



“TRUE NORTH”

A Short Story by
LANCE WOODS

Based on the podcast series
produced by



“TRUE NORTH”

Prologue

“True North” was not the first *SuperHuman Times* story I ever wrote (that dubious honor goes to “The Hot Property”, which was a script for a graphic novel starring Kevin Dunbar and Rei Shinozaki, both of whom readers would meet many years later in the novel *Heroic Park*). However, it was the first *Times* podcast. As such, it holds a special place in my heart, but it’s also one of the most personal stories I’ve ever written.

I first drafted it in 2006, less than a year after my father passed away at age 86. While going through his things in the months that followed, I found letters, photos and records from his service in World War II. I’d known a few things about that time in his life, most notably that he was shot through the stomach in a battle and almost didn’t make it home. (I still have the Western Union telegram Mom got from the War Department.)

What I didn’t know was that, at one point in his service, he was assigned to the Quartermaster Corps — Graves Registration (now known as Mortuary Affairs), responsible for the identification and proper burial of servicemen killed in battle. He never told us about this work, but I imagine it must have been stressful and emotional. I wish I’d had the interest when I was younger, or the courage when I was older, to ask him about his service when he was alive. But I always figured that he didn’t want to talk about that time. (I should have known better; he loved watching World War II movies on TV. I guess that’s how he was able to live with the memories for 60 years.)

Anyway, bump ahead to the day that I'm trying to come up with a story for the first *Times* show. Memories of Dad and his Army service are still fresh, and it starts me thinking about a spin on an old superhero trope: kid finds out his parents were/are superheroes, kid learns he has powers, kid misuses/abuses said powers until he gets set straight and becomes a hero himself. See *Sky High* or any number of comic and movie stories for an example.

I also wanted to put a spin on what may be the oldest superhero trope of all: the superhuman raised by human parents who learns about and accepts his powers and, well, you've seen *Man of Steel*.

For "True North", the parents are the superhumans, and their child — somehow — is all too human. And what Howard North discovers about his parents, and himself, may stun him as much as I was stunned by the discoveries about how brave my father must have been not just on the battlefield, but off it as well.

So, that's why "True North" is dedicated to my Dad, Frank Woods.

SuperHuman Times™

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“This may shock you, but when I was young, the world was full of superhumans.

“Not like the kind we have today – the super-strong construction workers, the speedsters delivering packages and documents at supersonic speeds, the folks with X-ray vision working security at the airports. I mean the larger than life ones. Superheroes. Supervillains. All trying to save the world, rule it or destroy it.

“And I was one of them!”

Yeah, Mom, I know. You were superhuman.

I’ve known about you, and Dad, for years. I’ve known since I was getting ready to move out, opened Dad’s old suitcase and found all of those news clippings and magazine covers of you guys. I never told you I knew because I respected your privacy. I figured you’d get around to telling me.

It would have been nice if you’d told me *before* you died. But that’s how it worked out.

Now, I’m sitting here looking at this letter you left me. A courier brought it to my office, which made me even less popular with my boss since we’re not supposed to accept personal deliveries. Darla backed off when she saw your lawyer’s letterhead on the envelope. I guess she figured it was impressive enough to let me take my full lunch hour today. Yep, the whole sixty minutes. Swell lady.

You’d like today, Mom. It’s a very pretty Wednesday. Feels like fall should, right down to the leaves tripping across the bronze markers over your grave and Dad’s. There’s a mild breeze, so I’m holding onto your letter pretty tightly. I’m also getting a passing breeze from the occasional superhuman flying overhead, passing me on their way from their job to a deli or restaurant for a real lunch. The cemetery’s across the street from several eateries, so some of the fliers strafe me unintentionally as they descend toward the sidewalk. It doesn’t bug me.

What bugs me is that *I* can’t do it.

Two superhuman parents and I turn out normal.

A freak.

I know it wasn’t your fault. I just wish I’d asked you guys about it to try and figure out why.

Too late for that. Too late for me. At least you were lucky.

You were one of them.

“And I was one of them!”

“Well, not right away.

“I wasn’t always ‘one of them’. I was perfectly normal until I hit my twenties. Doctors told me that some people don’t need any kind of external agent — lightning, radiation, exotic chemicals, whatever — to trigger superhuman powers. Something in their genes just takes them to the next level when the time is right.

“That’s what happened to me, which is probably why I never saw it coming.

“It was back in my old neighborhood one spring. A couple of characters you probably never heard about – Staminoid, a cyborg hero, and SkyTigress, some jet-packed, laser-sting-shooting supervillainess wannabe – were fighting in the sky over us.

“I saw it all from the roof of our row house. Lots of people crowded the street to watch. You know, after all of the fighting superhumans they’d seen over the years, and all the potential for damage they could cause, people never ran for cover; they always wanted to see the show.

“Okay, I was one of those idiots when I stepped onto the roof, but it didn’t last, because as I watched the fight unfold from moment to moment, I saw something else.

“I saw the *next* moment.

“As SkyTigress scored a glancing hit off Staminoid, I felt this weird chill, and a weird shimmer passed across my eyes, like those floaters you see when you’re tired. It made me blink and, when I opened my eyes, they were flying above me in a spot where neither of them could have flown in that space of time — I knew because the skyline was slightly different — but there they were. SkyTigress took another shot at Staminoid. I gasped and I blinked and —

“I looked out and they hadn’t moved from the time I first blinked. But they were heading for another part of the sky – the part I saw *after* I blinked.

“I didn’t understand what was happening, but something made me yell, ‘Staminoid! Dive left!’

“For some reason, just as SkyTigress fired, Staminoid dived and the laser missed him.

“That gave Staminoid enough time to swoop in, take out SkyTigress’s laser wrist cuff and punch her lights out. (Don’t judge; she was very evil.) You should have heard the cheering as Staminoid took her down to the police waiting on the ground.

“Then he took to the air again, and he stopped and hovered directly in front of me.

“I was speechless.

“‘Thanks.’ Even though his voice was synthesized, it sounded sincere. ‘How did you know where SkyTigress was going to fire?’

“‘Somehow, I stammered, ‘I *saw* her *hit* you *before* she hit you.’

“‘Wow,’ Staminoid said. ‘Sounds like some timely clairvoyance on your part. Ever happen before?’

“‘Never.’

“‘Well, if it happens again, please contact me through DefenseOne Headquarters. We could use someone like you watching our backs.’ Then he said good night and flew off.

“At that moment, I closed my eyes and opened them, repeatedly, hoping that the shimmer would happen again. It didn’t that night, but in the weeks to come it did, and each time I worked to control the visions. I couldn’t see far enough to make a fortune gambling or investing ... but just far enough to stop a couple of traffic accidents, save a couple of peoples’ shopping bags from tearing open, that kind of thing.

“I could make a difference! Maybe not a big one like Staminoid, but if he saw potential in my abilities, I had to explore it.”

You made a difference.

I make a salary, or what passes for one after deductions.

Now my phone’s ringing. I don’t think it’s DefenseOne hiring accountants with comp sci degrees.

The office. Specifically, Darla’s extension. She wouldn’t call unless it was important ... to her or her bosses.

Let her go to voice mail. I’ve been away from the office ten whole minutes. If I start back now, she’ll just call again. I could be a superhuman and I’d never be fast enough for her.

You waited years for this, Mom. Go ahead.

“So a year later, I made it official. A few trips to the thrift store, a little sewing, a wig and a mask to hide my identity, and Veronica Henning became *Beyondra*, She Who Sees Beyond!”

“Hey, it sounded catchy when I was 22.

“And Staminoid was right; DefenseOne welcomed me with open arms. Before I knew it, I was part of the big fight! Good versus Evil, twenty-four seven, three sixty-five!

“It was so exciting, and so exhausting. The break room at DefenseOne HQ was practically my apartment, I spent so much time there. We all did — Staminoid, Circuitbreaker, Sumo Cum Laude, Celestine, The Paradox and others your might have heard passing references if you studied the Superhuman Age in your history classes.

“But the most important person I worked with was Curtis North, The Compass — and, ultimately, your father, the flawless sense of direction. That may not seem like much of a power to you, but once he blazed a trail, he never, ever forgot it, which came in handy if we were infiltrating a villain’s lair or a dark cave full of subterranean creatures.

“When I met him in the DefenseOne break room, the man who never got lost couldn’t find the tea bags.

“His rationale: ‘I’m not lost; the tea bag is.’

“So, that was the start of our first date. When we weren’t answering distress calls, we got to know each other better. It wasn’t easy; we were so busy in those days.

“For example: remember that dark cave full of subterranean creatures I mentioned? Well, there was just such a cave under the city, and the creatures packed lasers when DefenseOne went in to confront, and retreat from, them. Running like hell, your father navigated the team out of the caves, but he asked me to look a few seconds ahead to be sure we were heading in the right direction. Even then, we were a good team.

“When we got out, and the rest of the team sealed the cave entrance, Curtis whispered to me, ‘I wasn’t sure I could get us out of that one.’

“‘I was sure,’ I said. ‘We were fine. Out here was just lost.’

“He just looked at me with this kind of dopey look. I asked if my face was bleeding. He said no. Then I asked what he was looking at.

“He said, ‘My future, I think.’”

Speaking of escaping supervillains, Darla’s making my phone vibrate again, but I muted the ring. It’s actually moving slightly across this marble bench I’m sitting on, kind of like the old

telephone receivers did in cartoons like *The Flintstones* when it was urgent, or the person at the other end of the line was angry.

I’m guessing it’s the latter.

I should answer it. Or just go back to the office. Or just watch the phone as she keeps calling and time how long it takes for Darla to go over the edge.

But there’s pavement on the ground, so the phone might fall and get damaged, and I can’t afford to replace it, which may solve the Darla problem entirely.

No. I’d still have to talk to her face-to-face, and I can’t see myself having the courage — or the leverage — to shove her over an edge. She’s pretty ... imposing, although I bet she could never be fat enough to have scared you guys. I mean, you faced some of the world’s biggest supervillains.

Looks like one even came to your wedding.

“About a year later, Curtis and I got married in a nice, quick civil service in Manhattan. But we didn’t have time for a honeymoon. Of all the days we could have picked to get married, we picked what would be the worst day in history.

“We picked the day Malvolio Nacht came to blow up New York.

“Now, I *know* you know who Nacht was. *Everyone* knows who he was, just like they know who Hitler and Bin Laden were. As supervillains go, he was publicly active for a relatively short time, although he claimed to have existed for decades. But in the brief time the world knew him, he managed to hurt or murder more innocents than any of his supervillain peers.

“The ironic thing was, in his white armor with the visor covering most of his face, and the goatee covering his chin, he looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy from a mirror universe, tall

and broad, but not really intimidating ... until he decided to conquer or eliminate you and yours. Then he showed his true colors as the most destructive and power-hungry man in history.

“That horrible day, the first thing everyone heard was the low rumble. Everyone thought it was an earthquake until we realized that the ground wasn’t shaking.

“We ran outside and looked up. The rumbling didn’t come from the ground, but from the sky, from a large, white, bat wing-shaped shadow approaching from the lower tip of the island.

“It was the *NachtTerror*. You’ve probably seen pictures or video of it, but none ever did justice to that monstrous flying fortress. Nacht parked it over Times Square, then his voice filled the air as he addressed the entire city from his bridge. He spoke in a calm, measured tone, like a patient teacher or a Zen master, not a megalomaniac, about how he’d learned of a plan we heroes had created to attack him (which was true) and decided that a pre-emptive strike was in order.

“And then, he struck.

“The next time you’re in a city, Howard, look around and try to imagine the most horrible scene of destruction. Picture sections of multiple floors of skyscrapers on either side of you being blasted away by concussive charges from above; the glass, steel and concrete raining down; the water mains and natural gas lines erupting as sections of the streets were blown away; the streetlight poles bending, snapping and smashing on anything around them; the people who were wounded or killed because they couldn’t reach cover fast enough, and because there were no safe places to go for dozens of blocks.

“That was the *first* sixty seconds. And in that time, I couldn’t keep from saying one thing to myself.

“I should have seen this coming.”

Sigh. I should have seen this coming.

Sorry, Mom. Darla. Again. Texting this time. All caps, of course.

“NEW #S FROM UPSTAIRS. ENTIRE PROJECT SCRAPPED. GET BACK NOW. D.”

Great. “NOW” is usually Darla-speak for “or you’re fired, you lesser, smaller, thinner being”.

At least *your* bad guy was just trying to kill you, Mom. Mine fires people. Not me, of course. I could quit, but I couldn’t get severance that way, and the market for accountants in the I.T. field is soft right now. There’s really not much else I can do.

I really could have used some superpowers, Mom. Maybe then I could have done something more, *been* something more.

Not like you two. I’ll never be that brave. But like those guys across the street. Three of them are loading furniture from a townhouse into a moving van. Two of them are carrying what looks like a dresser, so they’re probably human. But one of them has what looks like an upright piano on her shoulder. (I don’t know why a superhuman mover needs to wear a back brace when they have strength like that; must be some kind of Teamsters regulation.)

It probably doesn’t pay as well as an office job, and I wouldn’t necessarily need superpowers to do it, but it would be useful. I wonder what you and Dad would say if I decided to trash the bachelor’s degree in comp sci that you funded.

You’d probably be disappointed in me. Or tell me that what I’m going through isn’t the end of the world.

You would know, I guess. You were there.

“It took Curtis — yelling ‘Ronnie! Make yourself useful!’ at the top of his lungs — to snap me out of the self-pity I was feeling. He grabbed my shoulders and shook me, something he’d never done before, and I’ll never forget what he said.

“‘You couldn’t have seen far enough ahead for us to stop Nacht, Ronnie. But you can see ahead far enough to keep him from killing more people.’

“As I watched heroes from around the city — not just superhumans, but human first responders as well — mobilize to confront Nacht and the effects of his attack, I realized that Curtis was right. He had to get to DefenseOne headquarters to join the group that would board the *NachtTerror* once they broke through Nacht’s defenses. And I had to use my powers to see where a blast might hit, or where debris might fall, and do my best to get people out of harm’s way beforehand, like I did with Staminoid.

“In the middle of all that mayhem, I saw a vision of something other than wreckage and the panic. It made me stop in my tracks.

“I saw a vision of myself. I was lying on my back somewhere.

“And I was holding a baby. I knew I wasn’t pregnant, so I knew this had to be in the future — farther than I’d ever seen before — and somehow I knew that I was holding my child.

“I didn’t know when this would happen, but I knew your father and I were going to live.

“Or I was delusional.

“I don’t remember how long I spent grabbing and shoving people out of the paths of falling buildings, blasts from the *NachtTerror*, runaway vehicles and other people. Eventually, I found myself in front of a hospital — well, most of a hospital — helping move injured people inside.

“A blast from outside rocked the building. It must have been a direct hit or close to it. I managed to see it and warn people just before it struck. People screamed; large and small pieces of the place hit the floor; I could hear the entire structure creaking after the blast. Dust made it nearly impossible to see anything. Having worked to get people into the hospital, I started looking around for anyone I might have to get *out* of the hospital.

“In one corridor, I thought I heard groaning. I followed the sound to one of the birthing suites in the maternity ward. I fought every impulse to call up a vision; I wasn’t looking forward to seeing what was in there.

“The dust was still thick as I entered the room. Most of the suite’s ceiling had collapsed onto the bed. The arm of a woman, a new mother, hung limply out from the bed under the ceiling. Next to the bed, on the floor, under part of a wall, was a man of about the same age, the father. From his position, it looked like he managed to protect their crying baby from being hit. The baby was wrapped in a blanket with a flap dropped over its head and face. I could see the man’s fingers trembling as he held the baby, along with a set of car keys. I guessed he was about to get them all out when the last blast hit.

“Then he saw me, and he held the baby out to me. As I knelt down and took it from him, the man — hopefully satisfied that his child would be safe — died.

“I carried the baby across the suite as fast as I could, even though I was starting to choke on the dust. Another blast hit near the building, making it shudder. It knocked me off my feet.

As I rolled over onto my back and cradled the baby in my lap, I pulled the blanket away from the baby’s head just far enough to make sure he wasn’t hurt.

“In the middle of all that destruction, I realized that this was my vision.

“It was the first time I saw your face, Howard, and it was the most beautiful thing in the world.”

Unlike Darla, who is texting again:

“TEAM: LATE NIGHT TONIGHT. HOPE U ALL LIKE CHINESE FOR DINNER. D.”

Yeah, I saw that coming. Maybe I inherited some of your genes after all.

But I couldn’t have, could I?

I’m not your son.

I’m an orphan.

Why didn’t you tell me all of this when you were alive? Were you afraid I’d hate you guys? How could I? You saved my life, put me through school, encouraged me in college and — *what the hell is it now, Darla?*

“TEAM: CANCEL UR WKND. ALL CMG IN SATURDAY. SUNDAY POSSIBLE. D.”

Part of me wants to fold up this letter and read it later. But with Darla cracking the whip I don’t know when “later” will be. And after what you just told me about my “secret identity”, I’m a little afraid to keep going.

Oh, for the love of —

“WHERE ARE U??!? D.”

I’m being adopted, you bitch.

“I got you out and made it to DefenseOne Headquarters, where I reunited with Curtis after the heroes finally beat Nacht back and sank the *NachtTerror* into Hudson Bay.

“Before he could ask me anything, I handed you to him. After holding you for what seemed like forever, he looked at you, then at me, with the same dopey expression he gave me after we escaped the caves, and said one word.

““Yes.””

“He noticed that you were wearing one of those hospital bracelets on your little arm. It only had one name on it: ‘Howard’. We guessed that this was your real family’s name, and we didn’t want to take it from you. So that’s how you became Howard North.

“After I told Curtis what happened, he suggested that we apply for a duplicate birth certificate after the city was up and running again. So many records were destroyed in the attack that we had no way to locate your next of kin, otherwise we would have given you to your blood relatives. Even with DefenseOne’s computers and resources, we found nothing.

“I hope you won’t hate me for saying it, but I’m glad, because we really didn’t want to let you go.

“The rest, you know, both in terms of your history and the history of heroes like us. We drove Nacht away after that battle and lesser villains tried to fill the void. We took care of them while the police took care of human criminals, without our help. By the time we shut down the supervillains, the police didn’t really need us to help them anymore.

“But we still needed purpose, and ways to pay our bills, So we got real jobs. Well, most of the superhumans we knew did. Some joined the police and fire departments; some went into the military; some embraced the future by reliving the past, writing memoirs and even comic books — I think you call them ‘graphic novels’ — about the old days.

“Most of us were just content to fit in with the human neighbors we used to protect. You made that easy for us. While other heroes and villains spent years looking for their place in the world after the SuperHuman Age, we found our place with you. You taught us something every time you accomplished something without powers: you showed us how wonderful it was to be more human than super.

“That was the life you were born to, and that’s the life we wanted to give you, and ourselves. That’s how your father became a cartography professor at Bankhead State. It wasn’t as challenging as outrunning laser-packing trogs through a maze of caves, but it let me stay home and raise you. It also came with discounted tuition to Bankhead for family members, which — along with that scholarship you won in high school — came in handy when you were ready for college. I still have the photo of the two of you on the stage when you got your bachelor’s degree. You both looked so handsome in your caps and gowns. I don’t think he smiled that widely, and proudly, since our wedding.

“He used to look at that photo a lot, even when he couldn’t remember who was in it. Whoever thought that the man who couldn’t get lost would get Alzheimer’s? Ten years after his death, I still kick myself because I never saw that coming, either.

“I wish I could look ahead to see how you’ll react to all of this. Will you look at us as your adoptive parents or as your kidnappers? I only wish that we could have found the courage to tell you the whole story in person.

“Some heroes we were, huh?

“I just hope you aren’t disappointed in us.”

“Disappointed” ... in *you*?

Excuse me, Mom. Got distracted by those movers thumping the rest of the furniture into their van. People loading moving vans always gets me a little weepy.

Go ahead ...

“Well, now you know everything. I guess I just wanted to type this up and see if I could remember the story after more than thirty years. I thought I’d have to work at remembering everything, but it was easier than I thought.

“One thing I do know is that each person follows a different road to their destiny. And one thing I *will* predict is that your road will lead you somewhere special.

“Just like the road that led us to you.

“With all my love — past, present, and future — Mom.”

Work at remembering? Remembering.

Work!

Darla?! Voice mail?! Crap! I didn’t even see the phone vibrate that time.

Oh, hell. She left a message this time.

Press play and get it over with, lesser being.

“Howard, it's Darla. It's 2:25. Where *are* you? A *two-and-a-half-hour lunch* on a day when all hell is ... See me when you decide to come back.

“I think we need to talk about your future with InfiniStat. After you get the new numbers entered.”

Great.

Folks, your son is about to become an unemployed disappointment.

Maybe there’s room in that moving van for me.

Nope, too late; they’re shutting the doors.

Wait — what?

Mom, Dad, you wouldn’t believe the sign on the back of the van.

“Destiny Moving & Storage.”

What were you saying about my “future with InfiniStat”, Darla?

“We’re Hiring! Drivers and Office Support!

“Locations Nationwide!”

And I’ve even found a path I can follow to get there, Dad. Maybe it will lead Mom’s road leading “somewhere special”.

“Apply Online — DestinyMovers.com”

But do I have what it takes to find out?

The truck thinks so.

“Let Destiny Move You in New Directions!”

Yeah, Darla, we’ll talk about the future.

Don’t ask me how but, out of nowhere, I may have found my path to it.

I guess it just runs in the family.