

Cartoon Heroes

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The day Anson and his family moved into their house on the corner lot of Hearst and Armstrong was not a particularly remarkable one, especially not in the eyes of a seven year old boy who wanted nothing more than to be back at home playing baseball with his friends. When his parents told Anson that they were moving away, "because Daddy's got a new job," he had whined and cried, threatened to run away and then went through with it, making it all the way to the far side fence of their back yard before throwing himself onto the ground, and burying his burning, teary face into the cradle of his folded arms.

So as the Archers pulled up to their new home, turning into the first of a long row of paved driveways and parking the car at the top, Anson didn't notice much of anything. He didn't notice that the trip from their old house to the new one was only a little over a half hour, though he would realize this later. He didn't notice the plain, tan-colored siding on the house, so different from the beautiful stone exterior his parents had fallen in love with on their first home. He didn't notice the basketball hoop already attached just above the garage, the net swinging invitingly, caught in the chilly autumn breeze. More importantly, Anson didn't notice the largish maple tree that stood on the border between the Archer's property and their neighbors', nor did he notice the girl sprawled underneath that tree. But she noticed him.

She had her legs stretched out straight in front of her, one crossed over the other at the ankle. Her back was resting against the rough bark of the maple tree and as the breeze gave her a

chill in the already cool shade, she shivered. She brought the comic she was reading closer to her face, leaning in to examine a panel she had found particularly interesting.

The sound of the SUV tore the girl's attention away from the picture she was studying in time to see a boy around her age jump out of the back seat, backpack already hooked around one shoulder, and stomp right up to the front door, sending an angry glance after his parents.

As Anson stood on the porch, determinedly not noticing just as much as he could, the girl under the maple tree closed her comic, boosted herself up with her right hand, and made her way across the Archers' new lawn, stopping a few feet away from the sullen looking boy. It took Anson a moment to notice her, but when he did, he gazed at her with the same look of disdain he seemed to have for everything else so far. The girl caught Anson's eye for a moment, and a flicker of what might have been a smile crossed her face, but almost at once the boy jerked his head away, turning himself just enough so the girl was out of his sight.

The girl glanced over her shoulder back toward her house. Her mother was busy in the flower beds, facing away from the Archer's property and entirely focused on her rosebushes.

Taking her chance, the girl turned back to Anson and tried again to get the boy's attention. "Hey." When he didn't respond, she poked him sharply in the arm with an index finger.

"Ow!" Anson snapped his head around to shoot a glare at the annoying girl that apparently lived next door. When his gaze fell upon her, Anson noticed how strange a sight she made. The girl was wearing a broad smile, one tooth missing from the bottom row of teeth. Her blondish hair was in a sort of crooked ponytail hanging messily from the side of her head. She wore mismatching earrings; one was a bright green frog and the other, an ice cream cone.

Strangest of all to Anson, though, was probably that she had her hand extended out in front of her, waiting.

"I'm Jessie," the girl said. "Who're you?"

Anson's eyes were still fixed on Jessie's hand.

"You're supposed to shake it with yours," Jessie said, looking from Anson's eyes to her own still extended hand. "It's how you say hello."

Anson sighed heavily then, slumping against the siding of the house. "Go away. I don't want to talk."

Jessie let her hand fall to her side and her smile shrink away. "You know, you should be nicer to me. 'Cause I'm pretty sure I could make your brains explode with my mind. If I wanted. I've been practicing, you know," Jessie said seriously. "Just like the X-Men." She held up her comic to show him.

Anson rolled his eyes. "I knew I'd hate it here," he said, more to himself than to the girl.

"Anson," a voice called from the SUV. "Anson, could you come back here please? Help us bring in some of your things?"

Anson stood there, glaring at Jessie for another second or two before reluctantly heading back toward where his parents were unloading the car.

"Talk to you sometime soon," Jessie said to Anson's back, "when you're not so mean, maybe."

Anson spun around, mouth open and ready to retort, but Jessie was already sprinting across the yard.

It was three weeks since the Archers had moved into the house on the corner lot. Anson and Jessie had gotten back from school an hour or so before. Jessie had watched Anson rush up his driveway, not looking away until he reached his front door, quickly opening it and slamming it closed behind him. Since the day the Archers arrived, Anson had been avoiding Jessie, so she made her way over to the maple tree by herself, waving to her mother who was watching for her through the front window of their house, before dropping down onto the grass and stretching her legs out in front of her. After unzipping her backpack, she pulled out the issue of *Spiderman* she was currently reading, then leaned back against the tree trunk and found the page where she had left off.

When Jessie heard the front door slam shut a second time it was enough to make her glance over. "What's the matter?" Jessie asked, calling over to Anson from under the maple tree. Jessie waited for him to answer, but he was mean-faced and silent. She was about to turn back to her comic when he answered, so she turned toward him, listening.

"It's none of your business," Anson called back finally.

Jessie scowled and turned back to her comic book. A few minutes later she heard Anson's voice again, closer this time. "I wish I never came here."

Jessie sighed heavily. "Okay..." She was still looking down at the comic in her lap but felt Anson flop down onto the grass beside her. She kept staring at the pictures in her lap and waited.

"I miss my friends," Anson said.

Jessie still didn't move her head, but peeked at him from the corner of her eye, messy blonde waves hiding her gaze from the boy next to her.

"They don't want to be friends anymore," Anson whispered. "Mom and Dad told me they're not allowed."

Jessie stayed silent; she didn't know what to say. For a moment she looked as if she was going to say something, ask Anson why his old friends weren't allowed, maybe, but she couldn't find the words. She looked down once again and her eyes fixed on the "WHAM!," graphic bubbled in giant yellow letters to illustrate the blow Spiderman had just taken from the Green Goblin.

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They annoyed each other more than anything else. The Archers had been living in the house on the corner lot for five years now and yet it seemed that Anson and Jessie got along best and, indeed, enjoyed themselves the most, when trying their hardest to frustrate the other.

"It's awesome, isn't it?" Jessie said hanging upside down from a low branch on the maple. Anson was sitting underneath her, back pressed against the trunk of the tree, and Jessie watched him turn to the next page of her newest graphic novel, *Watchmen*.

"I guess," he said impassively. "Don't really get it though. The heroes. They aren't saving anyone."

"Duh, genius," Jessie said. "That's the point." She grasped the branch she was hanging on with both hands, and allowed her legs to swing forward and away from the branch, doing a back flip and landing on her feet.

"How'd you get this anyway?" Anson asked, examining several panels where Nite Owl and the Silk Spectre were having sex. "Don't tell me your Mom bought this for you?" he said,

indicating the pictures. "I mean, the blue guy walks around with his dick out for the whole thing."

"Dr. Manhattan," Jessie corrected, sitting down Indian style facing Anson. "And you don't get it. It's *social commentary*."

"She hasn't seen what's in here, has she?" he said, grinning.

"She wouldn't care if she had. I'm *mature* for my age. She said so herself."

"Whatever." Anson tossed *Watchmen* into Jessie's lap and collapsed further against the maple. They sat there for several minutes, silent in each other's company. Anson's eyes were focused on the ground in between them. He combed his fingers through the grass on either side of him, grasping clumps of it in his fists and tearing them out of the ground.

Jessie had begun to page through the graphic novel, but looked up then. "Really? You think so? I had no idea you didn't like it here. In all the time I've known you I don't think you ever gave me that impression before." Jessie put her finger to her chin in mock thought. "Oh. Oh wait, There might have been that one time, you know, that time when you tell me every day how much you don't like it here?"

"Shut up. God, I don't even know why I bother talking to you."

"It's 'cause I'm the only one that can stand you. You're so mean no one else wants to be around you."

"Like I said, this place sucks."

A half an hour later, when Jessie's mom called her in for dinner, she asked Anson to come along. When he tried to say no, Jessie dragged him in with her anyway.

Since the Archers' move, Anson had kept to himself for the most part at school. He had made a few close friends that he could count on no matter what mood he was in, but Anson was well aware he would never be one of *those* kids. The ones who, for some inexplicable reason were able to fit in with anyone they talk to in any situation. Not the "popular" kids. Anson always thought it was kind of ironic, because the kids in the "popular" crowd were generally the least-liked kids in the school. No, he meant the kids that were well liked and friendly. Social. Jessie. Jessie was one of those kids. And even though the pair of them had grown to become close friends, he couldn't help but hate her a little bit for how at ease she always seemed to be no matter where she was or who she was with.

She had tried to include him at first, dragging him around wherever she went, but it was very obvious Anson was uncomfortable being in the center of the crowd, somewhere Jessie, albeit unintentionally, usually ended up.

"What's the matter," Jessie asked, pulling Anson off to the side at the edge of the school cafeteria during lunch one day. "You seem grumpy...er," she said, tilting her head to the side and trying to catch Anson's eye, lop-sided smile stretching across her face. "You feeling okay? Something happen in class this morning?"

"Nothing's the matter," Anson said. "I'm fine."

"Then what..."

"I guess I'm just not in the mood to pretend that the worst thing I have to worry about is a bad grade right now, Jess." Anson turned around and walked out the cafeteria door, leaving Jessie wearing a small frown of confusion that didn't suit her face.

When Jessie found him fifteen minutes later Anson was sitting in the hallway against a row of lockers with two other boys she recognized from seventh period gym class. They were

laughing about something and as Jessie slowly moved further down the hall toward the group of boys Anson finally noticed her, the other two turning their heads to follow his line of sight.

"Hey Archer, it's your girlfriend," one of the boys said loudly, nudging Anson on the shoulder and snickering obnoxiously.

"Shut up, Derek," Anson said without looking over at the boy. "You're just pissed because you can't even get a girl to talk to you." Anson and the third boy began to chuckle again at this, while Derek mock scowled. "Hold on a sec, guys," Anson said, pushing himself up off the scuffed tile floor and brushing the back of his pants off with his hands. "I'll be back." Anson motioned to Jessie to move down the hall a bit and she followed him, the other two boys' laughter and whistling chasing them through the corridor. Anson stopped as the sounds of his friends' catcalls began to die down and turned to Jessie. "So?" he said, eyebrows raised in inquiry.

Now that she was standing here, Jessie wasn't sure what she wanted to say. "Well...it's just that when you left lunch a few minutes ago you seemed...mad. And I came to see if you were alright and. Yeah. So apparently you are."

"Yeah," Anson said, "I am."

They stood there, Anson staring at the tiled floor, Jessie studying the skinny blue lockers lining the walls, each waiting for the other to speak.

"Well, your friends. They probably...," Jessie motioned back down the hall in the direction they had come from.

"Yeah," Anson answered. "I should...get back, I guess. See you after school though?" he asked.

"Course," Jessie said, smiling a little.

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Anson cocked his head to the side, studying the “new” car that Jessie had just pulled up to the curb with. He couldn’t decide what color it was supposed to be; it was difficult to tell for all the rust. “How the hell did this piece of shit manage to pass inspection?”

“I know a guy,” Jessie said, smiling widely and smoothing her hands around the steering wheel. “Get in.”

Anson opened the passenger side door and slid into the seat, the door’s hinges creaking wearily as he shut it behind him. “Christ, you can see the road through a hole in the floor,” Anson said, looking over at the driver’s side.

“Listen. For seven hundred bucks this is as good as it gets. ‘Sides, I already have a way to fix it.” Jessie reached around to the back seat, pulling an aluminum “FOR SALE” sign to the front. “Asked if I could have this, too.” She slid it down onto the floor beneath her, shifting it around with her feet until it covered the hold completely. “Perfect,” she said. “Ready to go?”

“This thing is going to fall apart around us,” Anson said resignedly.

“Probably. You coming?”

“Yeah.”

Jessie parked the car, and as she turned the key the engine coughed and rattled before falling silent. She took the key out of the ignition and reached up to pat the dashboard gently before opening her door and stepping out onto the curb. “Come on,” she said, leaving Anson to catch up.

The bell above the door jingled cheerily when he entered, and he quickly scanned the store, spotting Jessie with her nose already buried in a comic book. Anson dragged his feet against the worn grey carpet, shuffling up to the front of the store. He slumped down then, forearms resting on the front counter, his head hanging a little between his shoulders.

“Hey Anson. How’s it going.”

Anson looked up, flashing a brief almost-smile to the man behind the counter. “Hey, what’s up, Eddie.”

“Not much.” Eddie looked over Anson’s shoulder, his eyes flicking briefly to Jessie and back. “She’s so predictable,” he laughed.

Anson didn’t say anything. He stared instead through the glass countertop, down into the display case below where Eddie kept the collectible comics.

“You okay there, Archie?” Eddie asked quietly.

“Yeah. ’Course I am. You know how it is. Just bored. No offense.” Anson glanced up and Eddie smiled a little. “Christ, we’ll probably be here for hours. When I told her that they made a TV show out of that story, she gagged. She really wants that one,” Anson said, turning just a little so he could watch Jessie read. “It’s just. Well…”

“I know, kid. How you been?” Eddie tried again after a moment. “You’re looking worse every time I see you.”

“She just got a car. Well, sort of.” Anson laughed a little, moving his head to point toward the car-shaped pile of rust that was sitting outside Eddie’s store. “That was all the money she had. Needed it to get to her new job.”

Eddie didn’t say anything, just stood there with Anson, staring out the front store window for a long while.

“I barely even remember what it was like. The last time, I mean,” Anson said quietly. He didn’t look over to Eddie, but he knew the man was listening. “I never talk about it with Jessie. I don’t want to make her feel bad. I mean, if it wasn’t for me we’d still live in our old place. I know that now. It’s not the same for her,” he said lamely. Eddie wasn’t looking at Anson. He seemed to be busy behind the counter, now sorting through some boxes that contained the latest shipment of comics. Anson continued suddenly as if he had never stopped. “And my parents don’t talk about it. They like to pretend...they wish I was normal.”

A motorcycle roared past the store but Eddie still said nothing.

“I’m not,” Anson said, turning toward Eddie. “I got over it a long time ago. My parents did what they had to do. I get it, I just...I guess I fooled myself into thinking it might be over.”

"Maybe you should tell her." Eddie spoke quietly so Anson could pretend he didn't hear if he wanted.

Two hours later, when Jessie finally joined them at the front of the store, Eddie insisted that she take three volumes of *The Walking Dead* with her, and although she protested at first, she was smiling for the rest of the day.

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Anson was pissed. It was like the nurses had a radar alerting them every time he was about to fall asleep. He hadn't gotten any rest since he was admitted, and his surgery wasn't until the next day. Well, probably, anyway. The hospital was making calls and a woman wearing a black suit and carrying a briefcase had stopped in earlier when his parents were there to tell them it was “looking good.” With everyone trying so hard to “help” him, Anson wasn't sure he was going to make it another 24 hours.

He tried desperately to ignore the fact that the hospital bed felt like laying on a wooden plank, that the constant beeping of the monitors attached to him and his roommate was slowly boring a hole through his skull, and that said roommate was watching *Men in Black* for what had to be at least the third time in a row. If he made it through the surgery he was going to kill whichever asshole decided to run that movie back to back on TNT.

When he heard the light tapping on the metal foot of his bed, he didn't bother to open his eyes; he knew who it had to be.

"God, don't you ever go away?" Anson said, his mouth curving upward in the slightest of smiles.

"Nah," said Jessie, walking around the bed and dropping into the plastic chair between it and the window. "I'm annoyingly persistent that way. Or so I'm told." Jessie kicked her booted feet up and onto the bed, stretching out her legs and crossing them at the ankles. "So...what's up home slice?" she asked, nudging his leg lightly with the toe of her boot and plucking the remote from his side so she could flip through the channels. "Thinking of getting my tongue pierced," she said, turning to stick her tongue out at him. "Wha' 'oo 'oo 'hink?"

A short bark of laughter escaped Anson. "Freak," he said, not unkindly. "Don't do that Jess. Your hair alone is..." He laughed quietly to himself once more, shaking his head. "How much does that cost you anyway? To keep that up?"

"About a third of my check every month," Jess said, turning herself in the chair and laying back on the seat, her head hanging over the bottom, her legs running up the backrest, bending over the top just slightly. "So worth it though. 'Sides, not like I need the cash for anything else."

"What about college, Jess?"

"What about it? I have a full ride."

She blew a blue bubble at him with the gum she was chewing, making it grow larger and larger until it popped, splatting over her face.

"You are such a freak," Anson said, laughing a little.

"Well duh." She smiled goofily at him from upside down. "Tell me something you haven't already accused me of a million times."

They sat there in comfortable silence, Jessie flipping through the channels, watching everything for a minute or so before switching to another channel. When she landed on TNT, though, she laughed, putting the remote to the side. "*Men in Black?* Really?"

"I might have to kill you if you keep that on, Jess. It's the third time I've sat through that piece of shit today."

Jessie turned her head to look at Anson. "Oh, it's not so bad. I mean, it completely bastardizes the original concept, in which the Men in Black were much more sinister characters, willing to murder whoever they had to in order to get their jobs done. So they aren't really that heroic at all. It's based off of a – "

" – Graphic novel. I would have never guessed," Anson deadpanned.

"Asshole."

Jessie reached over to the remote and muted the television. She spun around so she was sitting up once again, and then stood. "Move over," she said, pushing a little at Anson's shoulder. Jessie scooted onto the bed beside him and again they sat there, not looking at each other and not speaking for several minutes, until the air became so thick both felt like they might suffocate if they didn't say something.

"Where're your parents?" Jessie asked.

"They were here. Earlier. They'll be back around dinner. They had to go to work. This...this isn't easy on them."

"Yeah," Jessie said. There was another pause, as if neither knew what else to say. "Would you...would it help if I shaved my head too?" Jessie asked, so quietly Anson had to strain to hear. "Solidarity, you know?"

He chuckled under his breath and knocked his shoulder into hers. "God no," he said, turning toward her. "What good would that do? Jesus, Jess, you look crazy enough as it is." He laughed a little louder. "Purple hair? Seriously? I still can't get over it."

"You love it." Anson didn't see it coming. Without warning Jessie swung her arm, her hand connecting solidly with Anson's shoulder. "You're a complete bastard you know that?"

"What the hell?" Anson said, pushing her away a little and rubbing his shoulder. "What's your problem, Jess?"

"I thought we were friends," she said, staring resolutely at the television screen.

"I thought we were too. That was before you beat me up though," Anson said.

"I'm not laughing," Jessie said, shifting her body so that she was facing his. She stayed quiet for a long time, still not looking to his face. "Why didn't you tell me?" she whispered.

Anson sighed heavily. He moved a hand up to his face, pressing against his eyes until he could see spots floating around in front of them. "I just...I couldn't, Jess. I'm sorry."

Jessie fell back against the bed beside Anson, and he shifted his head over slightly, sharing a corner of the pillow. "I hate you right now," she said, almost breathing the words instead of speaking them.

"I'm sorry," he said again, watching her from the corner of his eye. "I really am Jess."

She reached up then, her slender fingers dancing gently over the now smooth surface of Anson's head. "They'll get it out. I know they will. They caught it early, yeah? So no worries."

"I'm not worried, Jess," Anson said, reaching his own arm up to catch her hand with his, bringing them both down to his lap. "If worse comes to worst, you can always just blow up my brain. You can still do that right?" He was unable to keep a straight face even as he said it, and the corners of his mouth turned up until a full smile spread across his face.

"God, how do you remember that?" Jessie said, leaning her head against his shoulder and laughing. "I was such a spaz."

"Was?"

Jessie turned her face into Anson's shoulder. He was still holding her hand in his, moving his thumb back and forth gently against her skin. She didn't say anything, but her shoulders began to shake, and he could feel her tears, slowly seeping through the sleeve of his hospital gown. Anson brought his other arm across to pull Jessie into an uncomfortable half-hug. He hid his face in her hair and tried not to think about the things he could have lost.