He grabs me as soon as I walk back into the office. The connection is instantaneous. I don't communicate with the Union. I commune with them. Well, one person, anyway. The glutinous voice seems to echo from everywhere. "How did it go today?" it asks.

I suppress a scream. We're talking together in a cavernous vault of Non-Euclidean geometry. It's all I can do to remind myself that none of this is real.

"I wish you just called me on the phone."

"Phones are silly toys for me." His voice caused icy chills down the back of my neck. "Why reach out and touch someone with a phone when I can actually reach out and touch you?"

"It's not right." I force myself to focus on the conversation instead of my

perceptions. B'Long's superpower is the ability to communicate telepathically over vast distances. He uses that power in his role as union administrator, and it drives me crazy. "You know that I resent it."

"I know everything that's in your mind."

"That's an invasion of privacy," I yelled.

"Not only for me but my patients. How am I supposed to maintain confidentiality if you're inside my head?"

"C'mon man," B'Long said, trying to be friendly. "You know me better than that."

"I hate this projection and you know it. Stop it."

"Sorry." B'Long returned me to my office. I was at my desk again while he sat on my couch as a middle-aged yuppie with thinning sandy hair. B'Long isn't actually

there, he projects himself. I don't like it, but anything is better than staring at slimy walls of Cyclopean masonry. "Just practicing."

"Yeah, well practice somewhere else. I'm going to spend the rest of the day feeling all weird and uneasy because of you."

"You have to admit, it's effective," B'Long shrugged. "I leave an interviewee down there for a couple of days and let him think he's stuck there forever. He'll tell me anything I want to know just to get out again."

"Why don't you just pluck the answers from his head?"

"Professional courtesy. What's that line from Neal Stephenson? I think it goes: 'In an era when everything can be surveilled, all we have left is politeness.'"

"Something like that." I sipped my coffee and tried to ignore the residual terror lingering in my mind.

"The hardest thing to learn about having powers is when not to use them," B'Long continued. "Sometimes I wish we gave the supers more training in that area before we put them on duty."

"Some better pay wouldn't hurt, either."

B'Long grinned. "Oh, did NightAngel bring that up again?"

I shot him a baleful glare like the one Herschel gave me. "Admit it: you pulled that out of my head."

"Not at all. Intuition isn't the same thing as omniscience. You aren't the only one he talks to. In fact, Herschel's kind of vocal

about it. Always comes up at the town hall meeting."

"Well, since you know ... what are you going to about it?"

"Contract's up for negotiation at the end of the year," B'Long waved a careless hand. "I'll raise the issue like I always do."

"Hard to believe you can't get beyond a simple four-percent raise."

"Look, dude, we're not the only ones. Look how they treat teachers in this country."

"Yeah, but teachers can pick other jobs," I reminded B'Long. "Superheroes are little more than indentured servants."

"Hey, I've been there. It sucks but after a few years, you get out of the dues-paying mode, and life gets better."

"NightAngel's been there for ten years."

"Only because he refuses to play the game," B'Long pointed out. "He could make a killing on publicity and book deals. Instead, he insists on living like a monk out there in the burbs. Nobody forces him to do it."

"He lives like a monk because he just got divorced."

"Oh right, sorry. I forgot."

"No offense, but they pay you to remember stuff like this."

B'Long had the good taste to look sheepish at the faux pas, but only for a moment.

"Duly noted. Gimme the rundown on your patients so I can file this status report."

"NightAngel: progressing well. Mr. and Mrs. X ... status is the same as last week. I



reiterate my recommendation to end their relationship.”

“Request denied.”

“Why are you doing this?” I snap. “Can’t you see these people are miserable?”

“Doctor Christopher, I know you know the protocol. The X's relationship is vital to the Bureau and the Union, full stop. We've considered all possibilities. It's in humanity's best interest for them to remain married.”

“But not in their best interest.”

“The needs of the many, Doc. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

“At least give me a rational explanation. I'd like to understand why I'm violating the Hippocratic Oath.”

B'Long snorted. "Out of the question. You're on a need-to-know basis, and you don't need to know."

"But ..."

"No seriously, Doc." B'Long grew cold and severe. "You don't need to know, and in fact, you don't want to know."

I give the superhero a careful look. "What does that mean?"

"It means you've already cracked the door open. You've seen a little bit of our universe."

"And?"

"So you know that there are some things in that universe you simply can't handle. They need superpowers to comprehend, much less deal with. Need I say more?"

“You can tell me what I’m supposed to say to them when they realize I’ve kept them in a miserable relationship.”

“Nobody’s being fooled who doesn’t want to be fooled,” B’Long said. “You honestly think we can keep a guy like Mr. X in the dark? He can defeat any encryption algorithm in a few months. Our systems are completely hackable to him.”

“So he knows you’re helping him stay married.”

“Of course he does.”

“What about Mrs. X?”

B’Long’s grin became predatory. “There you go again, asking questions you don’t want to be answered.” The superhero stands, smoothing out the wrinkles in his fawn-colored slacks. “Here’s some free

advice: Some rocks you just don't kick over."

"Duly noted." My sarcasm is mixed with defeat. I hated to admit it, but B'Long is right. I'm a medical professional working with the most tightly-guarded institution ever devised by humankind. The last thing I wanted to become is a liability. "Anything else?"

"You'll be getting your check in a few days. They're doing an open house mixer at the Union Dome next Thursday. You should come."

"Who invited me," I asked. "Doctor Xanax?"

"Doctor *Xanthic*," the superhero sharply corrected me. "He hates it when you call him that."

I ignored the comment. “Xanthic means something yellow. I wonder what that suggests.”

B’Long grunted. “Not cowardice, I can tell you that. It’s the color of his power crystal. He hasn’t used it since the last Juggernaut War.”

“That’s the one they fought on Mars, right?”

“You know it.” B’Long began to fade out as he ends his telepathic connection. “Let’s keep ‘em flying, Doc. See you next week.”

I thought of at least three answers to his comment, but none of them were productive. B’Long says the same thing every time we talk. *Let’s keep ‘em flying.* That’s all anyone cares about. Keep the heroes at their job. Keep the system

chugging forward, no matter who got run over.

Modern society doesn't treat superheroes very well; they know it, too. Of all the cosmic jokes the universe has played on humanity, giving us superpowers has to be the most tragic. Our species can't handle nuclear weapons. How are we supposed to handle someone with the power of an atom bomb in his fingers?

*We don't have the answers. We only have the power.* Human beings burnt themselves on flames long before they understood fire. Supers and their powers existed. They needed some kind of control, even if it was imperfect. That was the logic behind the Bureau and the Union. *It's also the logic behind me.*

I shut down my office for the day and headed home. Maybe someday I'll learn why Mr. X needs to be married. Maybe one day I'll help NightAngel figure out how to be happy with his gifts. Until then, my job was to keep the superheroes flying. I'm just praying that there's a destination out there for us to reach.

### ***About the Author***

*Jackson Allen is a science fiction writer who lives in the Pacific Northwest. He is currently working on his first sci-fi series. Learn more at [www.inkican.com](http://www.inkican.com)*