

Okay, I'm flying. I'm three years old and I can fly. Who knew?

But I'm always full of surprises and today's is that I'm flying. Not in an airplane, but like Superman, with my arms stretched out in front of me and the wind in my face. There's a lot of turbulence, but I'm not flying through the sky. I'm setting what must be the indoor air-speed record, flying down a long stairwell without touching the stairs. The turns are very tight, really scary, and as I approach each one, I sense that I'm flying too fast, and that I'm going to crash into the wall. I don't know how I'm doing it—what's propelling me, or holding me up, but my thoughts seem to play a role. Just as I think, "I need to slow down if I'm going to make this turn," I do, and I keep going.

Years later, when I was eight, and sensing that this was not just a dream but a memory, I would spend hours trying to reconnect with my super powers, which by that time had apparently gone into remission. I was especially interested in that thought-controlled steering system; it implied that I could make things happen just by thinking about them and that was particularly appealing to me.

So I made up concentration exercises that I would do in bed at night, hoping that the next day I'd be able to steer baseballs to my bat and turn Rebecca Lowenstern's face my way. I would stare and stare at the illuminated face of my Sony clock radio and try to stop the second hand from moving, or at least slow it down a little bit.

I really hated that clock. A clock radio had been the must-have gift for the pre-teen set at Glen Cove Middle School the previous year, but my parents were always way behind the curve with these things. We didn't have a color TV until long after NBC had stopped doing that peacock-spreading-its-wings business. One day I begged my friend Ben to come over after school because I knew Dad was finally going to bring home a toy I'd been asking for for weeks—a Billy Blastoff like Ben and all the other kids had. Ben's family had lived next door to us in Brooklyn, and they had moved to Glen Cove the same week we did, but the similarities pretty much ended there. I always felt like Ben was a hundred degrees cooler than me, which was borne out when we got to my house that day and what was waiting for me wasn't a Billy Blastoff, but a halfhearted knockoff called Tommy Takeoff. That was the moment when Ben dubbed my father The Man Who Won't. I said what do you mean? And he said whatever most people do, he won't; whatever they're for, he's against; and even as I was telling Benny to go to hell I knew he was right.

The only thing I was sure of when it came to my dad was that he was the center of my universe. After that it was all questions. I was eight years old, the eldest child in our family, and I wanted to get a bead

on Dad so that maybe I could get a bead on me, but whenever I tried I just felt confused. Is he a proud member of the National Rifle Association or a guy who leads anti-war marches? Absolutely. Is he a guy from Brooklyn who wears a torn old T-shirt to Thanksgiving dinner or a professor of economics who decorates his house with little blue Wedgwood plates commemorating the birthday of Queen Elizabeth? You betcha.

I caught my father in glimpses, heard him in fragments. He was a collection of fleeting pieces and parts, and sometimes it seemed like each part was opposed to the next. He loved being The Man Who Won't—the looks from other peaceniks when they saw his gun collection, or the cringing faces of the neighbors as they walked by our proudly unmowed, Addams Family crabgrass lawn.

So I was relentless with my demands for a clock radio, hoping that it might help elevate me to at least non-weirdo status with the other kids, or maybe even make me the kind of kid that nobody noticed, which I knew was probably too much to hope for, but I thought, why not dream big? And when I saw the word “SONY” on the top of the box through the Christmas wrapping that year, I felt like I had made it, like my dream of uneventful anonymity might be within reach. And then I opened the box, and I pulled out something that was, yes, technically a clock radio, but that lacked the one and only reason everyone wanted a clock radio in the first place, which was, of course, the digital clock. I didn't even know they made clock radios with old-fashioned clock faces on them. You'd have to go pretty far out of your way to find one, I thought, and I have to admit being very impressed with my father's resourcefulness. My mind-over-matter experiments began that night, and while I never succeeded in actually stopping time, I did learn that I could slow my heart rate pretty much at will. As I stared at that pitiful clock I would fall into a kind of trance, and eventually into fitful sleep, during which I would dream about running down flights of stairs.

I seemed to improve my skills with each dream, getting to the point where I could take two stairs at a time, and then three, and eventually I would basically be in a long, controlled free fall, keeping my hand on the banister and whipping myself around the turns without my feet touching a single step. I always managed to get away—whatever was chasing me never caught me—but it did literally scare the piss out of me. Any delusions I had about being a superhero were very well humbled when I woke up wet, to a sound like one of those self-destruct alarms in the movies. A pad of tinfoil under me was attached by wires to a big green box next to my bed that would howl with derision as soon as the first drop of pee hit the sheets. I guess the idea was to humiliate me into continence, but of course it just made things a whole lot worse.

I can't imagine who came up with the idea that kids who wet their beds are just not nervous enough, yet someone had, and I fantasized about smacking him to death with a rolled-up newspaper. But until that day came, I would have to deal with the mess I was in. I'd fallen asleep practicing to be a hero, and I woke up wondering what kind of explanation I could give to my mom that would make her believe that I wasn't an eight-year-old, bed-wetting baby. In fact, I was getting very good at the art of the explanation, spinning stories about mischievous gerbils and glasses of Tang, and I was starting to think that maybe I had found my ticket to the big time. I mean, even though the only super power I seemed to be

developing was the ability to bend truth in my bare hands, I thought it might be enough to build a decent superhero career on.

My newfound power was awe-inspiring. Lying was almost as thrilling as I imagined flying would be, and it felt very heroic. It didn't seem like "lying" to me so much as creating a new and improved truth, and I could do it whenever I wanted. It was like having a genie in a bottle—my wish was my command. I pretty much could make anything happen just by thinking it: "I think these kids might accept me a little bit more if I were royalty." Shazzam! "My great-grandfather was an English duke who was famous for giving away his fortune to the people of his, whaddayacallit, dukedom." And my powers only increased when I became an alleged adult. "I think this girl will be more likely to sleep with me if the scar on my leg was caused by a knife-wielding mugger instead of a beach umbrella." Shazzam! "I was stabbed! I am a brave and dangerous character! Thank you, me. Thank you very much."

The best thing about my power, though, was that I could lie to myself and make myself believe it. This came in handy at night, when there was no one else around to fool. During the day, I could fake my way through anything. I just kept moving so I wouldn't have to be alone with myself. Like the Sundance Kid. When Robert Redford said, "I'm better when I move," and then rolled on the ground and fired off six perfect shots, I knew exactly what he meant. As long as I was in motion I was okay, sometimes even impressive. But when I was stationary I was in trouble, and it was very hard to stay in bed all night. My parents had vicious fights on the other side of my bedroom wall, and sometimes I'd press my ear to it and try to figure out what the fights were about, or I'd bury my head in a pillow to drown them out. It wasn't until I discovered the malleability of truth that I learned to live with them. The noise on the other side of the wall became a prison riot, or miners trapped in a cave, or the Bolivian army waiting for Butch and Sundance.

One night, as I was lying in a state of suspended animation necessitated by the fact that I was Charlton Heston in a spaceship heading for, little did I know it, the Planet of the Apes, I detected a strange noise outside my frozen astronaut sleeping pod, and believing that something might be wrong with the ship, I allowed my ears to open a little bit more than they had been. I was right, something was wrong. The other astronauts had somehow broken out of their sleeping pods and had burst right into the middle of—holy shit—my room.

There they were, right next to my bed, screaming like hell at each other. My mother must have been pointing at me. She was saying, "Look what you've done, he's trembling!" I don't know if my father looked at me, because I couldn't see him. My eyes wouldn't open because I was in suspended animation.

There was nothing I could do about that. Everyone would have to wait for the duration of the journey, however long it took until we reached the planet that was actually Earth, even though we wouldn't recognize it. They would have to wait until we got there for me to open my eyes, and stop shaking.

Twenty-three years later I started dreaming about the stairs again for the first time since I was a kid. I asked Mom about the dream one day, over lunch in her apartment. I had recognized the stairway as the one in the building we lived in when I was three, so I wasn't surprised to learn that my dream was in fact a memory, and that my mother had been the motor of my flight down the steps, that she was the one thinking about speed and controlling it. I was surprised to learn that Mom was carrying my younger brother David under her other arm, which must have made her flight that much more difficult. I imagined what it must have felt like for her not to have a hand free to grab the banister, to have to slow down more than she wanted to in order to make the turns. I wondered if she considered dropping one of us to give the other one a better chance of making it. But I didn't ask her about any of those things. For some reason I was fixated on what kind of gun was involved. I realized as she began the story that one had been, and I wanted to know if it was a rifle or a handgun. Mom said, "He pointed a gun at me, then you, and I just snatched you and David up and started running." "Right. Right. Mom, what kind of gun was it, do you remember? I mean, was it—" "Oh it was one of those, those old ones. Those big, horrible old ones." "Not a pistol?" I said. "Oh no, no," she said, "no. Not a pistol."

My mom has played the piano all her life, and now she let her hands fall onto the table as if she were resolving a chord. She looked at me steadily, and I felt like saying, "Wow, it's great to meet you." I placed my hands on hers. I felt her fingers twitch, and I took a slow breath. Eleven years before this conversation, in 1980, my mother's friend Barbara had driven her to the emergency room, my mother's hands still being bruised from injuries my father had done to them during a long and horrible evening. Mom had escaped to Barbara's house, where Barbara put her in the car and called the police, and that's all I knew about that day. As I felt the pulse in my mother's hands, I felt my own heart racing, and new questions catching in my throat.