



DAN GREENBURG

My Superpowers

Do you ever wish you had superpowers?

When I was a kid, growing up in the North Side of Chicago and being picked on by bullies, I prayed for superpowers. Like Superman, I wanted to be able to fly faster than speeding bullets, to be more powerful than locomotives, to leap tall buildings at a single bound. Mainly, I wanted to punch bullies in the stomach so hard that my fist came out of their backs.

Winters in Chicago are so cold that frost forms leafy patterns on your bedroom window and stays there for months. The wind howls off Lake Michigan, and a thick shell of pitted black ice covers the streets and sidewalks from December to April. To keep warm in winter, I wore a heavy wool coat, a wool muffler, wool mittens, furry earmuffs and —one of my most treasured possessions—a Chicago Cubs baseball cap autographed by a player named Big Bill Nicholson.

On the coldest days of winter, three bullies waited for me after school, just for the fun of terrorizing me. The biggest one was a fat ugly kid named Vernon Manteuffel. Vernon and his two buddies would pull off my Cubs cap and tease me with it. They'd pretend to give it back, then toss it around in a game of keep-away.

One day in February when the temperature was so low I felt my eyeballs cracking. Vernon and his friends caught up with me on my way home. As usual, they tore off my Cubs cap and started playing catch with it. What made it worse than usual was that on this particular day I happened to be walking home with a pretty girl named Ann Cohn, who lived across the street from me. Ann Cohn had green eyes and shiny black hair and I had a goofy crush on her. As if it wasn't bad enough that these guys humiliated me when I was alone, now they were doing it in front of Ann Cohn.

I was so embarrassed, I began to cry. Crying in front of Ann Cohn made me even more embarrassed. I was speechless with shame and anger. Driven by rage, I did what only an insane person would do: I attacked Vernon Manteuffel. I punched him in the chest and grabbed back my Cubs cap.

Vernon saw that I had become a madman. People don't know what to do with madmen. Vernon looked shocked and even a little afraid. He backed away from me. I attacked the second boy, who also backed away from me. Encouraged by their backing away, I ran after them, screaming, punching, flailing at them with both fists. I chased them for two blocks before they finally

pulled ahead and disappeared. Breathing hard, tears streaming down my face, I felt I had regained my honor, at least temporarily.

That weekend, perhaps made braver by my triumph over the three bullies, I kissed Ann Cohn on her sofa. I can't tell you exactly why I did that. Maybe because it was a cold, cloudy Saturday and there was nothing else to do. Maybe because we both wondered what it would feel like. In any case, I could now brag that, at age eight, I had personally kissed an actual girl who wasn't related to me.

I never did get those superpowers. Not as a kid, at least.

When I grew up, I became a writer. I discovered a particular pleasure in going on risky adventures. I wrote about my real-life adventures for national magazines. I spent four months riding with New York firefighters and running into burning buildings with them. I spent six months riding with New York homicide cops as they chased and captured drug dealers and murderers. I flew upside-down over the Pacific Ocean with a stunt pilot in an open-cockpit airplane. I took part in dangerous voodoo ceremonies in Haiti. I spent time on a tiger ranch in Texas and learned to tame two-hundred-pound tigers by yelling, "*No!*" and smacking them hard on the nose. I found that tigers were not much different from the bullies of my childhood in Chicago.

I also wrote fiction. I created entire worlds and filled them with people I wanted to put in there. I made these people do and say whatever it pleased me to have them do and say. In the worlds I made up, I was all-powerful—I had *superpowers*.

I began writing a series of children's books call *The Zack Files*, about a boy named Zack who keeps stumbling into the supernatural. In many of these books I gave Zack temporary powers—to read minds, to travel outside his body, to travel back into the past, to triumph over ghosts and monsters. I created another series call *Maximum Boy*, about a boy named Max who accidentally touches radioactive rocks that just came back from outer space and who suddenly develops super powers. Maximum Boy is me as a kid in Chicago, but with superpowers.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot. In *The Zack Files*, I created a fat, stupid kid who sweats a lot and thinks he's cool, but who everyone laughs at behind his back. You know what I named this fool? Vernon Manteuffel. I do hope the real Vernon knows.

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