

INTRODUCTION

MARK SHAINBLUM

When Gabriel Morrissette and I launched our *Northguard* comics series in 1984, we were far from the first to try our hands at creating a genuinely Canadian superhero: Marvel Comics had recently debuted *Alpha Flight*, and Richard Comely had created the archetypal maple-leaf hero, *Captain Canuck*, back in 1975.

Going back even further, well before our time, scores of Canadian adventure heroes like *Johnny Canuck* and *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* flourished during World War II, when emergency economic measures restricted import of American comics. That said, by the 70s and 80s those comics were remembered by only a handful of scholars and hardcore collectors, and we knew them only in snippets and outtakes. We were influenced a lot by their existence, but virtually not at all by their content.

For their part, *Captain Canuck* and *Alpha Flight* were both great, innovative series that opened a lot of creative doors. Richard Comely and his brilliant collaborator George Freeman made great strides in illustration, colouring, and distribution, while John Byrne's *Alpha Flight* literally put Canada on the map in mainstream superhero comics, where it really hadn't existed before. However, I never felt that either series really confronted the essential contradiction at the heart of that innocuous phrase, "Canadian superhero." Some people considered it an out-and-out oxymoron like "military intelligence" or "open secret." Canada, after all, was the land of "surviving," not "winning," or so Margaret Atwood told us: "Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it *back*," she wrote in *Survival*, her seminal 1971 critique of Canadian literature. "Back from the awful experience—the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship—that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life."

Does that sound like good fodder for a typical superhero adventure? Not so much. Superheroes are all about winning: order overcoming chaos, justice triumphing over injustice, or, at the most primal level, good defeating evil.

In the 1980s, Canada wasn't very good at primal. Pop music excepted, our culture was all about shades of grey and weighty moral complexity. Pop culture was by definition almost entirely American, imported, and—to the cultural elite, anyhow—*other*. If you were a Canadian author interested in, say, mystery or science fiction, you were constantly being put on the spot to (a) justify why you were wasting your time when there were great novels left to be written about prairie farmers during the depression and (b) prove that Canadian mystery or science fiction actually existed in the first place.

Comic books and superheroes, needless to say, were even a step below either of those on the ladder of cultural propriety, with an even greater burden of disdain to overcome.

With *Northguard*, Gabriel and I came to the conclusion that if we wanted to succeed artistically we'd have to cross this cultural no-man's land instead of simply skirting it or pretending that it didn't exist. We advertised the series with the tagline "Canada does not believe in heroes," and we opened the first issue with another Atwood quote: "Canadian history defeats attempts to construct traditional society-saving or society-changing heroes." It'll never beat "With great power comes great responsibility," but it makes the point.

Frankly, though, at the time I was a little unclear on exactly what the point was. I vaguely thought that by acknowledging the contradiction I could inoculate myself against it, but it didn't work that way; Atwood was right, Canada *is* different. It's not that we're incapable of creating our own pop culture or working with archetypes like superheroes, but if we're true to who we are they won't be like American superheroes. Or British superheroes. Or Japanese superheroes. And we shouldn't expect them to be.

After all, superstar comics writer Alan Moore—of *Marvelman*, *V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen*, and *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* fame—turned the American superhero genre on its head in the 1980s by filtering it through his uniquely British sensibilities. I often say (tongue only partially in cheek) that I was the first North American comics writer to rip off his style, while all those other johnnies-come-lately waited till after his run on *Swamp Thing* or even *Watchmen*. (Hey, if you're going to steal, steal from the best!) A mature writer hopefully outgrows his superficial stylistic influences, but I think I learned something far deeper and more intrinsic from Moore: He didn't sacrifice who he was in order to write some of the greatest superhero stories ever told. On the contrary, Moore took what was perceived to be a quintessentially American idiom and made it into something entirely new.

And that's what *Masked Mosaic* is all about. In the old days, an anthology of prose Canadian superhero stories would have been almost unimaginable. Serious writers would have disdained it, and even serious science fiction and fantasy writers might have struggled with the premise. Thankfully, today, we've got Claude Lalumière and Camille Alexa. If you don't know Claude's previous work, he is, quite simply, one of the best authors and editors Canada has produced in the last twenty years, in any genre. In particular, he's rewritten the book on what Canadian science fiction and fantasy should look like. I don't know Camille as well, but it's clear from her published work that she knows speculative fiction backward and forward, and also has a keen editorial eye. Together, they've worked a rare kind of magic in *Masked Mosaic*.

Claude and Camille have recruited an awesome cross-section of Canada's speculative-fiction talent to write stories about people with superhuman powers and (in some cases) capes and tights. A decade or two ago, a book like this would have been a curiosity, a novelty item full of pastiche, broad parody, or exercises in candy-store-on-the-corner-where-I-bought-my-comics nostalgia. I doubt anybody would have had the guts to play it straight, to work within the genre to tell meaningful Canadian stories that stand on their own merits.

You can have meaning. It can be Canadian. It can feature superheroes. Go figure.

Mark Shainblum was born and raised in Montreal, where he and illustrator Gabriel Morrissette co-created *Northguard* and the bestselling political parody *Angloman*, which

later appeared as a weekly strip in *The Montreal Gazette*. Mark also collaborated on the *Captain Canuck* daily newspaper strip, *The New Original Captain Canuck*, and *Canadiana: The New Spirit of Canada*, a webcomic featuring the first Canadian flag superheroine with her own series. He recently moved to Ottawa with his wife and daughter. For more about Mark, go to www.northguard.com/mbs.



NOCTURNE

E.L. CHEN

My name is Doug, and I haven't been sleeping well lately.

When I do sleep, I dream of strange panoramas: clouds of sooty fluff, bird's-eye views of neighbourhoods as intricate as a computer motherboard, and a flinty-eyed man in grey who can fly.

I dream he saves the city a hundred times over. I dream that he's happy.

I think I'm depressed. I have all the symptoms: not eating, not sleeping, no motivation, no joy. I've been contemplating suicide. I mean, we all have to die sometime, don't we? This way you don't have to worry about retirement, or what your girlfriend is really doing when she says she has to work late again with Tyler, the one guy she didn't introduce you to at her office Christmas party.

I wonder—if I jumped off my apartment balcony, would the flying man in grey save me?



“So, Doug—where do you see yourself in five years?”

I hate that question. It's so irrelevant. Five years ago I was starting university and thought my degree was a ticket to a career, not a season's pass to a cavalcade of interviews for unpaid internships, between shifts at Starbucks.

I flash a smile at Dylan Gomi, the Motherf*cking CEO. That's what it says on his fucking business card. *Dylan Gomi, Motherf*cking CEO*. I suspect it's the alter ego for his real identity, *Dylan Gomi, First-Degree Asshole*, the way Doug Wolochuk, Eager University Grad, is the alter ego of Doug Wolochuk, Perpetual Barista.

“Well,” I say, “I'm really impressed with the work your startup's done. In five years I see myself as your head of Marketing.”

Dylan throws his head back and guffaws. I can see the fillings in his back teeth. “Seriously, dude?” he says. “Seriously? You think five years straight outta school at one company qualifies you to be the head of a marketing department?”

“Yes,” I say. *Smile. Be assertive. Be confident. Be Doug Wolochuk, Eager University Grad*. “With my passion and enthusiasm, it's possible.”

Dylan taps his finger on my resumé on the table. It's only one page, single-sided. I wonder if he's actually read it. It wouldn't take him very long.

“Christ. You fucking kids,” he says, although he can't be more than ten years older than me. “Your moms were wrong. Passion is worth shit in the real world. *Trying hard* doesn't win you a prize like it did in kindergarten.”

I want to punch him. But Doug Wolochuk, Eager University Grad, doesn't punch people, and I may not have won the prize for *Trying Hard* in kindergarten but I do have one for *Getting Along with Others*.

Dylan suddenly sits up straighter and frowns. "You look familiar," he says.

I shake my head. "I don't think we've ever—"

He snaps his fingers. "You live in my building. The Majestic. The new condo development on Wellington."

He would know if I lived there if he had actually read my resumé. My address is printed at the top. I say, "Um, yeah. I do live there."

He raises an eyebrow, and I know he knows there's no way someone like me can afford a condo at the Majestic. "I'm renting," I add, lamely.

He smirks. "From your parents?"

"No." *From my girlfriend's parents.*

"Hey, let me ask you something," Dylan says, pulling his phone out of his pocket. "You ever the see the flying man in grey?"

My mouth goes dry. "Excuse me?"

"The flying man in grey. You ever see him around our building?" He swipes the screen on his phone until he finds the right photo. "This guy. I got up at, like, 3 a.m. last night to take a piss, and this guy streaks past my living room window. Twenty stories up. Managed to get a pic the second time he came around."

He shows me the photo on his phone. A grey blur in the shape of a man doing front crawl floats in the night sky.

I remember how the wind felt in his face in my dream last night. I remember his smile. A genuine, joyful smile, not like the one I'm wearing now.

"No," I lie. "I've never seen him before."

"What do you make of it? Some kind of wire? A marketing stunt?"

"Yeah," I say absent-mindedly. It was cold, I remember. Colder than he thought it would be, twenty floors up.

Dylan yanks the phone out from under my nose. I hadn't realized I had been staring. "That's all you have to say?" he says, and I remember that I'm interviewing for a marketing position. I should've offered some insight.

"Sorry, Doug," he says. "We're wasting our time here. I'll see you around."

His mobile chirrups on the desk. He snatches it up and barks, "I told you not to call me at work, Robin. This better be important."

He stands and offers me his hand, but his attention is on the call. The flying man in grey would have taken that hand and judo flipped Dylan Gomi, Motherf*cking CEO, onto the ground. Instead, I shake his hand, smile another Eager University Grad smile, and leave.



The man in grey flies above the city. He doesn't really need to stretch out his arms, but he likes doing it. It makes him feel like he's slicing through the air like an arrow, even though he's moving at a leisurely pace in order to survey the streets below.

He crosses off Toronto's neighbourhoods in his head as he circles the city. Chinatown. Koreatown. Greektown. Cabbagetown. Little India. Little Italy. The Annex.

The Junction. The Beach (or Beaches, whichever you prefer). The Village. Liberty Village. Bloor West Village. Roncey. Leslieville. Parkdale. So many neighbourhoods, more than he can name, and so many opportunities for trouble on a mild spring night.

He finds it first in St. Jamestown. Voices carry from a playground tucked within a cluster of highrise apartment buildings. Someone shouting about wanting someone's phone in exchange for not kicking the shit out of him. He peers down with his razor-sharp vision, sharper than an HD camera. Three young men are using a fourth as a punching bag. It's a nice night, so they aren't alone. But those lingering outside on benches and motorized wheelchairs look away. They don't want to get involved.

The man in grey plummets to the ground like a shooting star, feet first, landing right in front of the muggers. "Holy shit!" one of them says. "Where the fuck did he come from?"

The others aren't so lucky. They don't get the chance to say anything. *Biff! Bam! Pow!* and they go flying through the monkey bars, collapsing like rag dolls around the swings.

The man in grey picks the phone off the ground and dusts off the sand. The glass screen is still glossy and intact, the brushed aluminum still unscratched. No wonder the muggers wanted it. "I believe this is yours," he says.

The phone's owner has sank to his knees. His lip and nose are bloody. He can't be more than fifteen. "Thankth," the kid rasps around the blood in his mouth.

The man in grey nods, raises one fist in the air, and leaps up to the sky from which he came. But not before the kid raises his phone and flicks on the camera.



I wake up to muffled shouting. I can never tell if it's in the unit above us or next door, or else I'd call the police. Chelsea says to ignore it, it's none of our business. I guess she's right.

I roll over, reaching for her—and my arm flails in nothingness. I've fallen asleep on the balcony again, on Chelsea's parents' wicker chaise longue, my old camp sleeping bag tucked damply around me. There's a soft thump from our fighting neighbours. A body has been thrown across a room. I know what that sounds like now, thanks to my dream of the man in grey.

I swing my legs over the side and trudge to the master bedroom, still cocooned in the sleeping bag. The shower is running; Chelsea's side of the bed is only slightly rumped, as if she got in but changed her mind.

The shower turns off, and Chelsea emerges from the bathroom in her robe, a towel wrapped around her blond hair. "What time is it?" I say, yawning.

"Seven-thirty," she says. "I gotta get to the office."

"So early? When did you get in?"

"Late," she says. "Press release for a big client has to go out this morning. You were sleeping on the balcony again."

I frown. "I don't remember going out there."

She shakes her head. "You never do. I tried to wake you, but you were tossing and turning and muttering in your sleep. I swear, one of these days I'm going to take a video of you so you can see how weird it is. How was your interview?"

I sink onto the bed and watch her get dressed. “Okay,” I lie.

“Do you think you’ll get the job?”

“Maybe,” I lie.

“That’s good. You look like crap, babe. You really should think about going to a sleep disorder clinic.”

“Yeah,” I say, rubbing my eyes. My hand comes away sandy.

She pouts in the mirror above the dresser and applies her lipstick. She never wore makeup when we were in school. “Don’t forget we’re going out tonight with Nicole.”

“Is it Friday already?” I yawn again.

“Yes,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I’ll text you where we’re meeting.”

I shrug off the sleeping bag and find that I’m wearing my grey hooded sweatshirt and jeans. The hoodie smells like clean sweat and ozone, as if I’d spent the whole night running a marathon in it.

“I’ll see you later, babe.” She gives me a quick kiss, and then wrinkles her nose and gestures at my clothes. “You really should do some laundry,” she says, and then she’s gone.



After working the evening shift I end up at some dive on Queen West or West Queen West or however far west the nigh-trendy stretch has shifted. We’re so far west on Queen West we’re practically in Vancouver. The bar’s name consists of two randomly paired words that have nothing to do with the bar itself, like Pineapple Stalin, as if it’s an indie band.

We’re apparently here because some Toronto blog extolled the virtues of their organic beer and artisanal poutine. Nicole has brought her boyfriend Brandon, whom I’ve never liked. He wears hats too much, and the frames of his glasses are so dark and thick they suck in the light like a black hole. Knowing Brandon, they were probably designed in Japan and assembled by fair trade African orphans in an organic carbon-neutral facility. I’ve always thought that men shouldn’t like accessories so much, but this past year has taught me that everything I knew while in school is wrong.

Nicole, I don’t mind so much. She’s a brunette version of Chelsea, also long-haired and banged and fond of thrifted men’s shirts and patterned tights like she’s an extra in a John Hughes movie.

“Did you guys see the Grey Hoodie video?” Brandon says when a table frees up in the back. Tonight he’s wearing a straw fedora with a black ribbon, black as his glasses.

Chelsea and Nicole nod. “It was all over the office,” Chelsea says. “How do you think he did it?”

“Did what?” I ask, putting on my guileless Doug Wolochuk, Nice Boyfriend, face. It’s for Chelsea’s sake; I know she wants me to get along with her new Toronto friends. “And who’s he?”

“You didn’t see it?” Nicole said.

“Oh, of course not. He was at work,” Chelsea says.

“No computers behind the counter at Starbucks,” I say, with a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes.

“You didn’t even watch it on your phone?” Brandon asks. “On your lunch break?”

“I was eating lunch,” I say.

The irony is lost on him. Which is ironic, because I thought hipsters were all about irony. “So this guy comes out of nowhere,” he says, “saves a kid from an ass-kicking, and then flies away. The kid posted a video online. Dude actually jumps in the air and flies away. Here.”

Brandon pulls out his phone, taps it a few times, and then passes it over to me. I set down my beer and take it. Chelsea leans over my shoulder. “I’ve seen it a million times,” she says, “and it still blows my mind. How does he do it?”

“He’s a superhero,” says Nicole. “He’s an honest-to-God, motherfucking superhero.”

“Do you think he’s from another planet?” asks Chelsea. “I mean, he can fly.”

“He could just have some high-tech gear,” says Nicole.

“No way. He’s definitely from another planet,” Brandon says. “No-one from Toronto would ever step in to help a stranger.” Brandon grew up in Montreal, if I recall correctly. “He probably dances at concerts, too,” he adds. Nicole punches him in the shoulder.

Chelsea says something else, but I don’t hear her. The video loads up, and there’s the man in grey from my dreams, rocketing from the ground as if launched upward by invisible wires. There are no wires, though. I know that the flying man in grey doesn’t need them.

“Why do they call him the Grey Hoodie?” I ask. They’re arguing now about which Canadian city the superhero *could* possibly be from, St. John’s, Newfoundland, being the top contender.

“Because he’s wearing one. Duh,” Chelsea says, and I remember the sweatshirt I’d woken up in that morning.

“And other reports of a vigilante in a grey hoodie came out of the woodwork after this video went viral,” Nicole says. “Seems he was pretty busy last night.”

I blink; and I remember other faces, other neighbourhoods besides St. Jamestown. That cabbie in the Financial District, and those girls in Kensington Market. And there were more, but it’s all a dreamlike blur of cloud-shaped shadows and flying fists and the wind striking the man in grey’s face.

“It’s a genius costume,” Brandon says. “None of that cape and tights shit. Sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers—dude can just land on the ground and look like everyone else. No need to find a phone booth to change in.”

“Anyone see his face?” I ask.

Nicole shakes his head. “Nope. Had that hood over his head the whole time.”

“I bet he’s white,” Brandon says.

Chelsea shoots him a dirty look. “Seriously? How can you tell?”

“Because, if he were black, someone would’ve shot him.”

Nicole snorts. “In Toronto?”

“Okay, well—no-one would have stopped their cab to pick him up late at night,” he says.

Chelsea laughs. “Does it look like he needs a cab?”

“Speaking of late nights,” I say, passing the phone back to Brandon, “were you also doing work for that big client last night, Nicole?”

Nicole’s brow furrows. Chelsea says, quickly, “She’s staffed to a different project.”

“Yeah,” Nicole says, smiling. “I don’t have to work crazy hours like Chels does, thank God.”

My answering smile is just as fake. Doug Wolochuk, Nice Boyfriend, would never suspect his longtime girlfriend to be cheating on him. “Lucky,” I say, and then a massive yawn overtakes my face. Chelsea frowns. “Sorry, I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Doug *never* sleeps well,” Chelsea says. “Always tossing and turning, and then he gets up and ends up falling asleep somewhere else, like the sofa or out on the balcony.”

“Too much noise, I guess,” I say. “I’m not used to the city. I should go.” I yawn again, gulp down the rest of my beer, and set down the bottle.

“Really?” Nicole gives me a puppy-dog face. Brandon makes some kind of faux-protest sound. Chelsea’s mouth thins.

“I have to work tomorrow morning,” I say.

“He’s no fun anymore,” Chelsea says. “When he’s not working, he’s sleeping. Because he doesn’t sleep well. It’s a vicious cycle.”

I stand up. Chelsea proffers her cheek. I dutifully kiss it.

“See you back home, babe,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say. *Eventually.*



The Grey Hoodie plans to save Toronto, one night at a time.

He saves cyclists and pedestrians from reckless drivers. He saves reckless drivers from irate cyclists and pedestrians. He swoops down to carry stalled streetcars out of the way. He hands out bottled water and Tim Hortons gift cards to the homeless.

On Friday and Saturday nights, he helps people find their housekeys when they stumble home at four in the morning. He stops women from going home with unsuitable men, and men from going home with unsuitable women. He breaks up bar fights. When someone pulls out a gun in the middle of the Entertainment District, he’s there to melt it with his heat-ray vision.

When the guy behind you at the ATM peers over your shoulder to get your PIN, the Grey Hoodie is there.

When you stagger out of the Dance Cave and none of your friends have followed you out to hold your hair back when you puke on the sidewalk, the Grey Hoodie is there.

When you’re walking your dog on Church Street and a group of drunken frat boys follow you around and call you a dyke, the Grey Hoodie is there.

The Grey Hoodie wants to save the city. The Grey Hoodie wants to save *you*.



The neighbours are fighting again. I leave the sleeping bag on the chaise longue and plod into the bedroom, trying to listen to the ruckus over the sound of Chelsea’s hair dryer. Mostly shouting this time; less bodily contact.

Steam puffs out of the bathroom as the door swings open. “Gross, you fell asleep in your hoodie again,” Chelsea says. “You really should wash it. It smells. I’m almost glad you sleep outside. Have you taken up jogging again?”

“Um, yeah,” I lie.

“That’s good; the exercise will probably help you sleep better. Oh! I have something to tell you.” She perches on the foot of the bed. “So Nicole and I went back to Mango