

THIRD CLASS SUPERHERO

CHARLES YU's work has appeared in a number of publications, including *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Oxford American Magazine*, *Mississippi Review* and *Esquire* (Web). He is the recipient of the Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award. This is his first book. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Michelle.

CHARLES YU
THIRD CLASS
SUPERHERO



SALT

CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved
© Charles Yu, 2007

The right of Charles Yu to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published by Harcourt 2006
Salt Publishing 2007

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source
Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

For my Parents

Contents

Third Class Superhero	1
401(k)	17
The Man Who Became Himself	26
Problems for Self-Study	38
My Last Days As Me	46
Two-Player Infinitely Iterated Simultaneous Semi-Cooperative Game with Spite and Reputation	59
Realism	65
Florence	73
Man of Quiet Desperation Goes on Short Vacation	86
32.05864991%	94
Autobiographical Raw Material Unsuitable for the Mining of Fiction	104
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	113

THIRD CLASS SUPERHERO

GOT THE LETTER today and guess what: still not a superhero.
Dear Applicant, not a good sign, the number of qualified candidates this year blah blah far exceeded the number of available blah.

I scan the list of people who did make it. A lot of them graduated with me. It's the usual assortment of the strong and beautiful. About half are fireball shooters. A few are ice makers. Half a dozen telepath/empaths. A couple of brutes, a shape-shifter, a few big brains.

One thing they all have in common is that every single one of them can fly.

I can't fly. I can't do much. On the other hand, it's not like I'm asking for a lot. I don't need to be an all-star. I just want a suit and a cape, steady work, a paycheck that covers groceries. Decent health insurance. But I'll have to wait another year.

At least I have my good-guy card. For now.



Every morning, when I open my eyes, I think the same four thoughts:

- 1) I am not a superhero.
- 2) I have to go to work.

THIRD CLASS SUPERHERO

- 3) If I didn't have to work, I could be a superhero.
- 4) If I were a superhero, I wouldn't have to work.

I was temping for a while to keep my afternoons free in case I got calls for tryouts, but those dried up and I needed to get a regular job for dental and vision. Now I'm a records clerk for a big midtown law firm. I like it because I don't have to talk to anyone or explain myself if I'm missing for a few hours. I just say I was lost in the stacks. People at work don't know I'm moonlighting. They think I'm an actor.



Part of the problem is my name. Moisture Man. Doesn't exactly strike fear into the hearts of the wicked.

For a few months last year, I tried to get people to call me Atmosphero. A few people did it to be nice, but it didn't stick—I think the problem was too many syllables. Shortening it to Atmos doesn't work either, because there's a physicist up in Seattle named Atomos who solves science crimes with a group that calls itself The Nucleus. The registrar says if I use too similar a name I could be sued for infringement. She suggested the name 'Sphero, but that's just plain wrong. Makes me sound like a force-field guy, and, anyway, -o endings are usually for villains.

So I'm stuck with Moisture Man.

A couple of years ago I listed myself in the phone book, which was a mistake, because you can imagine the crank calls I get.



My power, if you can call it that, and I don't think you can, is that I am able to take about two gallons of water from the moisture in the air and shoot it in a stream or a gentle mist. Or a ball. Which is useful for water-balloon fights, but not all that helpful when trying to stop Carnage and Mayhem from robbing a bank.

For years I was on a self-improvement kick. I read all the books and listened to tapes. I ordered everything there was to order by mail. Studied physics, how the big brains can change gravitational constants. I read history, I learned theory, the

Third Class Superhero

balance of good and evil, stuff like that. Still doesn't change the fact that I'm minor. Not even minor. A sideshow. A human water fountain.

I did some time in therapy. Turns out, I have a self-destructive impulse and slight megalomania. I didn't need to pay for sixty hours of analysis to find that out. I still go to the gym, but I'm getting old and I can only do so much. I read every word of *Heroics for Dummies*. \$24.99. Written by someone with an MBA. The quick bullet-point tip sheet at the back of the book tells me to "focus on my strengths" and "rely on others when it comes to my weaknesses." That's helpful.



Evenings, I get home, open the junk mail, drink a warm beer. My refrigerator is unplugged and will probably stay that way forever. If I get hungry, there's a twenty-four-hour taco stand across the street. Two for a dollar and free jalapeños if you eat there. I usually get four tacos and load up on salsa.

After dinner, around ten or eleven, I go upstairs to sit with Henry. He lives in the one-room efficiency above me. He's got a futon with a thin blanket, which I set up for him years ago. I don't think he's ever changed it from the couch position. He's got one sink and a hot plate and a toilet room the size of a phone booth. Henry usually watches TV while I read the trades.

Henry is eighty-something but looks closer to a hundred and forty. His skin smells like Naugahyde and his hair pops up from his head in clumps of cotton. Up until last year, he was inhaling two packs of Reds a day, but it got too expensive. In his life Henry has poured so much booze down his throat that if he never has another drink again he will be drunk the day he dies. He's been smoked, cured, pickled, and I bet he'll outlive me by twenty years.

The way we met was this: When I moved in nine years ago, I used to hear loud banging and thumping noises from upstairs about once a week. I ignored it for a while, but one night it went on longer than usual. I went up there and knocked a few times, louder and louder. No one answered. It got quiet. I put on my costume and stood outside Henry's door for a minute.

I heard a whimper. I broke the door down—I could do that kind of thing back then. Turns out it was Henry’s son, Harold, making all that noise. He had been beating the crap out of his father every Sunday night for months, an hour or ninety minutes, until he got tired. Henry had been kicked out of the house by Harold’s mother thirty-five years earlier for the drinking, but instead of cleaning up his act, Henry just forgot about them and moved into this dump with his fifteen-inch television and ash-tray and mini-fridge full of beer. Then Harold’s mother got sick and almost died trying not to go to the doctor. Her sister paid the hospital bills and practically raised Harold, and Harold turned out all right, went to college and got married and even had a son of his own, but he was still angry at Henry.

Thing is, I believe Henry when he says he never laid a hand on anyone. I believe him, if only because Henry is the laziest person I’ve ever met. He only wanted to destroy himself. Did his wife deserve better? Did Harold? Yes. Yes. Henry’s not a good guy. He’s getting the life he deserves and most days he seems okay with that. I forget that the majority of people don’t want special powers, like Henry, who can just barely handle being normal. I don’t like the guy, but I guess I have a soft spot for him because he’s the only person I’ve ever actually protected. Even though I didn’t really do anything. It was just the costume.

Since then, we’ve become friends. Sort of. I look in on him a little. Just a little. Not as much as I should. I’ll regret it someday soon. It’s true. The only kinds of people in this metropolis are failed superheroes and the lonely old men who live upstairs from them.



I wasn’t always this way. Nine years ago, I was Young and Promising. I lived my life like I was waiting for some big event to happen. Not just a big event, but a Major Life Development. I had a lot of Capitalized Thoughts back then. I did some things I shouldn’t have. I lived with about a six-month time horizon. I didn’t care about the people around me. I was going places, stepping on stones, burning bridges. I had a day job, but I looked around and said to myself out loud: You people are all lifers but

Third Class Superhero

I'm just passing through. On my way to Big Things.

Then that first letter came and I wasn't on the list. A temporary setback. Until the next year, when I wasn't on the list again. Burnham was. Dolan was. So was Feeney. Just a bump in the road, though.

Until the next year.

And then the next.

And then four more years. I got used to it.

This year, though, I thought something was different. This year, I could feel it. I even told a couple of people. I even admitted to myself that I was nervous. This year, things would turn around.

This year hurt.



A few years ago, when I was doing better, I got to travel to a parallel universe, where I met a better version of myself. We talked over a beer. We got along. I tried to figure out how he saw the world. Did he have a tendency to withdraw from other people, like I do? How did he make decisions throughout the day? What mistakes had he made? I told him about the one Great Big Mistake I made a long time ago. He knew what I was talking about. Turns out, the difference between us was that one moment. I told him I kind of resented him for getting the life I didn't live. I told him what a mess I was and he just nodded. He said it would probably get worse for me.



Golden Boy calls me to pretend like he hasn't heard.

"Let's go celebrate," he says.

"Celebrate what?"

"You mean . . . ? Oh, not again." Of course, he already knew. He tries to be sympathetic, but that's not one of his powers. How can he understand? He's an EM. Destined for greatness. Able to manipulate electromagnetism the way other people chew gum. He graduated two years after me and he's already got his own squad. Made Class Three on his first try, Class Two three years

later. As of next January, he'll be Class One and get his own secret hideout. I'll probably never see him again.

"Next year, man." He says he'll see what he can do about getting me some work. I want to hang up but I can't afford to. I need his help.

When Golden Boy gets drunk, he crackles with energy. I've always wondered what it must be like to be him, to walk into a room and have everyone feel it on their skin, in their hair, their brain waves. When the earth's fields shift and warp, he says he can feel it in his limbs, in his breathing, deep inside.



A couple of weeks later, I get a gig. I'm at work when I get the call. It's a mission. A real one. Golden Boy throwing me a bone. I don't know if it's out of pity or friendship. I don't know which makes me hate him more. But I'll take it. I go to my supervisor and ask for a few personal days. He says no. I tell him I have to quit on the spot. He says clean out your desk.

The turbo car picks me up in front of the law firm. Golden Boy is driving and Red Fury is sitting shotgun. I probably don't have to explain that I'm in love with her. She looks like a comic-book drawing. Her IQ is 190. On cloudy days she's a force to be reckoned with, but in direct sunlight, she is pretty much invincible. She waves at me.

I get into the backseat. Zero C is back there, reading the battle plan. He's an ice shooter. I don't know him very well, but he seems a little standoffish. Career-minded. "Try not to get in my way," he says, his breath freezing in the air.

Golden Boy tells me we're going to fight the Tricky Trio. I say that is a terrible name for a bad-guy group. He tells me to stay on task.

"We got word they are planning to steal a quantum computer from the university," he says. "It's four on three, our advantage." He said that to make me feel better, but I get the implication. It'll be a walk in the park. It doesn't matter that I'm basically useless.

We pull up and the bad guys have already done the deed. They're loading the computer into their helicopter, which is

Third Class Superhero

powered up and ready to take off. I take a deep breath and get ready to fight, but before I know it, Golden Boy and Red Fury are already out there, kicking ass. Zero C looks at me. “Why don’t you just stay in the car?”

I wonder that myself.

But I don’t. I go to take off my seat belt but it’s more complicated than it looks. By the time I get out there, two of the trio are down and Golden Boy has the third trapped in an energy field. Zero C whooshes by me and creates an ice prison to hold all three until the police arrive. “We work fast in the big leagues, chief,” Zero C says. “Try to keep up.” I try to explain about my seat belt, but no one’s listening.



On the way home, I don’t want them to see where I live, so I tell them to just drop me off at a bar. I go in for a drink. As I sit down, in walks Johnnie Blade. He’s a gray guy—talented enough to have passed all the tests, but never bothered signing up for either side. He calls me about once a year, trying to get me to sell my good-guy card for cash. Or something better. He slides up next to me and orders whatever I’m having.

“Is it worth it?” he asks, grabbing a handful of peanuts and tossing them into his mouth. I don’t answer.

Johnnie Blade grabs my wrist and locks in on me. “There are alternatives, Nathan. Quit trying to climb that ladder.” He hands me his business card and teleports out. I am about to throw it away when I see the local news on the TV. The Polaris Team defeats Tricky Trio. There’s Golden Boy and Red Fury and Zero C, making it look easy. Almost fun. And then they somehow got a shot of me sitting in the car, struggling with my seat belt. I put Johnnie’s card in my pocket.

When I get home, I go upstairs to check on Henry. He’s asleep. I startle him a bit trying to cover him with a blanket.

“How did you do?”

“We won,” I say. “I kicked a little ass.” Henry looks at how clean my costume is and smiles, embarrassed for me.

“Yeah, I saw you on the news. Next time, buddy. Next time.”



Another year of not making the cut means another year of trying to do enough freelance to keep my good-guy card, which means getting a provisional license. I sign up for the exam. The test is on a Saturday at a local high school.

Inside the exam room, sixty of us are crammed together at twenty desks. It is hot and people keep shifting around. The proctor explains the rules: three hours of multiple choice, an hour of true/false, and then ninety minutes of moral quandaries. We fill in bubbles. Name. Alias. E-mail. We describe ourselves:

What abilities do you have? Please check all that apply.

- Can run faster than a cheetah.
- Can jump more than twenty feet into the air from a standing start.
- Can swim faster than an adult dolphin.
- Can tell if a person is lying.
- Can intensify feelings of others.
- Can make others doubt themselves.
- Can manipulate atomic structure.
- Can be invisible.
- Can see through objects.
- Can see the future.
- Other (please explain):

There's no box to check for my power, so I write it in. Try to pretty it up a little.

Condensation power: Can take water from the air and use it as a distraction, or to cause momentary confusion in the enemy. Also to extinguish small fires and provide refreshment for team members.

I look around at the people in there with me. To my left is Itch-Inducer Boy. To my right is a pebble shooter.

Over by the door are Malaise Man, The Fatiguer, and The Nauseator aka Slight Discomforto. Burnouts, all of them. And they are no doubt thinking the same about me. All of us

Third Class Superhero

crammed into this sweatbox, each with the same thought bubble over his spandex-costumed head—

I'm the diamond in the rough, just wait, world, you've underestimated me—each thinking he's the late bloomer, the one who is going on forty but has enormous untapped potential thus far stymied by a combination of bad luck and small-minded admissions committees.

I come to the last question and get a queasy feeling in my stomach.

Which are you applying for? Please check one.

- Good Guy
- Bad Guy

I check Good Guy and get out of there as fast as I can.

Two weeks later I get the provisional in the mail. I try to convince myself I don't care, but my hands are shaking as I rip open the envelope. It's a piece of gold card stock, laminated. The type is blurry and off center. What does it prove? That I know the right words to say to convince people I'm a decent guy? It's nothing, less than nothing. It's a piece of paper, a shred of the dream, but it's what I have and I want to show Henry. I run upstairs and knock. There's no answer so I invite myself in to find Henry lying on the ground.

"What are you doing, big guy?" I'm laughing at how funny he looks when I realize I am watching him have a stroke.



Twelve hours, three bags of chips, and two choco-dings later, the hospital waiting room is starting to feel like home. I'm trying to find a doctor to tell me if Henry is going to make it, but they keep jogging past, avoiding eye contact, which I take to be a bad sign.

A woman comes in holding her baby son. He's been nicked in the foot by a stray bullet, and the bleeding is heavier than it should be. It won't stop. The baby is barely crying, but he is bleeding all over his mother and the floor while she fills out paperwork. Where were the heroes? Something in me clicks.

What the hell am I doing? What is it I want to be? A ladder climber, like Zero C? I wasn't born gifted. I'm not going to lead a squad before I'm thirty. Thirty was almost eight years ago. Even if everything I could realistically hope for goes right for me, even if the rest of my life is one long lucky streak until the day I die, where does that get me? Middle management? A teaching post? Adjunct lecturer for eight-year-olds who have nothing to learn from me, who can shoot fire and do calculus and crush my skull like a peanut?

The waiting room TV is turned to the local news. In my world, every TV is always turned to the local news. It's like nothing else ever happens in the entire galaxy except whatever is going on in a five-mile radius to make me feel bad about myself. There's the same old story: Golden Boy and his team win again. Score one for the good guys. They interview him and I feel the chasm between us. Meanwhile, back at the hospital, I can't do anything for the one person in the world more pathetic than I am. Henry is in there maybe dying and the bleeding baby is still bleeding on the floor and I'm looking at the television thinking about why I'm not on there? About my career? A thought bubble appears above my head and there are italicized words inside it. *Don't give up. The race isn't over.* I take out my good-guy card. I realize how small it is. I feel stupid. Embarrassed for myself. For longer than I can remember, I've been pretending I don't have ambition. Hiding it from people, from myself. Pretending I'm happy where I am. I think about Henry. I think about me, about what I used to want. I don't even want anything anymore. It's a bad place to be. The race may not be over, but it's over for Moisture Man. People are starting to lap me.

I open my wallet and fish out Johnnie's card. I flip it over and over, thinking, What if? What can he get me? I go to Henry's room and look in through the glass. He's asleep. I make the call from the pay phone. While it's ringing, I keep telling myself *this is a bad idea this is a bad idea* but then he picks up.

"Talk to me," he says.

"This is a bad idea."

"Hey, Nathan, I knew you'd come around."

"Cut the shit."

"Okay, then. What can I do you for, Moisture Man?"

Third Class Superhero

“I want flight?”

“Of course you do. Do you know what it’s going to cost you?”

“Can you get it or not?”

“What do you think?” It’s silent for a long minute. A lifetime of guilt versus a lifetime of feeling like this. I do the moral math.

“How does this work?” I say, finally. And that’s that. I feel free. I feel hollow. I want to throw up.

After I hang up, I go outside for a smoke. The nurse comes out and tells me Henry will be fine.

“He’s doing well. He woke up and slurred a few syllables, but he’ll be asleep for hours. Go home and get some rest.”

I can’t sleep in my own bed. I go upstairs to Henry’s apartment to watch TV and finish the bottle of Wild Turkey he was holding when he fell over. The programming at this time of night is for people like me. People who can’t believe they’re watching TV at this time of night. A commercial for a technical college. A commercial for a new religion. A commercial for a multilevel marketing system guaranteed to make me up to \$5,000 per week working from the comfort of my home. When the Wild Turkey’s all gone, I stumble down to my apartment. I fall asleep on my couch and dream about the checks just rolling in.



When the phone rings too early the next morning, I don’t open my eyes. I already know who it is. I already regret what I am about to do. Golden Boy is on the line. He’s out of breath. Megaton dislocated his thumb and is out four to six weeks. They need a fourth. This is the real thing, he says. I want to know how many guys he called before getting to my number, but I don’t ask. Can I be ready in fifteen minutes? I say I can. He says they’ll pick me up in the jet.

The inside of the jet is better than I could have imagined. Every seat has two cup holders. There are free vitamins and sports drinks. My head is light from the speed and from my amorality. So this is what it feels like to be evil. Not at all what I thought. It’s absolute freedom. Like stepping outside of your

own body and watching it. I throw up. Zero C looks back from the copilot seat and shakes his head.

Red Fury unbuckles herself and brings me a bottle of water and some strength pills. “Here you go, Nathan.” *She knows my real name* is what I’m thinking while launching into another heave. I feel her warm, photonic hand on my back, gently patting me between the shoulder blades. “It happens to everyone their first time in the jet.”

I know I can’t do it. I’m sure of it. With her palm pressed against my thin costume, I start to lose my resolve. Just touching her makes me a better person for a second. I want to tell her to turn the plane around. But we’re already landing. Golden Boy tells us we’re fighting in ten minutes. Before I can tell Red Fury what I’ve done, she’s up and out of the jet. All three of them are out there, stretching on the mountaintop. Their muscles are all so perfect. They stretch their hamstrings. They flex and loosen their granite-like quadriceps, massage their balloon-shaped deltoids. That is what a costume is supposed to look like, I think, when it fits. That is what a superhero looks like. The reason they have better lives than I do is because they are better people. They’re more this, more that, more strong, fast, smart, kind, forgiving. They’re more everything. What do I have more of? What do I do better than anyone else in the world?

Red Fury is motioning for me to come join them. I can’t move.



The battle is a rout. The good guys don’t know what hit them. Apparently my card allows even a peon like me access to a lot of sensitive material. They hacked the server, got access to the battle plan. Access to the hero weakness files. Everything. I guess the good guys operate on trust. They trusted me. Halfway through, it gets so ugly I start to throw up again. I even consider fighting, but what can I do?



When it’s all over, Golden Boy has a broken femur and a dislocated shoulder. Zero C is dead. Red Fury is basically okay except

Third Class Superhero

for a long, shallow cut across her shoulder. Her costume is torn. The color of her skin is impossible to describe. There's no name for it. Her gash is glowing so bright it hurts to look.

I pull together some water and cup it in my hands to wash her wound. She starts to thank me, but I stop her. I tell her what I did. She doesn't believe me at first.

"No. You wouldn't. Not you."

"Anna. Listen." My tone quiets her. I sound like a different person, admitting what I've done. I'm already a bad guy and she can hear it. "These guys are bush league. Any two of you could have taken all of them down on a given day. What happened here? Why were they so fast today? Because they *knew*. Because you were ambushed. By me. I ambushed you."

She is silent for a long time. "Why?" she finally asks, but she is twice as smart as I am and knows the answer better than I ever will. The rescue copter is getting close. I have to leave or go to jail. I climb up the stairs and into the jet. As I am flying away, I expect to see her shooting me down, but she just waves a sad, small wave.



A couple of weeks later, I'm waiting in front of the 7-Eleven for Johnnie Blade. I'm on my fourth cigarette when I start to realize he might not be coming. What was I thinking, making a deal with a guy like that? Even the bad guys don't trust him.

Then he drops out of the sky and almost lands on top of me.

"You did it."

"I guess so."

"I didn't think you would. I didn't think you had the stones to do it."

I can't even look him in the eye. I wonder if I'll ever be able to look anyone in the eye again.

"Hey. Nathan. Look at me." I slowly turn my head and stare at him with the side of my face. "You're not the devil. Get over yourself. How do you think I make a living? You think you're the first bad guy with a conscience in the history of the world? Please. Look around. Look at all these men your age wandering around in the middle of the night. No one to save, no one to save

them. Think you're different? Think you're not one of 'em?"

"I don't need an after-school special from you, of all people," I say. "Do you have what I want?"

"Listen, I'm just trying to do you a favor. You weren't born a superhero. The sooner you realize it, the better."

I look straight at him. "I'll say it again. Do. You. Have. What. I. Want?"

"Tough guy, huh? Hurt a few loved ones and now you think you're Dr. Doom?" He smirks. "Okay, then. As promised." He hands me a sandwich.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"You eat it, big man. And then you fly."

Before I can argue, he's two hundred feet in the air.

I look at the thing. Two slices of bologna on white, a little mayo on the bread. I eat it in three bites. What choice do I have? The crosstown bus pulls up and I get on.

About two stops later I start to feel something. A tingling in my foot. My right foot. It's light at first. I'm not even sure I feel it. Then it's running up the back of my leg. Could be my sciatica. Then it's gone. Then it's there again, this time in my left foot, in the toes and heel. It's like pain. It is pain. It feels like I've been shot. I wonder if I should try to fly a little inside the bus, but people are watching. I get off twenty blocks from my stop and stand on the corner, waiting for the bus to pull away. It's late. No one's on the street. Bugs chirp. It's now or never, I guess. How do you fly? How do you try to fly? I still don't know. It's not like jumping or walking. There is a moment when you are bound by gravity, bound by rules, bound by every assumption you've ever made about yourself since the age of ten, and then the next moment you are not. In between those moments, the impossible happens. How do you fly? Not by trying. Not by doing it. Not by willpower. There's no push-off. Flying isn't an action, it's a state of being. All of a sudden, I know I can fly. One minute I have no idea how I could ever do it and the next minute I wonder how anyone could not know. I fly low the whole way home, a few inches off the ground.

From the corner of our street I can see up into Henry's window on the second floor—the dark room, the toxic blue flicker of the television.

Third Class Superhero

I decide to float up to his window and surprise him. I hover for a few seconds, testing out my balance. How does it feel? Like you would expect it to feel. Better than sex. And not all that different. I want to rise, but I don't know how. Look up? Point up, with my fist, like Superman? But before I know it, I'm rising. As my head comes into view, I figure Henry is going to scream. I worry about him having a heart attack. I'm levitating outside his window. The window is open. He sees me and says hi.

"Come take a look at this," he says, pointing to his television. "This guy accidentally swallowed his own hand." He doesn't seem to notice what I'm doing.

"Henry," I say. His eyes are fixed on the screen.

"Henry, look at me. I did it. I can fly." He looks over.

"No shit."

He gets up off the futon and walks to the window. I ask him if he wants to go for a spin.

"I thought you said you didn't make it this year?"

"It's complicated," I say. "But I made it. I'm Class Three. A genuine superhero." Henry knows I'm lying before I even finish.

"I don't know what you did, Nathan. But you can still fix it. You're not a kid anymore, but you can fix it. Don't end up like me." I tell him I don't know what he's talking about.

"You shouldn't have done it for me," he says.

Truth is, I didn't. I did it for myself. I hurt people, people who were kind to me, better people than I am. I hurt them to get something I wanted. I was the bad guy in this story. And I know it. But I wish I wasn't a bad guy. Do I get points for that? What does that make me? What kind of guy?

Henry gets on my back and we take off. Slowly, a little wobbly at first, but then smooth and fast. Flying up there with him, looking down on the alleys, the clothes drying on the clotheslines, the small concrete backyards of the city, past the city limits, to the foothills, up over the smog, I'm flying, look at me, a bad guy in a good-guy costume, no more rules. *Dear Applicant. Your help is not needed. The world is just fine without you.* That's fine with me. Fine with me that my saga isn't epic. I'm not a superhero. I'm background. I'm a good person wrapped in a mediocre soul. I want to be better. I really do. But even now in my greatest moment I know this is as good as it will ever get for me and it's