

A person wearing a bright green hoodie is shown from the chest up, holding a clipboard and a pen. They are looking down at the clipboard, which has a checklist on it. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall tone is serious and focused.

THE SHRINK SUPERHERO

CLIMATE CHANGE

A SHORT STORY
BY JACKSON ALLEN

The Superhero Shrink: Climate Change

“Please don’t call me that,” my client says to me.

I glance up. “You don’t want me to call you EcoKnight?”

“No, call me Lawrence,” the rumped figure shifts on my couch. “I didn’t put enough time into choosing my name and now I’m stuck with it. I’d rather be Lawrence or Larry or heck,” he put his palms up, “call me Sue.”

“The boy named Sue?” I chuckle. “I love Johnny Cash.”

“Even Sue’s a step in the right direction. I get Tweets all day from people. ‘They call you EcoKnight because you’re an economy superhero!’ I want to choke every last one of those little fools.”

“Now, now,” I make a small note every time my superhero client threatens

violence. Little tick marks will stretch across the top of my yellow notepad by the time this session ends. “That’s not superhero talk.”

“Who cares? I was up all night putting a town back together after a couple of the kids decided to mix things up.” He waggles a finger toward the window. “Old buildings fall down, they release heavy metals and asbestos. Get that dust down before the residents of Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin get Nine-Eleven Syndrome.” My client massages his eyes. “Getting too old for these last-minute emergency cleanups. You got any coffee?”

I nod toward the small kitchen next to my office. “Keurig machine’s in there. Make one for me too, okay?” When he stands, I can’t tell which crackles more: EcoKnight’s silver lamé unitard, or his knees. I lean my

head back, thinking about what he said. Then I call through the thin office walls: “You can control the dust patterns, too?”

“Molecular recomposition techniques,” he says over the bubbling coffee maker.

“Disperse the airborne irritants by dismantling them in real-time. The trick is to disconnect their polymer chains without disrupting the surrounding air.” He reappears with two steaming mugs and hands one to me. “It takes a lot of concentration.”

“That’s amazing,” I say, but he shrugs in dismissal.

“It’s the lamest version of telekenisis in the history of the world.” Lawrence points at the potted plant sitting on the coffee table between us. “I can put all the dust on the ground but I can’t pick up that pot. What

am I supposed to do with that, anyway? Even little kids can push me around.”

I nod, reminding myself that Lawrence’s short stature has been a source of irritation for him for many years. My client is one of the old guard in the Superheroes Union. Plucked from obscurity in his teens, EcoBoy’s talent put him at the scene of many battlefields. His unique abilities for healing the planet kept him in sharp demand through the First Wars. The ravages of a superhero fight took their toll. Over time, EcoBoy grew into EcoKnight, but the job remained the same. So did his status within the Union: always needed but rarely appreciated. “Why don’t you change the suit?” I ask. “People might take you more serious than they have.”

Lawrence shakes his head. “Nah, the silver lamé is my trademark. Part of my licensing

deal is that I can't change the color of my uniform."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Nah. At least when I transitioned out of being 'EcoBoy' I got to put my underwear on the inside of my pants." He sips his hot beverage in silence for a moment. "I gotta admit, those things are bad for the planet but they make good coffee."

"What, my coffee maker?"

Lawrence peers at me. "Didn't you know? You can't recycle those things."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'll take it out if it bothers you."

"It's not about bothering me," his stare becomes annoyed. "I mean, look: I'm here to save the planet and I can't get people on the same page about coffee. You have no

idea how much this coffee maker junks up the place.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, palms up in surrender. “I’ll get rid of it right after we’re done. What was it you were saying about your name?”

Lawrence tugs at his ear and I can see strands of gray in his tight blond curls. “Just that I should have put more thought into it. Once you get registered, that’s it. I should have used one of those image consultants.”

“Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Oh, it’s a cottage industry. Hollywood rejects fired off the studio lot. They set up shop on Wilshire. Call themselves ‘Superhero consultants.’”

“Wild.”

"The big ones handle everything: your name, your press, social media. They kick you ten free sessions when you start. I couldn't afford to keep going after that."

"Not enough scratch?"

"Are you kidding? I'm the guy everybody needs but nobody wants. You save a plane or a busload of kids, you make a fortune in merchandising sales and endorsements. All I get booked for were recycling center openings and free podcasts with Ed Begley Jr."

EcoKnight's phone rings and he frowns at the screen. "Give me a minute, I need to take this."

He steps out into the hall while I review my notes, thinking about how to focus the session. EcoKnight's frustration stretches beyond the normal range of Superhero

problems. On one level, he loves what he does and helping people. On another, he knows he's pushing sand against the tide. I decide to come back to an important point he mentioned in our last session as he returns to the couch.

“Sorry, my consulting business had a question that couldn't wait,” he said, closing the office door.

I take a deep breath as he settles himself onto the couch. This won't be easy to talk about. “Let's come back to the orbit issue.” Lawrence doesn't answer right away. He picks up the little fidget cube I keep on the coffee table and plays with the buttons while deciding what to say.

“I'm not an astrophysicist,” Lawrence finally says. “They're still working on the

numbers but so far, we have a serious problem to solve.”

“Go through it again,” I said. “I want to make sure I understand this.”

“Sure, it’s pretty simple. These fights are killing us. Your basic skirmish between two supers results in one thing every single time. What do you think that is?”

I shook my head. “No idea. Lasers?”

“No, dummy. Rubble. Mess. Stuff falls down, right? I’ve seen the math. On average, one fight between supers releases a hundred tons of particulate matter into the atmosphere.” My patient looks at me. “How many superfights can you think of in the past year?”

“Actual fights or are we talking battles and wars?”

“Now you see the problem,” Lawrence grins. “Superfights don’t even make the papers anymore. There were over a thousand in this country, this year alone. Then you add up the battles and the wars. I’m not strong enough to clean everything. The air over New York is like Beijing in 2016. So before you even get to the orbit problem, you should know that the human race is losing, even when we win.”

“And then the orbit problem?”

“Oh yeah, that’s where the fun begins.” Lawrence sticks a finger under the collar of his suit. “We’re still cleaning up from the MechWars from ten years ago.”

“Right.” I still shudder when I think of the MechWars. Angry, metal-based aliens destroying the buildings of Octopolis like so many tinker toys. The good guys’

intentions were pure, but they aren't perfect. Nobody could be so perfectly omniscient as to rescue every single civilian. Thousands died under the collapsing buildings, or in the crossfire of plasma beams. "The thing that gets me about the RoboWarriors is, why do they have to fight here?"

"Search me," Lawrence says. "Bad enough that they destroyed their own planet, now they're destroying ours."

"Oh, I don't really think-

"Doc, I'm not telling you anything that I think," Lawrence's mouth is a thin, angry line. "I know."

"Know what?"

"What this is doing to us," he says, opening a file on his phone. "I'm not supposed to show you this, but you signed that

confidentiality agreement, so you're safe enough." He holds his slab of black glass out to me. "Take a look."

"What am I looking at?" A complex screen of graphs float across the screen.

"Planetary mass changes." I screw my eyes up at him in confusion. "The invasions brought billions, maybe trillions of tons of mass to our planet. Extraterrestrial metals, some elements we've never seen before. They can't be melted down, so they just sit there, waiting for us to devise a technology that can break down."

"You can't, you know, unchain them?"

Lawrence shakes his head at me. "You're talking about a polyalloy."

"A what?"

"It's a metal. Fundamentally different from anything we've ever seen. Ever hear about Damascus Steel?"

"I dunno ... something on the History Channel?"

"Yeah ... it took us hundreds of years before we had the technology to analyze the steel correctly. Carbon nanotubes. Now we can repeat the process, but it took us centuries."

I rub my face. "This is all over my head."

"That's my point," Lawrence says. "We're talking technology we can't understand, much less reverse-engineer. It's not different at the molecular level or the atomic level, they hardened this alloy at the quantum level."

I blinked at Lawrence. "How is that possible?"

“You got me. It seems impossible by any rational understanding of physics that we have. The problem is, they’re doing it anyway.” He shakes his head grimly.

“Remember Clarke’s third law?”

“Remind me ...”

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic?” Lawrence grins at me. “It’s funny to see the natives dance around when you bring your silver birds and boom sticks to the island. When you’re the native, it’s just a sick joke.”

“So what are they doing?”

“What can they do?” Lawrence drains his mug. “The Union is stuck hosting those Robodorks just in case the enemies come back. Meanwhile, our cities look like alien junkyards. Now our planet’s total mass has increased by something like a couple

millions of a percent. What does that do to us? Does it throw our planet's orbit off?"

I didn't understand, so EcoKnight took me through the math a few more times. I like to think of myself as a smart person, but I know I'm no match for Supers like Mr. X. or EcoKnight. Like any other thing floating in space, Earth's mass is held in place by a delicate balance of speed and gravity. What would happen if it changed? Our planet was heavier now, not by much, but still heavier. The RoboWarrior battles and other transdimensional fights had harmed us in many ways. Like most of humanity, I thought the worst was behind us. Now I understood what he was saying, and none of my training prepared me for the terror he was exposing me too. I wish I could have said something more poignant, but all I could think to say was, "Oh, crap ..."

My patient nodded seriously. “Now you’re getting it. We have no idea what this is doing to us.”

“What are they going to do?”

“Data is still being analyzed,” Lawrence murmurs. “They want to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the threat is real. Can’t waste decades on another ‘global warming isn’t real’ fight.”

“I guess not.” I made a note on my pad to follow up with B’Long, my Superhero Union contact. “But let’s get back to you, how are things going?”

EcoKnight takes me through his list of frustrations. His years of sifting through the rubble have left him with PTSD that he manages well. At the same time, he’s getting older and he knows it. Every telekenetic gets screened to see if they can

let Lawrence retire. None have appeared yet.

We close the session with another reminder to discuss his work concerns with his Union rep. Then it's off to the next patient. I see a normie with anger management issues who sees me as his court-ordered therapist. Some psychs work exclusively with Supers, or with wealthy clients.

I try to keep my patients mixed up. It helps me maintain perspective on everything else happening in the world. My patient's sessions are a mash-up of insights and lashing out at his estranged family. He's got a lot of issues to unpack.

I head home to pack after my last session. In the morning I'm flying to one of those annual Supertherapist conferences. The Union throws them all over the country.

You would think that the Union, one of the most powerful organizations on the planet, had more budget for these conferences. Like everyone else, the cutbacks have hit the Supers. We don't party at Universal Studios or Disney World. Instead, we get three days of catered food and stale air conditioning in a flyover-state hotel. It's still worth it. We need a change of scene. We also need a chance to get together, commiserate and hash out the problems we can't discuss with anyone else.

Twelve hours and two plane changes later, I'm standing in a taupe-painted hallway. We're at a Hilton Garden Inn outside Portland. It's check-in time and we need to sign in before heading to the open bar downstairs. Superhero shrinks are a small community. Every conference is like a dysfunctional family reunion.

“I hate these signs,” Doctor Cheever says to me.

“What?” I’m scanning the table for my conference badge.

“These signs,” Cheever points to the green-and-white wall stands outlining our conference room. “Supertherapist?’ It looks like ‘Super the rapist.’ Gives me the creeps.” He looks up at something over my shoulder. “Speaking of creeps ...”

I look up to see one of our more famous colleagues. Tammy Waxler walks through the lobby, a visiting monarch slumming it with the poors. She may be perfectly poised and coiffed, but her assistant stumbles behind a luggage cart. Waxler brought a mountain of bags to a three-day conference, each the same shade of lavender. Copies of that new book she’s been flogging on CNN occupy at least two

of the bags, maybe more. “What’s the book called again?” I ask Cheever. “Unleash the Super You?”

“No, that was the last one. This one is “The Five Things Supers Do to Screw Us Up.””

My jaw falls open. “You’re kidding. She’s going after the Supers?”

“Naw,” Cheever waves a meaty paw.

“Union would never approve it unless she toed every inch of the PR line. It’s a clickbait title ... gets people’s attention. Watch out, she’s headed this way.” Dr. Waxler ascended stairs like she was going up on stage to accept an Oscar. She zeroes in on her conference badge as though she placed it there herself. Cheever’s Southern manners get the best of him, and he helps her pin it to her lapel.

“Thank you, Mortimer,” Tammy says. “It’s good to see you again. How is your practice going?”

“Like the garbage man,” Cheever replies with merry charm, “my business is picking up.” Waxler titters like it’s the first time she’s heard that joke, instead of the fifteenth. Cheever is famous for his corny one-liners, and for his New Orleans practice. “Enjoyed your appearance on MSNBC last week. How’s life on the top?”

His comment comes with diplomatic bite, and Waxler ignores him. We’re supposed to be unknown, helping the Supers without letting anyone know they need help. In the professional community, we’re painfully aware of the balance we’re helping to strike. On one side, we help our patients with the tremendous strain of their responsibility. On the other, we

manage the public perception that our Supers have it all under control. Waxler, and other doctors like her, pull the curtain back on the machinery. They feel the transparency will help the Supers' cause in the long run. Cheever calls her 'Doctor Tammy Whackjob' behind her back.

"Doctor Christopher, I wonder if your ears were ringing," Waxler says to me. "Mr. X is a patient of yours, isn't he?"

I blink at her. Is she really asking me this? Waxler knows about our non-disclosure agreements. "I couldn't say," I finally say. "You know my patient records are confidential."

"Oh, but he told me how much good you're doing," she gushes. "Mrs. X loves you, too. You know, I thought that the Union would assign their case to me, since we run in the

same circles and all.” Over her shoulder, I see Cheever roll his eyes. “I’m glad that they found someone they trust. I know you’ll do us proud.”

“Thank you, I guess?” I finally say. “I don’t feel comfortable discussing this—“

“Oh, don’t be so formal,” she dismisses me with an articulate flourish of lacquered nails. “We’re all friends here, aren’t we? Don’t forget, the goal of the program is to *help* people.”

She hits the word ‘help,’ like the damper pedal on a piano. I blink in confusion. What does she mean by that? Before I can ask, Cheever is at my elbow again with a tone that could frost a beer mug. “You’re still debriefing with another professional, aren’t you?” he asks Dr. Waxler.

We all know what he means. He's asking if she sees a therapist herself. Of course, she does; we all do. It's very common for therapists to talk to other therapists. You need some way to release the pressure that treating patients puts on you. Waxler looks at him with the instinctive animal wariness of a gazelle facing a lion at the waterhole. Then, she takes the bait. "Of course, but what does that have to do with—"

"If I were you," Cheever continues as though she never spoke. "I'd use your next session to talk about the danger of manipulative people." Waxler's face whitens. She rears her neck back like a cobra about to strike. Cheever doesn't wait for her response. Instead, he takes me by the arm. "Come, Doctor Christopher. The open bar awaits."

It takes every ounce of self-control I have to wait until we're around the corner before I burst into giggles. "Oh, my god," I laugh. "I can't believe you said that!"

"I've been saving that one up for months," he slides an arm around my shoulders. "Tammy Whackjob can pull that fake 'I care about this more than you do' garbage on me if she wants. She's not doing it to my friends." He glances at his watch. "I do believe that it's Miller Time."

"That was such a ballsy move," I said, two beers and three hours later. "How do you get away with it?"

"It's easy," Cheever signals the cocktail waitress. "Grow up in a house of catty broads. It's a defense mechanism."

"Wow, sounds like something you should explore with a therapist."

“Capital idea, old chum!” Cheever cried. “I knew there was a reason I hung out with you.”

I laugh. “Thanks. I was beginning to think it was the Union credit card.”

“Nonsense. If I all I wanted was free drinks, I’d hang out with Omnicron.”

Oh yes, our celebrity host. Across the room, a crowd surrounds Omnicron. He's regaling them with tales of defeating the LogoNorsk tribe in the Hyperdimension. His thunderous voice doesn't require a microphone. For an old guy, he knows how to keep an audience laughing. Most of his stories end with a complaint about the lack of mead at this establishment.

It's all a big joke. Omnicron is one of the old-school heroes, back when the Union got started. He knows what we do, and

why we do it. After his divorce, and the loss of his adopted superhero son, we helped him get things back together. Now Omnicron one of our biggest supporters. Most of his work these days involves negotiation. If he had a fight with the LogoNorsk, it was over the type of brioche buns they served at the bargaining table. His standard line is ‘Keep their spirits bright, they’ll keep up the fight!’ I know what he wants. I think we all want the same thing, it’s difficult to agree on how we get there.

After the bar, I head up to my room. Time to stop being Dr. Christopher, mental health professional. Now it's time to start being Nathan Christopher, lonely divorced dad. My eight-year-old is also in the Pacific time zone. I have a standing appointment to read some bedtime stories to her over Skype a couple of times every week. It

takes forever to figure out how to set up my 'valued guest' Wifi password. By the time we finally connect, she's both tired and cross.

"Daddy, why didn't you call earlier?"

"I had to talk with a superhero," I say. "It took a while to finish our discussion."

"Was it Zobros?"

"No, honey. Listen ... Daddy's tired. Let's read 'One Fish, Two Fish again.'"

"Didn't you bring Curious George? I told you I wanted Curious George!"

I paw through my briefcase, even though I know I didn't bring it. Can't let my daughter down, so I buy the ePub version of the requested story. Soon, we're navigating the whimsical world of a curious monkey and friend with the yellow

hat. My daughter Emily is having a blast, but inside I'm dying. EcoKnight's words echo through my head and waves of anxiety pound at my stomach. What if he's right? What will we do?

"Thank you, Daddy," Emily says as I finish the last sentence.

"You're welcome, Sweetie. I plan to be there at the end of the month. We'll do the pony rides again, okay?"

"Okay, Dad," she yawns. "Good night. Love you."

"Love you too, Baby." Her face disappears from the camera and then I see a pair of sad, mascaraed eyes. It's Jessica, my Ex.

"Nathan, do you have a minute?"

"I actually have some paperwork to finish," I answer. With my ex, you always start the

conversation with a 'hello, I must be going.' If you don't, she sucks you into being the studio audience of an episode the Jessica Show. All Jessica, all the time. Her life is the center of your universe; you're just the extra! I did that for almost fifteen years. No need to go back for a re-run.

"Long day tomorrow, right?"

"It's only going to take a minute. I have a request."

"Shoot."

"Jessica's been telling her class about her Daddy's job."

"That I work with the Supers?"

"That you're their doctor."

"What? Why would she say that?"

“She was looking through my desk drawer and stumbled across an old note. It’s not my fault.”

“Jessica, this is serious.” I’m more than a little panicked. “You should have cleared my notes out a long time ago.”

“It was an accident!” Her nostrils flare in self-righteous judgement. It’s all a bunch of crap. I know my ex. We talked this all through several times, but I know how sensitive she can be to this topic. One of the reasons we’re no longer together is how Jessica handled my transition to Superhero Shrink. Or rather, how she didn’t handle it.

Some people are dyed-in-the-wool Superhero Worshipers and Jessica’s one of them. Years of therapy helped her dial it back from an unhealthy obsession, but she still has a lot of problems with it. Never got

over the fact that we were both therapists, but I was the one asked to take part. My job drove a wedge between us that our relationship couldn't overcome. Despite all that, the Union was very clear: Dr. Christopher's work is confidential, full stop. To meet our child's curiosity, we agreed to say that I was a consultant for the Superheroes Union.

I take a few deep breaths. "Jessica, I'm very disappointed. This is going to be a real mess, and I'm going to have to contact my union rep to get some guidance."

"But--"

"But, nothing." She had me wrapped around her finger throughout our entire relationship. It takes a lot of effort to not let her pull me back into that role again.

"We will discuss this tomorrow. Right now

I need to do some research. You should spend the time going through all your things to make sure nothing else is waiting for Emily to find it.”

“Oh, Nathan, you’re such a wiener.”

“Cute.”

“I set up your video call with your daughter and this is the thanks I get?”

“Hey, you want to talk court-ordered visits, take it up with my lawyer.” I try to sound tough but inside I’m hoping she doesn’t take me up on the offer. Every time my lawyer picks up the phone, I get a three hundred-dollar bill bill. The Superhero Union doesn’t reimburse you for the legal bills you incur, or for the family you lose.

“Good night, Jessica.”

I kill the call and hold my head in my hands. Tonight was not the night for this

discussion. Not only am I surfing a Class One panic attack, my Ex drops this drama bomb on me. I'll have to make an emergency call to the union. Who needs this in their life?

About the Author

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