



“ONCE UPON A
TIMES”

A Short Story by
LANCE WOODS

Based on the podcast series
produced by



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Prologue

I wrote this script as the Season 2 opener of the *SuperHuman Times* podcast in 2009; it actually got produced in 2014. If only one of the scripts I wrote for that aborted season was destined to be produced, I'm glad it was this one, because it answered a question that nagged at me since I created this little universe of mine way back in 2006: where the heck did *The SuperHuman Times* come from?

If you were wondering, too, I hope this will satisfy your curiosity.

I'm very pleased with how this story turned out, not only because it gave me a chance to ride along with Dunbar on another misadventure, but it also spotlighted his publisher, Grogan — whom I introduced in *Heroic Park* — and delved into his motivations for creating the *Times* in the first place. For me, his view of the world really added something to it, and made writing about it great fun. Visualizing him as Danny DeVito in a bespoke suit helped, too. (Ever see him in *The War of the Roses*? Yeah, like that.)

Incidentally, if you're keeping track of such things, this story precedes the events in both “Print the Legend” and *Heroic Park*. (Hey, Dunbar had a life before he met Rei, y'know.)

SuperHuman Times™

“ONCE UPON A *TIMES*”

A Short Story by

Lance Woods

“Let me get this straight, Mister Grogan: You want me to find a guy you took pictures of on a dark street ... more than forty years ago?”

I usually have to spend ten minutes in my publisher’s office before my head starts hurting. This visit, it took just five.

“You got it!” The short tycoon with the white wreath of hair around his head and the bespoke suit on his stocky body crossed from the couch where I sat to a bar neatly concealed by the room’s elegant, professional-looking wood paneling. “You want a Scotch, Dunbar?”

“It’s, um, eleven. A.M.”

“I know, but judging from your reaction, I thought you might need it.” He poured two glasses and walked back over to the leather couch in front of his desk, where I sat by a thick, wood coffee table. “Besides, it’s a special occasion, right? Two of ‘em. The fortieth anniversary of *The SuperHuman Times* and the tenth anniversary of when one of its best writers came to work here.” He handed me a glass and lifted his own in my direction. “Kevin Dunbar.”

I was grateful for his nice words — and for his even nicer Scotch, even at the early hour — but I still didn’t want to be there.

Grogan’s the best boss I’ve ever had, and I’m not just saying that because he likes my stuff and actually pays me for writing it. But every year, the *Times* publishes a big, special issue to mark its anniversary, and I usually draw some “where are they now” deal where I have to track down and interview a superhuman or human who used to be a big deal. Granted, I’ve met a lot of fascinating people that way. Some of them are even close friends.

I just thought I’d be writing something other than news articles by now.

Novels, non-fiction, ghost-writing a celebrity memoir, maybe even a screenplay or stage play someday.

But every year, every anniversary of the *Times* reminds me that another year has passed without my writing any of those things.

So, that’s why I *really* hate the anniversary issue.

“I like to think the confluence of your anniversary and the *Times*’ is kismet,” Grogan continued. “A perfect fit. You belong here, son.”

The day just gets better, I thought.

“At least until your book gets published and you get famous.” Grogan downed his Scotch.

I choked on mine. “How did — who told —?”

“Oh, come on. You think you’re the only frustrated novelist at the *Times*? Creative people always want new worlds to conquer, new frontiers. Must make you envious when someone from here actually makes it, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say envious —”

“Crazy?”

“Okay, I would say ‘crazy’.”

He sat down in a big, wing-backed leather chair across from the couch, set his tumbler down on the table and stared through his floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking New York from sixty-five floors up. “I felt the same way when I was working for the papers. Never could understand why publishers bought so much of the drivel my ‘colleagues’ were feeding them. Not that your stuff is drivel.”

“No offense taken.”

“I never thought I’d make a name for myself in this business,” Grogan said. “I just had to blaze my own trail.”

“Creating the *Times*.”

“Right. I owe that to a chance encounter, which is where you come in.”

I took another sip of Scotch, sat back and braced myself.

Grogan took a deep breath. His eyes twinkled. A story was coming, one from the deep, rich history of *The SuperHuman Times*. It always did at this time of year. It was the only part of this annual process that I actually enjoyed because Grogan, being an ex-reporter, knew how to tell a damn good story. Editors used his early work on the *Times* to guide new writers (including me) when they first came on board.

“First, some background,” he said. “I started out as a stringer, hunting down leads on my own, talking to people, writing copy and getting pictures for any publication that would buy them. One night, I had my camera loaded with some new, low-light film – you *do* know about *film*? Came before digital.”

“Yeah, yeah, my dad used it to take a picture of the first wheel.”

“Nice. Anyway, I was taking pictures downtown without using a flash, trying to catch crime scenes, political payoffs, those kinds of things without getting caught. Then, one night in November at about three A.M., near the med school at York and Seventy-second, it happened. *Bam!* Through a mailbox and straight into a light pole. Older car, so no air bags, twisted like a pretzel, metal and glass everywhere.”

“Wow. Did you get any pictures?”

He scowled at me. “No, I didn’t take pictures.” Then he smiled. “Not at first. I looked around for a phone booth – no cell phones then – to call the police or an ambulance, but there were no phones around. So, I did the only thing I *could* do.”

“Which was what?”

“I took pictures. Prayed for the camera to work. And for the poor sap at the wheel, of course.”

He leaned forward. “That’s when I first saw *him*.”

Silence. I waited. He had me and he knew it.

“Guy carrying what looked like text books,” Grogan said. “He came from across the street, from the med school library, I think.” He paused briefly to find the words and gestures for the next part. “It — it looked like he went from the curb across the street to the wreck in *one step*! ‘Fwip!’ Before I knew it, he was right at the car.”

“Super-speed?”

“No,” Grogan said, “it was like the guy transformed himself into an elastic strip and just ‘snapped’ across the street. Somehow, he was young and strong enough to pry open the driver’s side door and leverage the driver out in no time flat. I figure he wedged himself into whatever spaces were open in the car door and expanded his body and popped the door off. Anyway, this guy extracts the driver, this woman, carefully lays her down on the street, checks her over and starts giving her chest compressions.”

“Was he a doctor?”

“A med student, I figured ... when we heard — the snap.”

“Uh-oh.”

“No crap. The guy knelt there for a second. I could tell from his body language that he knew what happened and he was scared to death. He thought he’d killed her. An experienced

doctor wouldn't look scared. Unnerved, maybe, but patients die, right? I started toward him, thinking I might be able to keep him there until the police and real medics arrived, and he looked up.”

“You get a look at him? A picture?”

“I saw him under the streetlight for just a second as he took off. Young guy, early twenties, African-American, close-cut hair, moustache, maybe a goatee. He looked up at me before I could get a shot and ‘fwip’ — gone.”

“He left the scene? After killing that driver?”

“Who said he killed the driver?” Grogan stood up and headed for the bar again. “Medical examiner ultimately ruled that she sustained a cerebral hemorrhage after hitting the windshield. She had so many broken bones from the crash that her sternum probably couldn't take the chest compressions.” He held up the Scotch. “More?”

“I'm good, thanks. So that poor guy who tried to save her probably thought he killed her.”

“Worse,” Grogan said, pouring. “No one would ever know how that poor guy tried to save her.”

“You didn't file the story? What about the pictures? Didn't the police confiscate your film?”

Grogan shook his head. “Told them my camera jammed. And I didn't file a story. Other editors and publishers would have focused on the crash. For me, the wreck wasn't the story.” He produced a file folder from behind the bar, walked it over with his second drink and dropped it on the table in front of me. “Take a look.”

I opened the folder. Inside was a thin sheath of color photos of the wreck Grogan was talking about. That low-light film worked pretty well; the images were slightly grainy, but I could make out the

grisly details of the crash and the unfortunate driver. Since the person in question was leaning over the woman’s body as he performed the chest compressions, it was close to impossible to make out his face in the darkness. One photo jumped out at me. “Whoa.”

Grogan smiled. “You found the money shot.”

I held up one of the photos. “This picture, when the guy’s doing the compressions ... are his arms ... *stretching*? I mean, like, unusually?”

Grogan nodded. “My guess is he’d anchored his hands on the woman’s chest, reared back to deliver a compression, and in the heat of the moment accidentally stretched his arms more than he intended.”

“And if he was a superhuman, his arms would’ve snapped back like rubber bands and brought him down onto the woman’s chest with enough force —”

“To probably crack her bone,” Grogan said. “But not to kill her. The hemorrhage did that.”

“Did you ever try to find him and tell him?”

“Never could.” He sipped his Scotch. “It was during the Superhuman Age, so I thought he’d go public with his powers under another identity, maybe thinking he needed to atone for killing her. But he didn’t.”

I put the photo back in the pile. “Damn. Who knows what a man with his ability could have done with his life?”

“That’s what I want to know. Find the man in those pictures, Dunbar.”

“I can’t even make out his face, Mister Grogan.”

He leaned forward and adopted a congenial tone, which always meant trouble. “Son, you’ve sought out and interviewed humans and superhumans in every corner of the world, and they talk to you. They *like* you. They *trust* you. If anyone can find him and get him to open up, it’s you.”

I sighed, mostly because I knew he was right and I had the clip file to prove it. I loved a challenge, but past challenges had something this one didn’t: a starting point. “There’s not much to go on. I don’t know how I can —”

“You may find this hard to believe,” Grogan said, “but I have friends in publishing. *Book* publishing. And I’m sure they’d be very interested if I told them one of my best reporters was writing a novel.”

“Like I said, I don’t know how I can refuse.”

“Thank you.” He extended his hand, and we shook on it. “I want this man to know that what he did that night *meant* something, if not to that poor woman ... then, to me.”

“Can I ask why?”

“Sure.” He leaned back in his chair and chuckled. “I’ll tell you – *both* of you – after you find him.”

Little rich good-storytelling bastard.

I’ve done my fair share of “who-where-or-what-are-you-now?” articles, but those are usually about superhumans who were well-known before they the “Big Shakeout”, when the world outgrew superheroes and supervillains and made them get real jobs like the rest of us. Here, I was looking for someone who was virtually anonymous, and my network of superhuman pals didn’t know of any public stretchers with an elastic skeleton in their closets.

So, the next day, I checked out the intersection of York and Seventy-second, and visited the Manhattan Medical College.

I remembered that our guy arrived on the crash scene almost immediately and knew how to administer chest compressions, so I worked on Grogan’s presumption that he was a student at the college. I pitched that idea to Robert Merriman, the dean of the college, in his office. “Interesting theory, Mister Dunbar.”

“So, I was hoping I could get access to your student records from that time,” I said. “If they contain photographs from student I.D.s, I might be able to match one of them to the pictures my boss gave me.”

Dean Merriman shook his head. “I’m afraid that’s impossible. All of our student records are confidential. You’d need nothing less than the student’s written permission or a court order to access them. But I can grant you access to our library’s archive of annuals and campus newspapers. Perhaps they’ll have a picture of your Good Samaritan.”

The rest of that day was spent staring at scanned copies of the Manhattan Medical College’s campus weekly on a computer monitor. Since Grogan recalled the month of the accident, I didn’t have to look through forty years of campus publications. Still, I found nothing. Looked like our guy was determined to stay out of the spotlight. I thanked the librarian and Dean Merriman, then started out of the building ...

And that’s when I saw numerous engraved brass plates attached to a large wood plaque in the main lobby. I hadn’t even glanced at it when I came in; the direction of the sunlight coming through the college’s glass doors must have shifted and was glinting off the brass. It got my attention.

I read the sign at the top of the plaque: “Manhattan Medical College Jerome Staples Scholarship Recipients.”

I didn’t know if our guy was any kind of scholar, but I went back to Dean Merriman’s office and asked about them. “Every year since the college was founded,” he told me, “we’ve awarded a full scholarship to one underprivileged student from each of the Five Boroughs who wanted to become a doctor.

“We’ve always run an item about all five winners in *The New York Chronicle* Metro section.”

“Coming up on ten years at the *Times* for you, isn’t it, Dunbar? Gee, that’s a *long* time.”

Nate Shelton could be a pain sometimes, but that’s the way it is with most of my friends, especially my colleagues in journalism. Short and wiry with close-cut brown hair and a smile that often threatened to overtake his entire, narrow face — especially when he was working on a circulation-building article, which was often — he was one of the most valuable of those colleagues. The fact that he was able to bang out those articles with superhuman speed made him equally valuable to the *New York Chronicle*.

At this moment, he was sitting in his cubicle, sprinting across his heavy-duty, superhuman-friendly keyboard, because he’d burned out several “human” keyboards early in his *Chronicle* career. He pulled up and scanned the results in a matter of seconds. (He’s also a speed reader, another helpful and completely human ability. I figured it was the only way he kept up with all the text and images scrolling and panning all over his monitor screen as his fingers blazed across the keys. I have no idea how his computer kept up with him.)

“Yep,” Nate said, never turning from the screen. “Lonnng time.”

“Shouldn’t you be scanning those archives, Nate?”

“I am, but, I *should* be writing one article about a murder investigation, and another about the mayor’s latest budget proposal, but I’m helping a fellow journalist.”

“And repaying a substantial poker debt.”

“I’m amazed you even have time to play poker. How are you ever gonna finish your novel?”

“You ever gonna finish this search?”

There was the horse smile. “That well, huh?”

I tried not to sound impatient, but failed. “Come on, come on, are your computers as old as the *Chronicle*, or what?”

“They’re looking for a rubbery scholar with only a bunch of dark, forty-year-old photos and maybe a scholarship win to go on,” Nate said. “You want it faster, call one of those super-speedy interview subjects of yours. Ever make *them* repay you for their profiles in the *Times*?”

“No, because that’s work. Poker is fun.” My turn to smile. “Watching you pay me is *more* fun.”

“Y’know, even if I find the announcements for those years, the stories might not have pictures.”

“Pretty shoddy Pulitzer Prize-winning national paper you work for, Shelton.”

“Well, some of us aren’t lucky enough to get a sweet gig at the world’s most widely read puff pastry.” I think he was kidding; I didn’t bother asking because that’s when his fingers finally stopped moving, and the screen stopped flashing. “Voila.”

“Huh?”

“Here’s your guy. Well, one of these fifteen may be your guy.”

“You’re a god, Nate. Now, run them all through your obituaries and we’ll see which ones haven’t died yet.”

“Aww, for cryin’ out – I didn’t lose *that* much to you, did I?”

My cell phone rang. “This’ll teach you to raise with a pair of fives.” I stuck a finger in one ear to muffle the sounds of the busy newsroom and brought the phone to my other ear.

“Dunbar.”

“Two calls from your publisher in one day, Mister Dunbar,” a familiar voice rumbled pleasantly. “Feeling important yet?”

“Mister Grogan? I hope you’re not – I mean, I really haven’t had time to —”

“Relax, son, I was just curious about how the chase was going. Any leads?”

“Yeah, yeah, I just turned up a bunch of possible leads.”

“*You* turned up?” Nate said loudly. “Yeah, right.”

“Howzat?” Grogan asked.

“Sorry, Mister Grogan,” I said. “Street person. Babbling.”

“That’s swell, swell. Say, did I mention that this would be the cover story for the anniversary issue?”

I said nothing.

“And because it’s a special, it goes to press ahead of our usual schedule, in – lemme see – three days?”

I kept saying nothing.

“Guess I didn’t. But no pressure. Make it a game, an exercise for your fabled detecting skills. Good hunting!” Grogan dismissed me with a small beep.

Nate was impressed. “Grogan? The Raptor? Calling you? About *this*? If this story’s that big, I wanna share the byline!”

“Faster, pussycat; surf, surf.”

His super-fingers started dancing over the keyboard again as he sighed. “Days like this, I wish you’d just stay home and write your damn novel instead of playing poker, Dunbar.”

I nodded. “Me, too.”

The screen flashed rapidly again. I could swear I saw wisps of smoke starting to creep out from between the keys. “Okay,” Nate said just as rapidly, “I’m in the obit morgue. Let me cross-reference your fifteen.”

He stopped. He smiled.

“Down to five.”

His search took him all of ten seconds.

My search took me all of a day and a half — tracking down, talking to and eliminating three of the five scholarship recipients on the list Nate generated for me. One was a retired doctor; one ended up switching to law, then he retired and died; one became an accountant, not retired, although after spending a half-hour or so with the rambling old guy, I figured he probably should have retired ten years ago.

Just when I was losing hope, I saw that the fourth prospect had the potential for, at least, entertainment value: Long Play Records in Harlem.

Real estate on 125th Street isn’t cheap. It’s the main drag through Harlem and one of the world’s great cultural centers. (After all, it’s the address of the Apollo, where I’ve spent lots of

evenings interviewing visiting performers and celebrities, human and superhuman.) If someone wanted to open a place like Long Play Records on that street these days, they’d need to write a seven-figure check just for a year’s rent, let alone inventory. According to some quick research on the web (okay, Nate’s research), the shop opened many years before the car crash incident under one William Wilkins. According to some items in the *Chronicle*, the current owner, one Eugene William Wilkins, consistently resisted offers from developers who wanted to replace the vinyl emporium with something more gentrified. Fortunately, the gentry liked music on vinyl, and fueled the profitable interest in it that business correspondents reported in recent years.

Long Play was a record store of the first order: clean, well-lit and filled with racks of new and used albums, some with dust that I could imagine collectors snorting into their lungs upon entering. Albums from every genre — autographed by the artists and personalized to “Long Play” — hung framed on the walls, whose cracks added character to the place like well-placed wrinkles. I couldn’t see speakers, but I heard music. Jazz. Good jazz.

I really wanted this to be the end of Grogan’s rainbow.

The store wasn’t the only thing with distinctive wrinkles. The 60-ish man sitting on a stool behind the counter — the only visible employee — looked pretty well-preserved, probably because he’d spent the better part of the last forty years in here. Tall and lean, with graying black hair and beard, the man I presumed to be Eugene William Wilkins wore simple jeans, a dark T-shirt, and a sweater. He also wore a pince-nez, those little armless glasses that rest on the end of the nose; you’ve seen snooty rich people wear them in old movies. I made a mental note to ask him about it.

As I stepped in, I accidentally interrupted a conversation between him and one of New York’s finest, a middle-aged uniformed officer. Neither seemed to mind as Wilkins turned to me and smiled. “Be with you in a second, sir.”

I nodded. “No hurry. More time to look around. Wow.”

That made him smile wider.

The officer spoke. “All I’m sayin’, Long Play, is maybe close the store early and get yourself home before dark, at least until we catch these guys.”

“Sarge, take it from me: there’s little *honest* money to be made in vinyl LPs, much less drug money to be stolen.”

“These punks’ll take a kid’s lunch money if it gets ‘em closer to the next high,” the sergeant said. “And if they *are* from around here, they’re probably waitin’ for a night when you’re alone in the store.”

“I’m always alone in the store, and no one ever gives me trouble.”

“I just wouldn’t want the life of ‘Long Play’ Wilkins cut short, you know what I’m sayin’?”

Wilkins chuckled. “Won’t happen on your beat, McKenna. Where else would you get those fine Sarah Vaughan albums you love so much?”

McKenna laughed. “True, true.”

“I’ll be careful, Sarge. And I’ll let you know if I see anyone or anything suspicious.”

McKenna turned toward the doorway. “Fair enough. I may swing by with Conwell before our shift ends.”

As the cop exited, Wilkins stepped out from behind his counter and called, “You worry about me more than my wife does, McKenna!” He chuckled again as he headed toward me.

“Sorry for the wait, sir.”

“No problem, really. Crime wave?”

“Nothing new, not around here. Some kids have been financing their drug habits with break-ins, and Sergeant McKenna just doesn’t want to lose his favorite record store.”

“I don’t blame him. I haven’t been in an honest-to-God *record* store in forever.” I listened to the music on the unseen speakers, enjoying every note, hiss and pop. “My dad has that vinyl. Used to play it all the time when he was in his study. I bought the CD for him a few years back when I bought him a CD player, but I don’t think he’s even taken the wrappers off them.”

Wilkins liked that. “Sounds like my perfect customer, Mister —”

“Dunbar.” We shook hands. “Did I hear that officer call you ‘Long Play’?”

“Yes, sir, that’s where Long Play Records gets its name.”

“Eugene ‘Long Play Willie’ Wilkins? The deejay who cut the deepest grooves this side of 110th Street? You know how many soul and hip-hop artists cite you as an influence?”

Wilkins smiled, but just a little. “All right, all right, come on.”

“And you’re here, you’re ... *here*. I’m surprised you didn’t become a record producer instead of a retailer.”

“I do love music,” Wilkins said, “but I guess I never had the ego or the confidence to go into the business. Truth be told, I wanted to be something else entirely. But I’m not a guy who likes to dwell on the past. This store’s my family. Took it over when my father passed. Brings business into my community, and that’s a good thing.”

I nodded. “Yes, it is.”

He leaned casually against a bin of albums. “So, speaking of business, Mister Dunbar, what’s yours?”

I don’t know how he suspected me of having an ulterior motive, but the look in his eyes reminded me of the kind my mom would get when I tried to hide the fact that I had no idea where the mysterious dents in her fender came from. Only his look was a lot nicer, more curious than condemning.

So, I told him my business. He didn’t want to waste time, and I didn’t have time to waste. I confessed that I knew about his deejay career only because I came across it in my (Nate’s) research, but my admiration was sincere. As I pulled a couple of records to buy for Dad’s birthday, I explained my original reason for coming there and showed him Grogan’s pictures of the accident.

He spread them out across the tops of two bins filled with albums. He looked at them carefully, adding a few more wrinkles around his brown eyes as he squinted to make out the details. After a few minutes, I was ready for him to deny being the guy in the pictures, because that’s what most people do when we reporters show people photos of themselves, or phone records, or email threads, or hotel receipts that may figure into a *Times* article. And it’s not like the pictures caught him in some compromising position; he was trying to save someone’s life.

“Naturally,” I said, we’ll pay you for the rights to your story.”

He kept studying the pictures.

“I’d be sure to mention the store,” I said. “Good publicity.”

Not a word.

“I really think our readers would be interested in how a superhuman went from studying medicine to running a successful record store.”

He didn't even look up. “That's easy.” He held up one of the photos of him working to save the motorist. “Failure.”

“What?”

He placed the photos down and looked at me. “I didn't save her, Mister Dunbar.”

“Yeah, but you didn't kill her, either.”

“Oh, I knew that. I always knew that. Sure, when I heard her sternum crack at first, I thought I my damn fool arm pushed down too hard. I got scared. Flattened my body and slid under the car, into a manhole.”

“If you knew you didn't kill her, why didn't you wait for the ambulance or the police?”

“You have to understand, Mister Dunbar, when anyone from my neighborhood heard *sirens* back in those days, didn't matter what color you were, you ran like hell. Cops might have said nothing, but we didn't take chances. It was just the times, you know?”

I nodded.

“I read about her condition in the papers the next day,” he said. “Still, I never forgave myself for not being able to help her. That's how I knew I wasn't cut out to be a doctor.”

“But doctors can't help everyone. They lose patients from time to time.”

“And I just couldn't stand the thought of losing another one, dealing with that kind of helplessness over and over again. So, I quit. Returned what was left of my scholarship to the college and repaid the rest working here for my dad, selling records.” He finally smiled again.

“When I wasn't sneaking them out to play them at my deejay gigs.

“Not what I planned to do with my life, but I still ended up happy. Things work out, you kn—”

Gunshots cut him off.

I'm not ashamed to say that my first instinct was to drop for cover behind one of the record bins. Without even moving his lower torso from his chair, Wilkins stretched the *top* half of his body *across the store* to the front door, opened it and looked outside.

“McKenna!”

I barely kept up as his bottom half snapped out his chair and caught up to his top half. As I ran out of the doorway, I saw Sergeant McKenna lying on the pavement three doors away. A crowd was quickly gathering, and thickening, but Wilkins just flattened himself like a ribbon and contorted himself as necessary to weave through the crowd, then restored himself to his true form as he arrived beside his friend. The onlookers were split between watching the downed officer and their elastic-limbed neighbor.

Wilkins knelt down. “Sarge! Sarge, you talk to me, dammit!”

It took me a little longer to arrive behind him, but once I did, I saw McKenna, eyes closed, with a bloody gunshot wound in his shoulder. He rolled his head toward Wilkins and opened his eyes, then spoke in a thready voice. “Hey, Long Play ... told you those punks were ... would come around ... caught ‘em in an alley ... young, fast punks ...”

Wilkins lifted McKenna's wounded shoulder, which made the officer grunt. “Sorry, man. Looks like the bullet went clean through your shoulder.” He turned to the crowd. “Somebody get me a blanket, a coat, anything to keep him warm! Stat!” Back to McKenna. “Where's Officer Conwell?”

“Callin' it in,” McKenna groaned. “Other shot grazed him, but the kid's a brick.”

Wilkins took in a deep breath. “I've gotta stop this bleeding now, Sarge. It's not exactly sterile, and it's gonna hurt, but hang in there.”

“Hang in there for —?”

Before McKenna could finish, Wilkins began extending his index finger until it measured approximately eight inches in length, then adjusted its thickness of his finger until it approximated the diameter of the gunshot wound. If that didn't stun the crowd, his next move surely did: he quickly placed his finger into McKenna's wound (making a brief, but icky squishy noise), then expanded his digit to secure it.

When he was done screaming, McKenna — much more conscious — said, “What the hell did you just do?!”

“Stretched my finger to make it through your shoulder,” Wilkins explained, “then I stretched it laterally to plug up the wound and stop the bleeding until the medics got here.” He looked to the crowd again and barked, “Where's the damn blanket?”

A large woman carrying a thin, faded blanket ran out of a nearby clothing shop with an extra-long, leather duster-type coat and shouldered her way through the crowd. As soon as she got within six or seven feet of the scene, Wilkins snapped his free arm out, snatched the coat away from her — “Thanks, ma'am!” — then retracted his arm and spread the coat across McKenna.

McKenna managed to smile. “Superhuman, huh? When did that start?”

“About the time I started being black, I guess,” Wilkins said.

“Wastin' your talents in a record store,” McKenna said, still smiling. “You oughta be ashamed.”

“Maybe you haven't noticed, Sarge, but most cops are glad there's not a big call for superheroes anymore.”

“Who said anything about being a superhero?” McKenna wheezed.

“You shoulda been a doctor.”

And that’s how Long Play Wilkins finally saved a life. McKenna survived to I.D. the perps, and Long Play waved off all the cheers, press coverage and commendations, and went back to work in his music store.

But not long after, he gave his stories of what happened to him, then and now, exclusively to the *Times*.

Not to me.

At my request, he gave it to a reporter who’d always wanted to meet him.

Long Play relaxed against his counter. “That’s really all there is to it, Mister Grogan. Any more questions?”

“Not anymore!” Grogan had the wide eyes of a five-year-old on Christmas morning. “Between me and Dunbar, we should be able to give you the kind of press that a man like you deserves.”

“Which should bring more business into your store and the neighborhood,” I said.

“That’s very nice, but I have a question,” Long Play said with a smile. “Why? Why did you put this nice young man to so much trouble just to find me – especially after more than forty years?”

“Like it reads on our masthead,” Grogan said, ““Everyone’s story is a story for our *Times*.””

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? Our slogan? That’s the only reason you sent me out on this?”

“Good instincts, kid,” Grogan told the 32-year-old “kid” reporter as he straightened the lapels of his suit jacket.

My story-sense was tingling.

Grogan strolled in the aisle before Long Play and the counter. “Back in my reporting days, traditional superhumans were everywhere. Good guys, bad guys, big fights, big crimes, big rescues – you remember how it was.”

“I do,” Long Play said.

“Well, *their* stories were the ones selling newspapers back then,” Grogan said. “and those were the kinds of stories I wanted to cover. Until I saw you. You were a young, scared med student with superhuman powers trying to save a life without calling attention to himself. No mask, no costume. You just wanted to help.

“After you ran off, I started wondering if there were other superhumans out there like you, trying to make a difference without grandstanding. So, I started looking for them, and when no one else would publish what I wrote about them, I collected and photocopied my stories — see, Dunbar, we had to copy pieces of paper, we didn’t have blogs then —”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Grogan slowly moved towards Long Play. “I started selling them on the streets myself. Explored a lot of New York in the process while I was sleeping in my car. But the dream was worth the inconvenience. In a few years, the stuff I wrote caught on with people and I’d saved enough money to start publishing them in a magazine.”

Long Play looked truly surprised. I probably did, too. We said it together: “*The SuperHuman Times?*”

Grogan nodded and placed a hand on Long Play’s shoulder. “You couldn’t have saved that woman’s life that night, Mister Wilkins. But you changed mine. And I’ve always wanted to find you, and thank you. Best way I can think of to mark the *Times*’ fortieth.”

You would have thought Long Play Wilkins had received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. “I ... I truly do not know what to say, Mister Grogan.”

“Well, you might want to apologize to Dunbar, here. If I hadn’t seen you and created the *Times*, he’d be on a book tour for his novel right now. Instead, he’ll be going back to his cubicle to write this up for the anniversary issue.”

That made them laugh.

I pretended to laugh with them.

No, that’s not entirely true: I *pretended* to pretend to laugh with them, to look like writing the big anniversary assignment was still a burden.

In truth, for the first time ever, I couldn’t wait to get started.

So, Long Play Wilkins wanted to save lives, sold music he loved to share, and ended up saving a life anyway.

Grogan wanted to write about superheroes who were champions, and ended up championing superhumans.

And both of them taught me that writing for the *Times* isn’t such a bad way to earn a living, not when there’s always a chance that I’ll get to write my own stuff someday.

It could happen. After all, Grogan kept his word and forwarded my manuscript to his publishing buddies — with a letter of recommendation from The Raptor himself. Anything could happen.

But that, as we say around the office, is a story for another *Times*.

(Yeah, after making a crack that bad, maybe I *do* belong there.)

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