

The Amazing Adventures of Hannah O'Hare

by Karen McIntyre

All morning long, on that day I stopped being a regular ten-year old and discovered my superpowers, the wind was trying to tell me something. It blew in fitful gusts, like a baby crying, and shook the back door hard and urgent while I crunched through my bowl of Froot Loops. When I stepped outside, it yanked the screen door from my hand and slammed it hard against the doorframe, as if to shove me out there with the balding grass and someone's old newspaper blowing across the yard.

If my friend Maribeth were there, we'd have run around with our model horses, playing out complex scenarios involving lost foals or the desperate need for a watering hole. But she was sick that day, and she was the only friend I'd made since we moved to the new town. So I did the other kind of playing you can do with toy horses, the kind that's more like being a museum curator where you poke twigs in the ground and set them up in realistic tableaux. It wasn't fun, exactly. But it absorbed me so fully I didn't see the little boy until he was looming over me in his Sears Toughskins jeans and dirty windbreaker. It was Davey, the boy who lived on the other side of our duplex, a boy my mother had warned me about.

“What’s this?” He plucked Midnight, my big black stallion, from the herd. I grabbed but Davey spun away. A slow, mean smile spread over his face.

“Hey, ever seen a horse fly?” He threw Midnight over his head. We both watched with our heads tipped back as Midnight went up, up toward the cloudy gray sky, then fell past my reaching fingers to the ground, where his leg snapped off.

I knelt on the cold grass and looked at the little leg with its shard of plastic on one end and the tiny, perfectly detailed hoof on the other.

“It was a *accident*,” Davey said.

And somehow that was the last straw: that terrible blank “A” bumping against the other “A” and he couldn’t hear it, and probably never would, because that was how people talked in Syracuse. And there, right in front of me, was Davey’s white ankle glaring out between his high-water jeans and the lumpy sag of his tube sock. My hand leaped out and closed around his ankle and jerked it toward me and Davey fell to the ground with a *whump*. How quickly I moved, springing onto him so my butt was solid on the scrawny bird bones of his pelvis, my left hand pressing firmly to pin his shoulder to the ground. It was as if my body had always known how to jump on a boy and hit him. I remember seeing his mouth open and his tongue tinted Popsicle blue. Then my fist came down. Shockwaves of pain went up my arm but it felt good, like something I was meant to be doing, while my real part stayed enclosed and safe like a nut in a shell, watching calmly from behind my eyes as my knuckles connected with his blond eyebrow and the wobbling soft eyeball underneath.

A sob. His face turned sideways. As if someone had blown a whistle I got up, and he got up and wiped a streak of dirt across his teary cheek. I stood there with

my knuckles smarting in the wind and watched him run into his side of the duplex. The aluminum door bounced on its latch and hung open, flashing in the weak sunlight.

Inside, the air was warm and smelled like Windex. From the living room I heard my mom singing over the vacuum cleaner, “Bad girls, talkin’ ‘bout the sad girls...” then the *ther-thunk* of the vacuum sucking up a Barbie shoe. I went into the bathroom to see what had happened to me.

My hair was bunched up in a frizzy shrub. In my new school, all the girls had hair that bounced when they walked. I reached for the faucet. A spark zinged off my finger and cracked against the metal.

“Zap,” I said, and met my own eyes in the mirror. I took off my pilly sweater and pulled it back over my head, on and off until my hair stood up in waving filaments. Well. This was not a girl you would bump in the cafeteria line, then give a sneaky laughing look to your friends because you knew she would just take it in and skulk away. Not a girl who would walk blindly up the bus aisle with her head full of happiness because her class was going to the art museum, only to have some boy stick his foot in the aisle to trip her.

Those kids.

They better watch their step.

Monday morning I sparkled down the school corridors, my superpowers zinging around me like those little circles they draw around pictures of atoms to show the hidden force fields. All around me rose the babble of kids and the occasional squeak of a sneaker. A locker slammed and the smaller boys jumped and

pushed out a rough, showy laugh and of course it was him, Peter Giannetti, the boy from the bus who thought he was a big shot because his father was a fireman and let him wear suspenders to school. I watched him come strutting down the hall chest first, pulling the other boys behind him like the brown birds who flapped their wings a thousand miles north just to end up sitting on a power line waiting for the seasons to change.

I no longer felt my feet step automatically aside to let the boys pass. When Peter bumped my side, I bumped right back.

“What are you looking at, Ugly Face?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “Really. Nothing.”

“What’s that?” He put his hand to his ear as if trying to figure out where a noise was coming from. “Hey, I’ve seen a face like yours before. On a stopped clock.”

“Shows how smart you are,” I said. “You’re supposed to say, a face that could STOP a clock. Not the clock itself.”

A hard, high titter. Then a hush from the other boys.

“You’re lucky I don’t fight with girls,” he said, and belched in my face.

And then time did stop, or at least, broke into pieces so I could examine them later: the heat of his insides wafting onto my face. A camera zoom into his open mouth to show the peanut butter packed around his molars with the gray fillings on top. Then the vomity smell of his burp, and time gurgled back into normal speed and I saw the circle of faces around us rocking with laughter, their eyes narrowed into shiny slits. Peter turned his head to bask in the glow and I punched his nose hard from the side, so fast his friends were still laughing when I got my second shot in, an uppercut straight to his Adam’s apple. He bent forward choking and then the

second bell was grating the air and kids were scattering, and I was gone, striding into art class to fasten my smock.

Afterwards, when I walked down the hall, kids stepped aside to avoid me. “It’s *her*,” they said. “She hit a *boy*, and it was *Peter Giannetti*.”

Back then there were no good superhero female role models. Fake as Batman’s fighting was, Cat Woman’s stylized high kicks wouldn’t hurt anyone but a choreographer. Wonder Woman was even worse. The brazen way she stood with her thighs apart, hands on her hips, both breasts pertly defined--she *embarrassed* me. There never was a Superwoman, though that blond cheerleader they called Supergirl came and went over the years. The closest they ever came to a Superwoman was in the old DC comics when some evil sorcerer put a spell on Lois Lane so she ran around town making a fool of herself--trying to stop trains with her index finger or leaping off skyscrapers to rescue a sputtering propeller plane in her dainty little high-heeled shoes. She didn’t save anybody. All she did was make double work for Superman, who had to interrupt his own busy schedule to rescue her using Super Speed so she wouldn’t get huffy and notice. It made me mad because they wrote it so Lois was doubly duped, feeling all proud with her newspaper lady nipped-waist suit and roller-set hairdo, until the spell was broken and of course she snapped out of it in Superman’s arms, gazing up at him adoringly as he flew through the air with his cape streaming behind him, making some flirty remark about sweeping her off her feet.

It was clear I would have to teach myself.

I started by making friends with pain. I lay in bed at night rapping my knuckles

against various parts of myself, mentally cataloging the various astonishments: That flash of cosmic light from my eyeballs. The twanging sinus twinge that spread up from the bridge of my nose when struck with my palm, versus the stabbing ice pick when my nose was hit straight on. I no longer feared pain. Even if I flinched I knew it was just a thing to be endured on my way to getting what I wanted: to win. Punches still hurt, but it was just that, just pain. Part of me thinking, *this is the worst you can do?* Practicing with my brother Patrick, I let him twist my arm back until a white-hot spear pierced my shoulder. But I wouldn't say "uncle." I knew if I waited long enough he would just stop.

"What's the matter with you?" He let go and I dropped to the floor. I stared up at his face with its erupting red acne crusted by Clearasil.

"I'm telling Mom," he said, backing away.

"Why? Cause you hurt me and I didn't cry?"

And all he could do was give me the finger and slam his door with the grinning Farrah Fawcett poster hanging crookedly from two pieces of tape. Because while both of us knew I had done something against the rules, neither one of us had a name for it.

In our old house, we shared the same room, and Patrick's friends were the brothers of my friends. It wasn't me tagging along, it was all of us together, running barefoot across the summer lawns. But in our new town, he was suddenly visibly older, chunking a basketball down the street with his lank-haired junior high school friends. I barely saw him except at dinner, when Dad was just waking up for work, and Mom was rushing around still in her uniform, slamming the oven door and throwing a block of frozen spinach into a pot. My brother and I knew not to fight

with each other at the table the way we used to; the tired face of my mother chewing, my dad sipping coffee and staring into space, took the bickering right out of us. But when we lost that friction, we didn't seem to have any other way to connect.

Sometimes I would slip into Patrick's room before he got home from school, and hide under his bed so I could watch him throw his knapsack down and play the same dim, homemade cassette of Led Zeppelin over and over while he stalked back and forth, jackknifing his skinny body over an imaginary guitar, trying to throw his hair around. I'd lie there dozing until my mom came home from work and yelled at Patrick to move his damn sneakers from where she'd just tripped on them, when I could run back to my desk to scribble out my homework, blood still beading from my knuckles.

Like all superheroes, I managed to keep my flimsy disguise in place. Come *on*, a person might reasonably say, can *no one* recognize Superman's square jaw and steely gaze behind Clark Kent's glasses? You'd think my parents would notice the band-aid slapped across my knuckles, or the wincing way I reached to place a fork and paper towel beside each plate. When Dad lumbered to the table with pillow marks still creasing his face, you'd think he'd see the flash of fear in my eyes as he clamped my head in a Papa Bear squeeze and asked how my big brain did at school that day. You'd think he'd notice how fast I ducked away, before his fingers could graze the scabs on my scalp where my head had banged against the pavement. But I soon realized if I put my homework in the middle of the kitchen counter, the circled "98" on my math test would color their judgment about all that came after, the way Clark

Kent's timid suit masked the muscles bulging underneath.

If I was going to be a superhero, I needed someone to save. Ravi Shoopur was a likely candidate. The school's lone Indian boy, he spoke in a lilting accent and wore slab-like lenses that flashed in the frames of his wire-rimmed glasses. But for some reason Ravi was now afraid of me. When I shadowed him down the hall, he darted into the boy's lav and stayed there until the next bell rang. I set my sights on Ilene Fleisher, a Jewish girl with hair worse than mine. She wore political buttons to school that read, "Don't blame me, I voted for McGovern" and staged a one-girl protest in the lunchroom because they didn't offer vegetarian entrees. I walked beside her down the hallways with a heavy, protective tread, my head swiveling for any sign of bullying. But she must've been too weird for Peter Giannetti and his friends to bother with, because even when she tried to hand them flyers for her mother's anti-Reagan rally, they just curled their lips and walked away.

I stood showily in places I didn't belong. In the middle of the hallway so boys had to make an effort not to bump into me, or near the basketball hoop, where if I taunted long enough they'd let me play and then inevitably hurl a ball at my head. The smack and pounce of pain, the cold schoolyard air rushing to the hot, hurting place and my feet running to Billy Rodgers to throw my whole weight behind the first punch--it didn't matter that he pushed me down and tore my tights on the asphalt, or hit me so hard in the ribs I couldn't take an all-the-way breath for the rest of the day. It was enough to just bloody my knuckles against his teeth and punch my blunt-toed ugly shoe into his abdomen while that high pure singing feeling tore

out of me.

At the first punch a skittering excitement would blow across the recess yard. Girls let the Chinese jump rope fall from their legs and ran full tilt to form a circle around me and the boy as we rolled over and over, grappling and slapping and grunting. I would glimpse them over the boy's reddened, glowing ear, pumping their fists and shouting *Han-nah! Han-nah!* I understood these girls weren't really my friends. But they knew me now. They knew me as more than the bookish girl with immovable hair, even if they couldn't possibly know the Hannah O'Hare I really was, the one who still existed for me back in our old town, in the yellow house with the normal, single front door and the lilac bush on the side.

Sometimes, turning from the pencil sharpener or carrying my homework to the teacher's desk, I'd see the girls' eyes give a little flare of fear, with the white part showing all the way around the colored part. It gave me the courage to be nice, the way Clark Kent could put up with Perry White yelling at him for bumbling a scoop, when Clark would just give his mild smile and turn back to his typewriter.

With every smile and step to the side at the water fountain, I was pardoning them.

I also knew my parents hadn't moved to Syracuse to ruin my life, though that was my story and I was sticking to it. "You think Daddy likes working all night while we're here asleep?" my mother would ask, taking the clean socks from my hand and shoving them into my brother's dresser. "You think I wanted to leave Athenia for a place that uses the same cooking oil all week?" And it was true, in our old town she wasn't a mom who had to work as a waitress. She was a niece helping out her Uncle

Tony at the renowned Athenia Diner, where they took pride in their fried chicken and I got to have my ninth birthday with all my friends and every dessert from the revolving glass case lined up in front of us. But Syracuse was where my father's new job was--in *management*, as he liked to say, with the same audible italics reserved for *college education*, something my parents would now be able to save money toward, with the understanding that my brother might not get in.

The year we moved, the Syracuse town fathers launched a new civic booster campaign. *There's Snow Place Like Syracuse!* a red banner proclaimed to the dying downtown with its shuttered department stores and sidewalks gritty with rock salt. Around it, pennants of primary-colored triangles whipped in the gray, diagonal sleet. Feet plunged into icy puddles. Shovels dented against frozen curbs. Yet our neighbors bragged in their flat accents that this was *nothing*--last year they'd gotten three feet by Halloween! "The most snowfall of any U.S. city," my dad said with quiet pride, hoisting another hundred-pound bag of sand into the trunk of our Plymouth.

To wake up morning after morning in the dark, blowing cold, to discover that even when I finally broke down and wore my bulbously wrong rubber boots over my shoes, my feet would still freeze into numb pads before I got to school--the whole town seemed to be conspiring to beat me down and make me give up. The way the shopping cart at Price Chopper slid sideways through the slushy parking lot. The stale blast of the car heater and my dad's thumb split by cold so you could see the meaty red inside, turning and turning the ignition key. It was all I could do to keep the memory of my old life alive inside me.

Sometimes as a treat, Mom would let me take the bus to her new job so I could do my homework at the counter while she finished her shift. She'd bring me a heavy, seamed parfait glass filled with cold rice pudding and pull the wad of singles and fives from her apron to count. She seemed so commanding, kicking through the kitchen door in her sturdy nurse's shoes, bearing down on a table with plates of burgers piled up her arms. But after a while it made me mad the way the men would hold up their coffee cups for a refill, not even bothering to use words to ask her, as if not willing to stop their chewing for even the moment it would take to say something nice. At home, I watched her pull off her shoes and rub the ball of her foot through her thick, putty-colored pantyhose, saying, *oh, it feels good just to sit* and I wanted to fly down to the diner and punch the men off their counter stools one by one, for the way they sat with their big butts overflowing the red vinyl, doing that stupid scribbling motion to make my mom come running.

In our old town, snow before Thanksgiving was magical and extraordinary. In Syracuse, the snowbanks were already splashed with dirt and squiggled with bright yellow dog pee. Maribeth and I were walking home on the stretch of Salt Springs Road near the snowed-over soccer field where no one ever shoveled the sidewalk. There was only a thin path meandering along the edge of the field, made by other people's feet packing down the snow. Maribeth was hopping from one footprint to the other, chattering about last night's episode of *The Waltons*. I was carrying my painting of a Horn of Plenty that Mrs. Wilner had compared favorably to Cezanne, for the way I'd worked squarish yellow smudges onto the red apples until the brush tore through the cheap paper. I was holding it carefully to keep it from

creasing, when I saw Peter standing in the path up ahead. He had one arm raised like the Statue of Liberty, only instead of a torch he let his middle finger be the beacon for the world.

“Come on.” Maribeth tugged my parka. “Let’s cross.” She already had one foot up on the snowbank. Cars hissed by, splashing slush. But I could no more avoid Peter Giannetti than Superman could avoid Lex Luthor tempting him toward the den of hidden Kryptonite. I knew fighting would be different out here beside the big empty field with no bells to ring or teachers to suddenly step into view. But if I crossed the street now I would be walking back to being a scared little nobody. The path of footprints stretched between us, marching me to my destiny.

Ten feet away. Peter shrugged off his backpack and set his Starsky and Hutch lunchbox on the snow. A thrill of fear spiraled up from my belly at the sight of his cheeks, which had an adult swarthy in the weak afternoon light. It was rumored that he shaved.

Five feet. Peter ducked his chin and glared at me like the bad-guy boxer in Rocky III, the effect only slightly mitigated by his red plaid hunter’s cap with the sporty earflaps turned up.

Maribeth’s voice took on a maternal scolding quality. “Hannah! Right now! Come on!” Her stomping foot crunched the snow. I tried to hand her my cornucopia painting but she wouldn’t take it, so I opened my hand and let the wind have it instead. For a long, silent moment the three of us watched my overworked apples and perfunctory grapes skid away across the sculpted top of the snow.

“Get out of my way,” I said to Peter, my eyes at a level with his chest.

“Why don’t you make me?” he asked.

We both stood there. Later, in high school, I would recognize this odd unmoving dance as the helium moment before a first kiss, when you're both trying to figure out how to start, and wondering where your noses will go. I stared up into his brown eyes. "Go ahead, Pube Head," he told me. I put both hands on his chest and shoved.

His hands came up and I fell backwards, ingloriously, like a tree.

I learned two things that day. First, how awful a boy was when he was on top of you, how much his knee hurt and humiliated as it dug into your belly. Second, superpowers are a relative thing. You can feel them surging and singing inside you but still be unable to unpin your limbs from the boy's massive bulk while snow seeps down your neck and up your sleeves.

"Ho hum," he kept saying, pretending to tamp down a yawn with his hand.

I found myself jerking in moth-like, fluttering movements until the unthinkable happened. I began to cry.

"Oh shit," he said. "Cut that out."

"No, YOU cut it out!" Maribeth took this opportunity to say.

His knee left my belly. Cold air trickled in through my hot, congested nostrils.

"Come on. Stand up. You're not hurt bad."

Maribeth's mittened hand came down. I pulled myself to my feet.

"I'm going," Peter said. He inspected my face with a worried frown. "Don't you tell on me."

I punched him. It was a nice shot, clean from the shoulder, surging on a wave of pure despair.

He punched me back.

Fireworks of pain flowered down from my nose and fell in bright red drops on the snow. And then he was gone, running down the foot-beaten path, yelling “I told ya, stupid girl!”

In the comics, when a woman screams, Superman turns in mid-air, red cape roiling around him, and flies like a bullet toward her, one fist punched into the air ahead to make him fly faster. In our house, the last “ah” of my mother’s scream hung in the air for eons while I kept my face stiffly upright on the Strawberry Shortcake pillowcase she still thought I liked, trying not to smear the SunGlo Beige makeup I’d snuck from her makeup bag to cover the giant purpling bruise on my face. Footsteps pounded down the hall. My brother gawked in at me, hanging in from the doorframe with his plaid shirt riding up his bony wrists. My dad shoved past, took one look and seized Patrick by the shoulders. “WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO HER?!”

“How should I know?” Patrick said.

“Who did this to you?” my father asked.

I wanted to crawl onto my mom’s lap and bury my face in her polyester grease-smelling uniform while my father patted my back and made tuneless soothing sounds. But I was too far away from them now, too deep inside myself with all my secrets. Watching my father pace in his pajamas and my mother slump on the edge of my bed with her hands on her hairnet, I felt as Superman must feel when he pauses weightless in space, surrounded by blackness, gazing down at the blue little earth.

“I don’t know who it was,” I told them. “Just a...boy.”

“But why you?” my mother asked. “Why would anyone want to hurt YOU?”

“He wanted my cornucopia painting,” I said.

Then my parents started arguing about how they’d get me home safely from then on, with two jobs and only one car between them. It was one of those endless, ragged debates fueled by exhaustion where usually my brother and I would slip away but here we were, watching my father clench and unclench his fists and my mother slowly pull off her nurse’s shoes, trying to decide if her dad could drop her my mom at work in the morning so he could wake up early and pick me up in the afternoon, when it would only mean losing a few hours of sleep.

And then Patrick spoke up in his fluty-creaking changing voice. “I’ll get her,” he said. My parents stared at him, as if the lamp had spoken.

He leaned in close enough for me to smell the Juicy Fruit gum on his breath and the cigarette smoke underneath. “Wait for me inside the doors,” he said. “I’ll come get you.” And then he snapped his head back, so the tight curls in front shivered.

“Well...good,” my father said. “Thank you, son.”

My mother sighed, patting her pocket with the wad of bills inside. “It’s meatloaf tonight,” she said apologetically to us all.

Winter went on. I never told on Peter, and he never bothered me again, though sometimes when we passed each other in the hall I saw his eyes slide sideways like he might be about to say something. Years later, I found out he’d become a firefighter like his father, and a few years after that my mom sent a clipping of Peter carrying a little girl down a ladder, saving her from the State Street fire.

Every day for the rest of the winter, Patrick came to get me. We didn't talk. We didn't even walk next to each other. I'd wait inside the big double doors until I saw him stop near the steps in his flapping Army jacket and busted-out jeans. I'd come out and he would just turn around and start walking and I'd follow. Only once did he even acknowledge my existence. It was a blizzard, one of the rare times they closed the Syracuse schools early.

Snow boiled down from a colorless sky. My scarf froze. My nostrils burned. Yet still my brother kept up his odd, lunging pace, plunging his sneakered feet into the snow and forging on five steps ahead. But when we got to the wide sweep of the soccer field he slowed until he was just in front of me, sheltering me from the pushing wind. And on we walked past the field with its grass frozen under the snow, the two-wheel-drive cars going slowly past with chains on their tires and their wipers on, while in our house my father slept and downtown my mother raced between tables and the blizzard raged and the bright red and yellow pennants flapped hard in the wind blowing in from the lake, all of us just trying to make it to spring.