

DEATH OF A SUPERHERO



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FOR MY SONS



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DEATH OF A SUPERHERO



ACT ONE



Fade in... DONALD DELPE. Fourteen years old. A skinny kid, shoulders as meatless as coat-hangers. Odd-looking. No eyebrows, no hair. Face like a peeled potato. Walks paddle-footed down the streets of Watford into a stiff northerly umbrella-buster straight out of Siberia, a beanie pulled low on his head, music full-throttle via his earbuds wired to an iPod as he crosses the cloud-banked town. Anger is his default setting. Melancholy too. He looks at the ground most of the time. A sunflower in the rain.

His big problem? Sex is on his mind, as usual. Been this way for a couple of years now. Acid-tripping on testosterone, lonesome as hell, his every second thought X-rated. Were these mind movies ever to go out on general release, the film censors would have to cut them to ribbons for family audiences, bleeping and blanking and pixelating all the reality out them, until they became the 12A-rated sleeper which is all the world ever sees of Donald F. Delpe.

Flap, flap, flap go his size-elevens as he makes his way moodily across this town north of London, so familiar he can close his eyes at any moment and know just when to raise his step to avoid a misaligned slab of paving, or when to wheel left-right-left so as to

place himself at his favourite table at the local KFC, the red plastic booth with arse-moulded chairs facing the window and the huge billboard across the road filled all four seasons with a magnificent example of womanhood writ large: a lingerie model ten metres wide, a vixen (his favourite word), whose man-high breasts are hammocked in a monster brassiere, a sling to string between trees, inside which he could happily while away his long life (if a long life had been an option for him): her elongated body reclines on its side, her football fields of flesh stippled by goose bumps as she stares across the road at Donald F. Delpe with a sultry, love-ready expression that for him bespeaks an ardent longing.

Is he sick in the head? Does the fact that this super-sized poster girl gives him a semi make him disturbed? Not at all. He's fourteen. A fourteen-year-old virgin. That a billboard should give him a semi is one of nature's brightest wonders.

But today he blows right by his gargantuan girl. He barely shoots her a hi-ya glance, for today he's busy, as busy as the streets around him, this town he often thinks he defends and protects – a once-sedate backwater that now is crazy-eyed and unblinking in the amphetamine rush of an overnight film industry, as the locals work overtime to make the most of the financial spin-offs to have arisen from the global box-office successes of the *Wizard's Apprentice* films, a rolling phenomenon that puts this satellite town on the map and makes A-list stars of its hitherto unknown B-rate actors.

The most visible impact of these films is that whole neighbourhoods of Watford and Leavesden parish

have been turned into movie-studio back lots. Huge latex monsters menace the old Arrivals hall at the tiny aerodrome; posters of malefic ghouls with bloodshot eyes and fang-cluttered gobs leer out from the windows of shops selling toasters and gas barbecues; a dragon twenty metres across has its talons sunk into the roof of the local picture house as if, with a flap of horny wings, it will carry the whole place away to hell.

It's high summer, 2006: the summer when nearly everyone feels they have tentative links with Hollywood, that land of fantasias so far away across the roiling sea; the summer when nearly everybody fancies themselves in show business and has begun to think in frames per second, dream in Panavision, see the world in montage, as scenes either brilliantly or poorly directed, as a series of smash-cuts and slow-fades to black, of lives as hits or flops, of relationships as comedies with cliché endings, of the Past as prequel and the Future as a franchise whose film rights are unencumbered – making all life, all of it, behave in the glorious nowness of the present tense common to film scripts, so that even the rubbish man is insomniac waiting for a call from his agent, and all the local barbers and bars display photos of staff with their arms wrapped around a star. It is the first summer in memory when an ordinary, hard-working, God-fearing life looks like an awfully dim choice compared with the brilliant projections of white light through celluloid. Donald walks through this population of extras, stand-ins, shortlisted body doubles, under-understudies, near-auditionees, relatives twice removed of bit-part players, wannabes of all kinds so excruciatingly close to the Big Time. But

Don is happy just to keep his head down. Tracked by the sweep of a CCTV camera (for everyone is on film these days more or less), he is listening to his own jungle beat when, in the jargon of his beloved comic books, **DISASTER STRIKES!**

A child on foot. A speeding Toyota Corolla. Two incompatibles. Donald looks up from his shoes for the first time. His eyes narrow. Think laser vision, think telemetric lenses, think Clark Kent. From an impossible distance this funny kid foresees all that will unfold, and he starts to run, to run fast as a car, as the Corolla closes in on a child strayed into the road, a child too young to comprehend the peril she faces, having become detached from her father (who is babbling real-estate jargon on the kerb: “Well, Bruce, it all depends on whether it’s indexed, whether it’s pegged to the base rate...”), whilst the driver of the Corolla is also lost in a world of her own, thanks to the kids in the back just then fighting for control of the rear-seat entertainment system and turning an otherwise competent parent into the equivalent of a drunk in the throes of epilepsy, her eyes everywhere but on the child in her path. Sadly for everyone, Donald, our hero, even though he is running now, is surely too far away to be of help – there is no way on earth he can assist – and yet, with a reaction time that would allow you to survive *Grand Theft Auto* without recourse to a Bulletproof Vest and with a perfect “health” rating, he flips a skateboard from under the arm of a slack-jawed kid, kick-launches himself towards the emergency with extraordinary thrust, board-jumps the legs of a homeless man splayed crosswise on the footpath, even adds a competition-winning board-flip

combination of vertical and horizontal spins just *because he can*, then banks into the road with zero concern for himself and scoops up the tyke in one arm, lifting her above the height of the oncoming bumper just as the death-delivering chrome careens to a halt (**Screeeeeeee!**...) five and a half centimetres from his Adidas sweatpants.

Freeze frame. Hold for five seconds. Awesome. MEGA-CLOSE!

By the time the clouds of blue tyre smoke dissipate, Donald has niftily back-flicked the board to its owner and reunited the nipper with her dickwit father, and is now strolling on as if nothing of consequence has occurred. The fact that four more vehicles then career into the back of the stopped Corolla (in slo-mo: **KRUNCH, DOOSH, KRANCH, KA-BOOM!!!**), creating the most God-awful pile of metallic origami, is of small import. It doesn't register with Don. He has to be somewhere.

The crowd is left to wonder only who the hell that kid is.

What is important to Donald right now is getting to the appointment for which his parents said he must not be late. He is on the move again, and does not look back as his brand-new iPod earbuds pound out a song at atom-splitting volume. It's his current favourite:

I know you think I'm so uncouth
It's just the pornography of youth,
So don't be blamin' me, girl, cos it's the truth
It's just the P.O.R.N.O. of youth
Break it down.

Our hero reaches into his pocket to adjust the volume: upwards. The beat becomes life-threatening. Mind-altering. Lobotomizing. *Ooontz... Ooontz... Ooontz... Ooontz... Ooontz...* Then he stops. Is this the appointed place? An odd place to halt. He looks about him. Why is he standing midway across a railway track on a cross-tie, his feet astride a rail? What kind of appointment would this be?

The sound of a goods train grows in magnitude, shaking the general environs. But instead of hurrying to safety, Donald glances down at his threadbare Vans on the oily sleeper and sees that a lace has come undone and needs attention at once. The left one has escaped the nest of his triple knotting and demands that he bend down onto one knee in slow genuflection, even as a hurtling locomotive rounds the corner. Slowly Don reties the lace from scratch, taking his time, undoing first the snarl of what remains until he has two straight threads to deal with and, beginning with the crossover, pressing his index finger down on the new junction (the way a doctor monitors a pulsing veinlet), then making two bows of equal size in the lace-tying style favoured by kids everywhere, before making a granny of the final result. Geronimo. His left lace is restored: a nice bow. And only then does he stand up and, with a sigh, step off the tracks the second – the very second! – 10,000 tonnes of metal hurtle by at his back, missing him by millimetres, so close that the train guillotines Donald's shadow at the neck.

MEGA-CLOSE!

Without looking back, insulated against the scream of the train's whistle by his earbuds, he continues on his way with nothing of what has happened showing

in his general comportment. He notes only that he is now running a little late, and picks up speed. He jaywalks, takes short cuts, shuttles through traffic and people. He even turns into a blind alley off the High Street's café quarter and walks up to where it terminates in a solid brick wall four metres high. Where to from here? He looks at the wall, turns briefly to look over his shoulder, then sets his right trainer up on the brickwork, at ninety degrees to his body. Next, and with a concerted heave and swinging his hips up and forward, he stabs his left trainer beside the first! Now in general defiance of Newtonian physics, he is horizontal, standing there. He sure hopes no one is watching.

Walking up the wall, then, as he would negotiate a slightly slippery pavement – a little gingerly, making sure of each step – a mere six paces takes him to the top, whereupon he throws his weight forward again, expertly flipping vertical. *Voilà*. He is now standing on top of the wall, balanced, masterful, the late-morning sun on his face, his eyes closed for a second as he enjoys a moment's serenity before he opens them wide and looks down – looks down, down the sickening miles of the abysmal drop at his feet. For what should be a four-metre drop to the ground on the other side has become a vertiginous eighty-floor dive down the face of a skyscraper to a teeming city street not quite real, not entirely credible. What is going on here? What kind of wall is this, one side a low Watford abutment, the other the view down from an Empire State Building? Clearly, he is standing within a portal of some kind, a portal to a bustling megapopolis to which he has secret and unrestricted

access. In a capitulation of consciousness, he doesn't baulk or turn back, but instead adjusts his backpack, takes a deep breath and, in command of his destiny, jumps...

He jumps. Geronimo. From the banal vantage of the Watford alleyway he is just a kid jumping over a wall. Nothing suicidal in this at all. But... but... if you know what Donald knows, then... then...

Sometimes all is not as it seems – eyes do not bear infallible witness, mystery and fact play tag and take turns at being *It* – because a mere fifteen minutes later this same young man is spotted in another part of Watford, safe, unhurt, unharmed in...

Cut to...

...A hospital wing, the appointed place and right on time, walking into the building just as expected, just as instructed by his parents, entering on foot and not via the electronic revolving doors out front but via a discreet side door known only to regular visitors.

One Doctor Fred Sipetka is there to meet him. Donald reaches into the well of his pocket to find, Braille-like, the indented Stop button on the iPod. The music dies in his ears, and the doctor smiles and sees that it is now possible to talk to him.

DOCTOR: Hello, Donald. All set then?

Don nods, and Sipetka leads him to an elevator. Together they rise, rise, rise eight floors in a whoosh to the top. When they emerge they bear right and pass through a swing door with a faded two-word sign overhead. Donald doesn't glance up as he passes under it. His eyes are on his shoes. Anyway, he knows what it says. It says "Cancer Wing".

Interior. Vestibule. Day.

JIM DELPE: How do you feel, son?

DONALD: Like puking.

The Delpes would call themselves disobedient Christians. While they ought to come to church to hear about rectitude and transcendence and the evangelizing spirit, this is not what they seek any more. Their needs are much more human, urgent and grounded. They come here looking for comfort.

This four-strong family arrives late. The Sunday Mass is already in progress.

The cast (in order of appearance):

RENATA DELPE, Don's mother, thin-lipped (late forties), the careful type. Values: hard work, diligence, love. This is her default setting. Trusts in life insurance, crosses her sevens, heeds precautionary advice wherever she can find it, and is forever looking for wood to touch just so she can say, "Touch wood." She hopes by this to be spared the worst that life can deal out, but the news is coming in fast that she is not to be spared. She is, however, still youthful, with the wellspring of a woman who is well-loved. This is not simply a matter of good fortune. This has been planned for too, laid in like supplies. She insists on affection and does not permit her husband, Jim, to succumb to any dereliction of duty in this area – and because he likes it that way, for her to crack the whip, to chivvy him along, then her marriage is one thing she doesn't need to worry about. As for her kids, they're another matter.

JIM DELPE (early fifties), six three, thinning hair, thickening girth, softly spoken. With quiet industry he has hauled himself to a position of respect both

at home and at large. He is that rare thing: a selfless lawyer. Specializes in cases over Crown Land disputes but tacks on a little pro bono and Legal Aid work when he can. Jim S. Delpe, BCM, LLM (Bristol), is also available as coach for junior basketball. Used to play himself, could even jam it in his twenties, until his left knee gave out. Now, this quiet man is merely the most knowledgeable father in the stands when his boys play. When excited, he can show a different side – witness him, cupped hands around a shouting mouth: “Go to the hoop, go to the hoop, Donny!” – but it’s rare. He is a determined, stubborn, persevering force. If he were a boat, he’d be a bulky old triple-huller, reliable, lumbering, good for punching through floe ice in the Northwest Passage.

JEFF DELPE (eighteen), Don’s older brother. For most of his life an unremarkable kid, lately a mutant gene has kicked in, altering his course: this now defines him. Call it the Bullshit gene. He is suddenly incapable of honesty. Renouncing Truth in all its forms, he is interested only in inspiring incredulity. He has had sixty-five girlfriends, will be a multi-millionaire by the time he is thirty, and could run a sub-four-minute mile should he ever feel compelled. This one rogue gene makes him unbearable. His parents are not like this, and you have to go back to Renata’s father – a two-timer, kept a fancy woman on the side for twenty years – to find a progenitor, but perhaps genes can jump like chess knights. His parents have lately given up on correctional strategies, and now can only hope Jeff changes his name by deed poll until he calms down. If not, they can only wait for God to intercede.

In the vestibule, while his father waits to open the main doors, Don reaches back and unties his mask, a sterile surgical item worn on his doctor's advice to ward against cross-infection. Chemotherapy has done this to him. He is susceptible to everything. But he leaves the beanie on. He needs the beanie. The beanie stays. He's now ready, against his will, to go inside. He folds the cotton purdah and puts it in his pocket, then takes his first unfiltered intake of air in an hour.

JIM: Ready?

Donald nods. He's ready. The family enters the church proper.

Int. Church. Day.

How do priests find so much to talk about? This is Donald's thought bubble as he sits there on the hard, cold wooden seat listening to a celibate (or pseudo-celibate) man: a virgin listening to a virgin, the blind leading the blind. What certainties are there that can be so certainly dispatched on a Sunday morning to a packed and uncertain congregation other than the confirmation, uttered afresh since the dawn of faith and never losing its sheen for those with an ear for consolations, that God loves you?

This is the long form of what Donald thinks. The short form is: So what? These two words float above him, are circumscribed by a line as drawn by an artist's-quality fine-ball felt pen, while a trail of lesser-and-lesser-sized bubbles, all empty, extends back to the side of his head, the point of departure.

He listens glumly, completely unconsoled, and inspects the church designed in-the-round so that the