

HIGHER POWER

A COMEDY-DRAMA IN TWO ACTS

By Bradley Walton

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SYNOPSIS: The asteroid should have destroyed all life on Earth. Instead, it crumbled into nothing and moments later, there were reports of a flying man sighted all over the East Coast, a man they now call Miracle. In the days that followed, a small handful of people found themselves with superhuman powers. Some became heroes, some became villains, some worked as soldiers for a government hungry for their talents, and some simply tried to get on with their lives. Now, ten years later, those who found themselves with powers are called together by the one being with the ability to speak directly into their minds, a being known only as Nevermore. Even Ralph, whose power to talk to fish had never impressed either himself or anyone else, heard the call from Nevermore that brought him to Mel's diner, the spot that would have been ground zero had the asteroid hit. Today they are gathering . . . to be judged.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

*(FLEXIBLE CAST OF 23: APPROXIMATELY THREE MEN, SIX WOMEN,
FOURTEEN GENDER-FLEXIBLE)*

MICHAEL/MICHELLE

ANDERSON (M/F)A TV reporter. (1 line)

MEL (M/F).....The owner of Mel's Deli. (151 lines)

LUCY/LARRY (M/F).....A regular customer at Mel's Deli. (18 lines)

NEVERMORE (F).....A woman with telepathic and precognitive powers. (253 lines)

RALPH/ROZ STEWART (M/F)Can talk to fish. And that's all. (171 lines)

COLLEEN DUFFY (F)A blind woman who once had superhuman sight. (95 lines)

CUSTOMER 1 (M/F).....a deli customer (6 lines)

CUSTOMER 2 (M/F).....a deli customer (7 lines)

MYSTIC BOB (M)	Leader of the Baltimore Butt Bashers. Has magic-based powers. (52 lines)
CRITTER (M)	Member of the Baltimore Butt Bashers. Has animal powers. (37 lines)
PSYCHEDELIA (F)	Member of the Baltimore Butt Bashers. Has light powers. A major hippie. (27 lines)
MIRACLE (M/F)	Imagine Superman without the secret identity, helping people 24/7. (34 lines)
CATHERINE BRANNER (F)	A reporter. (9 lines)
CAMERAPERSON (M/F)	Works with Catherine Branner. (2 lines)
GENERAL RATH (M/F)	Leader of the government superhuman group called Higher Power. (106 lines)
BEAM (M/F)	Member of Higher Power who can shoot energy beams from his eyes. (11 lines)
MUSCLE (M/F)	Member of Higher Power with superhuman strength. (16 lines)
NESIS (M/F)	Member of Higher Power with telekinetic abilities. (15 lines)
PORT (M/F)	Member of Higher Power with teleportation abilities. (13 lines)
CELL (M/F)	Member of Higher Power with healing abilities. (27 lines)
SUE DICKINSON (F)	A government prisoner who can generate force fields. (9 lines)
ELECTRIC GIRL (F)	A government prisoner with electrical powers. (7 lines)
JUDD RICHARDS (M)	A superhuman who has kept his existence secret for ten years. (30 lines)

DOUBLING

The actors in the roles of MICHAEL ANDERSON, LUCY, CUSTOMER 1, CUSTOMER 2, CATHERINE BRANNER, and CAMERAPERSON can double in the roles of MIRACLE, RATH, BEAM, MUSCLE, NESIS, PORT, CELL, SUE DICKINSON, ELECTRIC GIRL, or JUDD

HIGHER POWER

RICHARDS. Single actors can play as many as three or four of the characters listed here. By tripling or quadrupling roles, this play can be performed with as few as 16 people.

SETTING

Mel's Deli in Baltimore, Maryland - the present.

STAGING

Staging is relatively simple, but will require some construction. The play is set in a deli, and the main set piece is a deli counter, which the director may want to elevate, as it sits at the rear of the stage. Several small tables with chairs are placed across the stage. In the original production, the meats and cheeses behind the counter were created with sections of 4-inch PVC pipe which were taped off at one end and then painted. The original production also had large menus hanging up behind the counter.

COSTUMES

MICHAEL ANDERSON.....	Suit
MEL	Jeans, t-shirt and apron.
LUCY/LARRY	Casual clothing
NEVERMORE.....	A black body suit, gloves, boots, and a long, purple hooded cape which covers her head
RALPH/ROZ STEWART.....	Casual, but upscale street clothes
COLLEEN DUFFY	Very nice or professional clothing
CUSTOMER 1.....	Casual clothing
CUSTOMER 2.....	Casual clothing
MYSTIC BOB	A medieval-looking outfit accompanied by a ridiculous-looking hat.
CRITTER.....	Something with an animal stripe or spot pattern
PSYCHEDELIA	A bright, tie-dyed dress and bare feet
MIRACLE.....	Solid white, almost angelic clothing
CATHERINE BRANNER.....	Professional clothing

CAMERAPERSON Jeans and a t-shirt
GENERAL RATH Military fatigues and combat boots
BEAM Military fatigues and combat boots
MUSCLE Military fatigues and combat boots
NESIS Military fatigues and combat boots
PORT Military fatigues and combat boots
CELL Military fatigues and combat boots
SUE DICKINSON Hospital gown or similar garment
ELECTRIC GIRL Hospital gown or similar garment
JUDD RICHARDS Grungy slacker clothes

PERSONAL PROPERTIES

- LUCY - money
- COLLEEN - cane
- CATHERINE BRANNER - microphone
- CAMERAPERSON - video camera
- RATH - wristwatch

ONSTAGE PROPERTIES

- o Paper bag containing “bagel”
- o Newspapers
- o Two cups of coffee

PROLOGUE

On the bare apron of the stage, a tight spot on the head and chest of Michael Anderson, a TV news anchorman.

MICHAEL: This is Michael Anderson, live with News 6. The asteroid scientists have been watching for the past two weeks continues on its collision course with the Earth. It is expected to strike the East Coast of the United States at approximately 11:35 this morning, resulting in the global extinction of all life. Preparations continue for *(He pauses as something unexpected comes across his teleprompter, then fights to hold back a smile as relief washes over his face.)* - we have breaking news that the asteroid appears to have broken apart, completely disintegrating in space. No explanation has been offered for this *miracle*, but scientists believe that the earth is out of danger. We repeat, the Earth is out of danger. We have additional breaking news with multiple reports coming in that *(Appears baffled by what is now running across his teleprompter, then turns his head to the side and yells offstage.)* what is this? This can't be right! We can't say this - what? *(Pauses, incredulously.)* This is real? *(He turns his head back to the audience, glassy-eyed for a moment, then speaks.)* Multiple reports are coming in from all over the East Coast of a man seen flying without any visible means of support.

Blackout. Curtains open.

ACT ONE

AT RISE:

Mel's Deli in Baltimore, Maryland, ten years later. A deli counter sits upstage center. Several small, round tables and chairs are peppered across the center of the stage. MEL, a gruff man in his fifties, is behind the counter. He is dressed in jeans, a t-shirt and an apron. LUCY, a forty-year-old regular customer of MEL's, enters left. All entrances and exits will be made to the left.

LUCY: Good morning, Mel.

MEL: Hey Lucy. What can I get for ya today?

LUCY: Ham and cheese bagel.

MEL: Ham and cheese. You got it.

LUCY: You going to the ceremony this afternoon?

MEL: Yeah. The city's crawling with tourists, but I figure they'll all be at the ceremony too, so it's not like I'm going to miss any business. Can't believe they're holding it here in Baltimore and not in D.C.

LUCY: They think Baltimore would have been at the center of ground zero.

MEL: Yeah. But that asteroid was so big, D.C. and Baltimore would've *both* been at ground zero. I can't imagine . . . everybody in the world dying.

LUCY: I spent that morning at church. Praying. There were so many people there you could hardly breathe.

MEL: I bet. I wasn't the church-going type before, but when I heard about the asteroid . . . man. Hard to believe it's been ten years.

LUCY: And our prayers were answered.

MEL: Yeah. They were.

LUCY: In our darkest hour, God sent us his Miracle.

MEL: I dunno. There's people who think that the asteroid had something to do with all the super-types who popped up later, including Miracle.

LUCY: That's blasphemy. He's the one who stopped the asteroid. He's a gift from the Lord.

MEL: 'S just what some people say. None of it's ever really been explained. Doubt it ever will. Here's your bagel. (*Hands LUCY a paper bag.*) Buck ninety-eight.

LUCY: (*Paying.*) Thanks. You been to church lately, Mel?

MEL: I did for a while there. But no. Not real recently. Not like I should.

LUCY: How long has it been?

MEL: Aw, geez, Lucy. I dunno. A year. Two. Maybe more.

LUCY: We were going to die that day, Mel. All of us. And we deserved it. Heaven only knows, we deserved it. What our society had become.

MEL: (*Aside.*) Pretty much like it still is.

LUCY: And God gave us another chance to get it right. Don't forget that. Show some appreciation.

MEL: I'm going to the ceremony today, right?

LUCY: Are you going to show your appreciation, or just to see if Miracle comes?

MEL: I dunno. Gotta admit, I always wanted to see him in the flesh. There's other super-types, but him . . . wow. He's always on the move. Always helping people. All over the country. They say he never sleeps.

LUCY: Some of those others - I wonder about them. I really do.

MEL: How do you mean?

LUCY: They're just . . . strange.

MEL: Like a guy who flies and bends steel bars with his hands isn't strange?

LUCY: Miracle is good. He's noble. You can tell by looking at him. His confidence.

MEL: You'd be confident, too, if nothing could hurt you.

LUCY: He saved our lives. Don't disrespect him.

MEL: Just an observation. No disrespect, Lucy. Not for Miracle. Heck, not for any of them. With great power goes great responsibility and all that. See ya.

LUCY: (*Starting to exit.*) I've heard that somewhere before.

MEL: Nah. Just your imagination. See ya.

LUCY exits.

MEL: I can't imagine what it must be like to be one of those people. The things you could do. Wow. They get no disrespect from me. No sir.

NEVERMORE enters. SHE is in her thirties, dressed in a black body suit, gloves, boots, and a long, purple hooded cape which covers her head. SHE crosses right and sits.

MEL: Look, lady . . . if you're a lady, since I can't tell what's under that cape thing - but I'm assuming you're a lady since no self-respecting guy would wear a get-up like that - not that there's anything wrong with bein' a guy s'got no self-respect, if that's what you're into, you know - that kind of thing - there's this bar down the street if I'd be more comfortable if you was there - but your money spends the same, so you know, I got no problem with whatever you're into so long as you don't get into in here, so to speak.

NEVERMORE: Relax. I am female.

MEL: Well, that's good to know. Uh, anyways, we got no table service here. Just me fer now. So if you want anything, you'll have to come get it at the counter.

NEVERMORE: I do not require food.

MEL: Cup'a coffee?

NEVERMORE: Nor beverage.

MEL: You wanna buy a newspaper? I got newspapers.

NEVERMORE: I do not require a newspaper.

MEL: I don't mean to be rude, but if you're gonna sit in here, you gotta order something.

NEVERMORE: If I order something, I must pay for it. I have no money. I do not wish to cheat you.

MEL: Look, (*Crossing to NEVERMORE.*) I appreciate you bein' honest, but I can't have some homeless whacko comin' in here off the street loitering around.

NEVERMORE: I am not loitering. I'm meeting some people. Some of them will order beverages, if that consoles you.

MEL: What kind of people?

NEVERMORE: People like myself.

MEL: What, a buncha costumed freaks? (*A look of realization slowly crosses MEL's face.*) Oh, no. You're not, uh, one of them . . . um, super-powered types are ya?

NEVERMORE: Some of the people I am meeting will be wearing costumes. Whether or not they are freaks is an entirely subjective matter I leave to your own judgment. And yes, I am one of "them super-powered types."

MEL: You're a -

NEVERMORE: Yes.

MEL: Then how come I don't recognize ya?

NEVERMORE: Not all of us seek the affirmation of the media and the public.

MEL: If you don't wanna draw attention to yourself, then why are you decked out for the Dark Ages Renaissance festival?

NEVERMORE: I mess with people's heads, Mel. It goes with my powers. Consider my outfit to be a friendly warning.

MEL: How do you know my name?

NEVERMORE: I can read minds. But don't worry, I haven't read yours. Ten seconds from now, you are telling me your name, which I also read on the sign out front when I came in. The name of this establishment is Mel's Deli. I assume you would be Mel.

MEL: Yeah, I'm Mel.

NEVERMORE: Very good.

MEL: Wait a minute. (*Crosses to right of NEVERMORE.*) You're claiming you can predict the future?

NEVERMORE: No.

MEL: But you just predicted I was going to tell you my name.

NEVERMORE: To predict is to gather available data and make an educated guess as to what is going to happen in the future. I was making an observation of what was happening at another point in time.

MEL: You just lost me, lady. But you didn't predict squat.

NEVERMORE: I just told you that.

MEL: Will you stop messing with my head?

NEVERMORE: We already covered that part.

MEL: Look, lady -

NEVERMORE: You may call me Nevermore.

MEL: Your name is Nevermore?

NEVERMORE: No. But that is what you may call me.

MEL: Nevermore.

NEVERMORE: Nevermore.

MEL: Whatever.

NEVERMORE: (*Aside.*) Why here?

MEL: So who are you meetin' here? Super-powered guys?

NEVERMORE: And women.

MEL: For what? The ceremony?

NEVERMORE: No. Not for the ceremony.

MEL: Oh, come on. Don't expect me to believe that. That's too much of a coincidence.

NEVERMORE: The reason for our gathering coincides with the tenth anniversary of the asteroid. So does today's ceremony. But we are not gathering because of the ceremony.

MEL: In plain English, please.

NEVERMORE: (*Sighs deeply and stands.*) Something big is going down, Mel. Something big and ugly. So big and ugly that every super-powered being will be required to confront it. And it's going down here. In 102 minutes and 38 seconds.

MEL: Look, Miss Whatevermore, if you think I'm going to let you and your buddies hold a brawl in my deli - did you say every super-powered being?

NEVERMORE: Every one.

MEL: Miracle?

NEVERMORE: Miracle.

MEL: Those guys that work for the military? Higher Power or whatever they're called?

NEVERMORE: Yes.

MEL: Those three weirdos that call themselves the Baltimore -

NEVERMORE: Every super-powered being.

MEL: Every . . . being? As in, not just the good ones?

NEVERMORE: Not just the good ones.

MEL: That nutso chick with the electric powers that tried to hold the power grid for ransom?

NEVERMORE: Her too.

MEL: Here?

NEVERMORE: Here.

MEL: Why?

NEVERMORE: This is where the asteroid would have hit. Your deli would have been at the exact center of ground zero.

MEL: How do you know?

NEVERMORE: I do. Leave it at that.

MEL: Is there another asteroid?

NEVERMORE: No. But something is coming. Something powerful.

MEL: What?

NEVERMORE: I don't know for certain.

MEL: I thought you could see the future.

NEVERMORE: Mel. I don't want to scare you with information that you don't need to know, so I'll just give you the best possible outcome. If the world is still here tomorrow, your deli will be very, very famous.

MEL: How famous?

NEVERMORE: World famous.

MEL: Fifteen minutes-type famous or historic landmark famous?

NEVERMORE: Mel. Understand that nothing lasts forever. Especially not fame. But as long as people are able to remember, I believe they will remember this location and what will occur here today.

MEL: So if I don't die, I'm set for life?

NEVERMORE: Yes.

MEL: All or nothing.

NEVERMORE: Yes.

MEL: I don't suppose you'd happen to have any tips on coping with that?

NEVERMORE: How did you cope when you thought you were going to die ten years ago?

MEL: I prayed. I prayed a lot.

NEVERMORE: Pray now.

MEL: I haven't prayed in years.

NEVERMORE: If there is one thing that humans as a race are able to do, it is run begging to a higher power when things turn ugly. You'll remember how.

MEL: That's not what I meant.

NEVERMORE: I know what you meant. Pray if you want. We need all the grace we can get.

RALPH enters. HE is in his thirties and wearing casual but upscale street clothes. HE crosses to NEVERMORE.

RALPH: Okay. Long cape; gratuitous eye makeup. You must be the one who talked straight into my head when I was driving in morning traffic and almost caused me to wreck.

MEL: You a super-guy?

RALPH: Please don't ask me that question.

MEL: *(To NEVERMORE.)* Is he a super-guy?

NEVERMORE: He has power. He chooses not to use it.

RALPH: I can't help but use it! I'd give anything to be able to turn it off!

NEVERMORE: You choose not to employ it in a constructive manner.

RALPH: Constructive manner? Would you please tell me what is remotely constructive about being able to talk to fish?

MEL: *(Popping in between THEM.)* You talk to fish?

RALPH: Yes, I talk to fish.

MEL: Like Aquaman in the comic books?

RALPH: Kind of. Yeah.

MEL: So like, your body can withstand the pressure of being at the bottom of the ocean?

RALPH: No.

MEL: Are you super-strong?

RALPH: No.

MEL: Can you breathe underwater?

RALPH: No.

MEL: But you can control fish?

RALPH: Not control. Just talk to them.

MEL: But they'll do what you ask?

RALPH: They're too stupid to follow directions.

MEL: Do they tell you anything interesting?

RALPH: They're too stupid to tell me anything interesting.

MEL: Then what good are you?

RALPH: None. None whatsoever. Which is why I'd really like someone to explain to me what I'm doing here.

MEL: Darth Nebulous here claims there's a big fight goin' down right here in about a hundred minutes and everybody with powers is supposed to be in on it.

RALPH: *(To NEVERMORE.)* And how do you know that?

MEL: She can see the future.

RALPH: And does this battle involve fish?

NEVERMORE: I do not know. I doubt it.

RALPH: I thought you could see the future.

NEVERMORE: I will explain when everyone arrives.

RALPH: Who's everyone?

NEVERMORE: Everyone with powers.

RALPH: Everyone? Miracle? Higher Power?

MEL: Yup. Buncha others.

RALPH: And me. Ralph the worthless fish guy. (Or "chick".)

NEVERMORE: Yes.

RALPH: Well, that'll just do wonders for my inferiority complex.

NEVERMORE: You are needed.

RALPH: Bull.

MEL: You got powers. Lady says we need you.

RALPH: Who are you?

MEL: I'm Mel.

RALPH: Right. That explains everything. Who's she?

MEL: Nevermore.

RALPH: That's so incredibly helpful.

MEL: Don't get smart with me.

RALPH: What are you gonna do, beat me to death with a loaf of bread?

MEL: Whatcha gonna do to stop me, fish boy?

COLLEEN enters. SHE is a nicely-dressed blind woman in her forties, feeling her way along with a cane. Seeing that SHE is blind, MEL hurries over to help HER navigate the room.

MEL: Good morning, ma'am. Here, let me give you some assistance.

NEVERMORE: Colleen Duffy, welcome.

MEL: She's one, too?

RALPH: A blind chick?

COLLEEN: (To MEL.) Thank you. (To NEVERMORE.) I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage.

NEVERMORE: I am known as Nevermore.

COLLEEN: You were the one who called me here?

NEVERMORE: Yes.

COLLEEN: I never realized that one of us was a telepath.

NEVERMORE: There was never any need for you to know.

COLLEEN: I guess that's my own fault, huh?

NEVERMORE: You bear the responsibility for your own actions.

COLLEEN: Didn't seem like I had much choice.

NEVERMORE: There are always choices.

RALPH: Check it out. The lady who can see the future is preaching about free will.

COLLEEN: You have precognitive powers?

NEVERMORE: For the sake of simplicity, let's just say yes.

COLLEEN: I think I can handle the advanced version.

NEVERMORE: I know you can. But they can't.

COLLEEN: Understood. Could I get a cup of coffee, please?

MEL: Sure. Sugar and cream?

COLLEEN: Black, thank you.

MEL: Will do.

RALPH: I'll take one, too. Lots of sugar and cream.

MEL: How much is "lots"?

RALPH: I like sugar and cream with coffee in it.

MEL: Right. Whatever makes you happy.

MEL gets to work preparing the coffee, which HE gives to RALPH and COLLEEN during the following speeches.

COLLEEN: So, based on the question, "She's one, too?" I assume that this is a gathering of powers?

RALPH: *The gathering.*

COLLEEN: "The." Such a little word to be so scary. Is this big, apocalyptic end-of-the-world stuff?

NEVERMORE: Very possibly.

COLLEEN: You're not sure of the outcome.

NEVERMORE: No.

COLLEEN: Is that good or bad?

NEVERMORE: Bad.

COLLEEN: Look, I'll do what I can to help, but I don't think that'll be much.

NEVERMORE: The power still exists within you. You are simply no longer able to utilize it.

RALPH: What, your eyes?

COLLEEN: Yeah. I used to be able to see really, really well.

RALPH: And when you lost your sight, you didn't get a radar sense that lets you know what goes on all around you?

COLLEEN: Is your power to be superhumanly obnoxious?

RALPH: Nah. I talk to fish.

COLLEEN: *(Interested, despite herself.)* Really? Like Aquaman in the comic books?

RALPH: *(Sits at COLLEEN's table.)* Kinda like that, yeah.

COLLEEN: So did you also get superhumanly strong, and get your physiology rearranged to withstand the pressure of being at the bottom of the ocean?

RALPH: No.

COLLEEN: Can you breathe underwater?

RALPH: No.

COLLEEN: Can you control fish - get them to do stuff?

RALPH: No.

COLLEEN: But you can talk to fish?

RALPH: Yeah.

COLLEEN: I don't suppose you're a marine biologist?

RALPH: No. But I worked at the Baltimore National Aquarium.

COLLEEN: So you didn't get a completely worthless power. What'd you do there?

RALPH: Clean toilets. Summer job while I was working on my English degree.

COLLEEN: You were a custodian.

RALPH: You asked me what I did. Not my job title.

COLLEEN: Custodians do things besides cleaning toilets.

RALPH: Maybe. But cleaning the toilets are by far my most vivid memories.

COLLEEN: I'm sure. So what good does it do you to be able to talk to fish?

RALPH: None.

COLLEEN: Huh. What do the fish have to say?

RALPH: Well, I guess I should clarify. I say I can talk to fish. Actually, I can talk to anything. I can talk to this table, but it's not going to talk back to me. Now, fish - fish talk back to me, and I can understand them. Fish talk to me whether I want them to or not.

COLLEEN: You hear them in your head?

RALPH: Yeah.

COLLEEN: So you're a fish telepath.

RALPH: When you put it that way, it sounds even more worthless than saying I can talk to fish.

COLLEEN: But you can hear fish talking to you in your head?

RALPH: Unfortunately.

COLLEEN: And they can hear you?

RALPH: I think so.

COLLEEN: You don't know?

RALPH: Look, fish probably aren't quite the stupidest things on the planet, but they gravitate near the bottom of the dumb bucket. (*Stands and walks around.*) Basically, they talk about eating and

swimming. In one-word sentences. The day I realized I had my powers, it was the day after Miracle saved the planet from the asteroid. I went in to work, and when I got near the harbor, I started hearing these voices in my head. (*Speaks in a deep, dull voice.*) "Swiimmm. Swim. Sssswim." I thought I was going nuts. So I go inside and the voices start saying, (*In fish voice.*) "Fo-od. Food. Foooodd." And there's nobody around me. And I realize, it must be the fish. Which made no sense. But CNN was reporting sightings of a flying man, so I figured I might as well keep an open mind. So I'm like, hey, how you doin'? I'm Ralph. And I get back this chorus of (*In fish voice.*) "Fo-od. Food. Fo-oo-od" from all these fish voices in my head. So I try to zero in on this one guy. And I'm like, what's your name? (*In fish voice.*) "Food." I'm thinking maybe I'm doing something wrong. Maybe I need to be in the water with the fish. Nobody else was around yet, but I wasn't about to jump in the tank. So I just stuck my head in. Same response. Wondered if maybe I could breathe water since I could hear the fish. Figured I might as well try. Did I take a little breath? No. Of course not. That would have made sense. So when I finished puking all the water out of my lungs, I figured I'd try back after they'd been fed. I did my best to ignore them until after feeding time and then tried to strike up a conversation. (*Slowly and deliberately.*) "Me Ralph. Who you?" (*In fish voice.*) "Swim. Swim. Swimmm." And that was it. That was all they'd ever say. Unless they got sick or hurt, which case I'd hear, (*In fish voice.*) "sick" or "hurt." Or somebody took a photo with a flash camera. Then they'd go, (*This time in a high-pitched voice.*) "Bright! Bright!" and kind of freak out a little. That was kind of funny, so I started bringing a flash camera to work with me.

COLLEEN: (*Cold and disapproving.*) That's cruel.

RALPH: Look, it didn't take long for those scaly crap brains to really get on my nerves.

COLLEEN: They were just being what they were.

RALPH: And I couldn't block them out. "Food. Swim. Food." All day. Five days a week. You have no idea how seriously I considered poisoning all the tanks. The harbor, too.

COLLEEN: That would have been brilliant.

RALPH: I finally had to quit.

COLLEEN: We do what we have to do.

RALPH: Now I can't go near the pet section of a department store without hearing this incredible chorus of morons in my head. I used

to love going to the beach when I was a kid, but let's just say that's been kind of ruined for me.

COLLEEN: I'm sorry.

RALPH: Yeah. Life's rough. So what happened to your eyes? You stare at the sun too long?

MEL: Ralph, I think you may be the most incredibly insensitive jerk I've ever met in my life.

RALPH: You may think I'm obnoxious, but I like to think that I've developed a healthy, defensive cynicism.

COLLEEN: Whatever you want to tell yourself.

RALPH: That's a mighty high mountain you got yourself perched on. Hope it's got a good view.

MEL: Ralph -

RALPH: I got enough hard luck in my life that the blind shtick wins zero sympathy from me.

NEVERMORE: Obviously.

RALPH: So what happened to your eyes, Colleen?

COLLEEN: I stared at the sun too long.

RALPH: Aw, c'mon, you don't have to be such a - geez. Awright. Look, I'm sorry, okay?

COLLEEN: The day my power kicked in . . . the day we all thought we were going to die - I hiked up to top of this mountain near my home, so I could look out over the valley one last time. Enjoy the beauty before it - before all of us - got obliterated from the face of the Earth. It was this gorgeous, clear day. Like a final gift from God that he was about to rip out of our hands just like everything else he'd ever given to us. And I was looking at this house down in the valley. I could barely make it out. It must've been a couple of miles away. It didn't dawn on me right away that I could see through the window, even though the window was filthy dirty, and then I was thinking what an incredible slob the old guy in the blue and green plaid striped shirt sitting in the house must be. And how utterly predictable it was that he was reading the Bible just as the world was about to end, and he was probably reading *Revelation*. But then I was surprised when I looked at the text on the page and saw that it wasn't *Revelation*. It was the story where Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac, and then God stops him. All this took place in the space of about one second. And then it hit me.

RALPH: Dang.

COLLEEN: Yeah. Dang. For about the first five minutes, it was really cool. But I couldn't turn it off. I could see in the dark just as well as in daylight. And could I see stuff I didn't want to see. Stuff

you should only be able to see with a microscope. I could count the grains of dirt under the fingernails of the guy flipping burgers when I went to a fast food restaurant. I couldn't look someone in the face without completely zeroing in on the follicle mites writhing around in their eyebrows. I could see bacteria. I couldn't keep myself clean enough. I couldn't keep my apartment clean enough. I could see the dust mites in my bed and on my pillow and on my clothes. I bought gallons of bleach and rubbing alcohol. Scrubbed the paint off the walls and my skin raw. But even when the little crawly stuff was dead, it was still there. I could still see it. And when I closed my eyes, I could still see the bacteria on the surface of my eyeballs and the skin cells on the insides of my eyelids. I lasted about a week, and then I just couldn't take it anymore.

RALPH: So what'd you do?

COLLEEN: I stared at the sun too long.

CUSTOMER 1 and CUSTOMER 2 enter and go to the counter.

MEL: Good mornin'! Welcome to Mel's! What can I get for ya today?

CUSTOMER 1: I'll have a cinnamon and raisin bagel with cream cheese.

CUSTOMER 2: I'll take a plain bagel with sour cream.

MEL: Sure thing.

CUSTOMER 1: Hey, uh, what's with the chick in the cape?

MEL: Her? Oh, she's dressed up for a uh - a renaissance festival?

CUSTOMER 2: There's a renaissance festival in town? Cool!

MEL: Uh. Yeah.

CUSTOMER 2: Where at?

MEL: Uh -

CUSTOMER 2: If you don't know, that's okay.

MEL: Well, you see -

CUSTOMER 1: Hey, excuse me.

NEVERMORE: Certainly.

CUSTOMER 2: Nice cape.

NEVERMORE: Thank you.

CUSTOMER 1: You going to a Renaissance festival?

NEVERMORE: No.

CUSTOMER 2: Huh. He said you -

NEVERMORE: He was lying. He means well. But he was lying.

CUSTOMER 1: Why would he lie?

NEVERMORE: He's having a stressful day.

MYSTIC BOB, CRITTER, and PSYCHEDELIA enter. THEY are all in their thirties. BOB is wearing a medieval-looking outfit accompanied by a ridiculous-looking hat. When addressing CRITTER and PSYCHEDELIA, BOB talks in dude-speak. When addressing other characters, he adopts a completely over-the-top tone of heroic formality. CRITTER is wearing something with an animal stripe or spot pattern. PSYCHEDELIA is barefoot and wearing a bright tie-dyed dress.

PSYCHEDELIA: That was gross, Critter, even for you.

CRITTER: I was marking my territory.

BOB: That mugger was not your territory, dude.

CRITTER: All crime is my territory, dude.

CUSTOMER 1 and CUSTOMER 2 look at BOB, CRITTER, and PSYCHEDELIA in absolute befuddlement. COLLEEN tries to pretend they don't exist. RALPH puts his face in his hands as if ashamed to be part of the human race. MEL is deeply alarmed. NEVERMORE sighs deeply, as if accepting an unpalatable inevitability. BOB proudly acknowledges their reception.

BOB: Greetings, honorable dudes and dudettes. We are the Baltimore Butt Bashers, at your service.

CUSTOMERS 1 and 2 look at each other in alarm and head for the door, timidly squeezing past the BALTIMORE BUTT BASHERS.

CUSTOMER 1: Right. Um. Hi.

CUSTOMER 2: 'Scuse us.

BOB: Fare you well, good dudes. We hope you have blissfully savored your delectable meal at this fine establishment and enjoy the rest of your day in peace and safety!

CUSTOMERS 1 and 2 exit.

MEL: *(Calling after them.)* Hey, you want your - *(Realizes they've gone.)* Great. Thanks. Don't suppose you guys wanna buy some bagels?

BOB: Your offer is greatly appreciated, good sir, but we never fight crime on a full stomach. Being hungry keeps us mean, and there's big time butts to be bashed today.

RALPH: You like alliteration, don't you?

PSYCHEDELIA: Hey, if it was good enough for Poe, it's good enough for Bob.

RALPH: I don't doubt for a second that all three of you are going to die drunk in a gutter somewhere.

COLLEEN: Poe died in a hospital.

RALPH: You're taking their side?

COLLEEN: Against you? Sure.

BOB: I sense a bit of hostility in your dudeliness.

PSYCHEDELIA: You should chill more often.

RALPH: Words of wisdom from the homeless hippie.

PSYCHEDELIA: I go by Psychedelia.

RALPH: I know. I've seen you on the news. Tell me, were you in a production of *Hair* and forgot to return your costume or something?

PSYCHEDELIA: I have the power to create bright, pretty, flashy lights. What do you expect me to wear? Black leather?

RALPH: Isn't there a law against bare feet?

PSYCHEDELIA: No.

RALPH: You've never seen one of those signs on the door of a fast food place that says "No bare feet by order of Department of Health"?

PSYCHEDELIA: They're lying. It's part of a conspiracy against non-materialism.

RALPH: You're nuts.

PSYCHEDELIA: You think any kind of publicly traded company is a reliable source of information about anything?

RALPH: Oh, come on.

MEL: She's right. I checked once. No such law.

RALPH: You too, Mel?

MEL: Only because you're such a likable guy.

RALPH: You walk around Baltimore? Without shoes? That's disgusting.

PSYCHEDELIA: I guess you must wash you shoes at least once a week.

RALPH: I don't wash my shoes at all.

PSYCHEDELIA: That's disgusting. At least my feet get clean in the shower every day.

COLLEEN: I used to be able to see bacteria. She kind of has a point.

RALPH: Whatever. You. You call yourself Critter?

CRITTER: Right on, dude.

RALPH: Critter. *Critter*. All the words in the dictionary and that's the one you picked?

CRITTER: Yeah. 'Cause I absorb animal mojo.

RALPH: Animal mojo? What exactly is animal mojo?

CRITTER: Like, essence, dude. Being. I go near a dog, and it's like, I am the dog.

RALPH: And if you go near a Walrus?

CRITTER: I am the Walrus.

RALPH: The mysteries of the universe reveal themselves.

CRITTER: Or I can save it for later.

RALPH: What, the mojo?

CRITTER: Yeah, dude.

RALPH: Could you possibly be any less articulate?

NEVERMORE: Critter absorbs animal characteristics and replicates them. Like a dog's sense of smell or an elephant's strength.

RALPH: I guess you must spend a lot of time at the zoo.

CRITTER: Oh, yeah.

NEVERMORE: He picks up some behavioral characteristics as well.

COLLEEN: You know, I was kind of curious about that, but I really didn't want to know.

RALPH: There are so many things I could say here.

COLLEEN: If you know what's good for you, you won't say any of them.

MEL: You keep your behavioral characteristics to yourself while you're in here, okay?

BOB: Law-abiding citizens have nothing to fear from us.

COLLEEN: Critter, can you replicate a fish's ability to breathe underwater?

CRITTER: You betcha.

RALPH: *(To Colleen.)* You wound me.

COLLEEN: Ralph here can talk to fish.

RALPH: Don't you dare -

CRITTER: Whoa, dude - like Aquaman?

RALPH: Oh, please - yes, like Aquaman.

CRITTER: Oh, man. That's cool. Fish are like, so zen. I love to just hang with the fish. It's like we're kindred spirits or something.

RALPH: Oh, you sure are.

CRITTER: Can you breathe underwater, too?

RALPH: *(Sarcastically.)* Yeah. And my body can withstand the pressures of the bottom of the ocean and I can bench press a sperm whale on dry land and I learned the meaning of life from a school of carp.

BOB, CRITTER, and PSYCHEDELIA crowd around RALPH, each kneeling in turn on the following three lines.

CRITTER: *(To BOB.)* Dude -

BOB: *(To CRITTER.)* Dude -

PSYCHEDELIA: *(To CRITTER.)* Dude -

CRITTER: *(To RALPH.)* Dude - you know the meaning of life?

RALPH: Yeah, *dude*.

CRITTER: What is it?

RALPH: To do that which is most existentially meaningful to the individual while simultaneously hedging one's bets against all religions in case one of them turns out to be right.

CRITTER: *(Stares at RALPH blankly.)* What?

Pause. RALPH stares intently at CRITTER.

RALPH: *(Deadpan.)* Forty-two.

CRITTER: *(Deeply impressed.)* Forty-two! Whoa. *(Stands.)*

BOB: *(Amazed.)* Douglas Adams was - right. *(Stands.)*

PSYCHEDELIA: Douglas Adams was a visionary. *(Stands.)*

BOB: I was right to name my dog after him. Whoa.

RALPH: And you're - Magic Rob or something, right?

BOB: Mystic Bob.

RALPH: Mystic.

BOB: Totally.

RALPH: Bob.

BOB: All the way.

RALPH: And supposedly you do magic.

BOB: Right on, dude.

RALPH: You pull rabbits out of hats? Turn bullets into feathers? Conjure banana peels for criminals to slip on?

BOB: Bingo bingo and bingo. Although Critter here keeps trying to convince me it should be doggy doo instead of banana peels.

CRITTER: Hey, I figure, don't do the crime if you can't take the slime, you know?

RALPH: No, I don't know. And I don't want to know.

BOB: So, Nevermore, what's up?

RALPH: These people know you?

NEVERMORE: We have collaborated in the past. Yes.

RALPH: You've collaborated? With them?

NEVERMORE: When circumstances warranted, once. Yes.

RALPH: But you're not proud of it, right?

NEVERMORE: These three are extremely effective at what they do.

RALPH: I have no doubt that Critter especially is enormously effective at what he does, but you didn't answer my question.

NEVERMORE: There is a matter of crisis at hand.

RALPH: Fine. Be that way.

BOB: Whoa. Sounds pretty ominous.

NEVERMORE: History will hinge upon what happens here today.

BOB: What?

MEL: There's gonna be a really, really big fight.

CRITTER: Cool! Fight!

BOB: Fight!

PSYCHEDELIA: Fight for peace! Right on!

NEVERMORE: Perhaps. But whatever is coming, I am convinced that all of us who have been given powers will be required to confront it.

CRITTER: Woo hoo! Power party, dude!

BOB: We gonna hang with Miracle?

NEVERMORE: You will hang with Miracle.

CRITTER: Cool, dude!

BOB: What about those government guys? They comin' too?

NEVERMORE: Yes.

CRITTER: Bummer.

BOB: Aw, man. That blows.

PSYCHEDELIA: Buncha government sellouts.

COLLEEN: Hey. It's a free country. They have the right to use their powers as they see fit, same as you. Right, Nevermore? *(Pause.)* Right?

MIRACLE enters. HE is an extremely fit man in his forties, dressed all in white. Everyone except NEVERMORE reacts with awe and amazement. Even RALPH is impressed.

MIRACLE: I got your call, Nevermore. What's the problem?

COLLEEN: Is that . . . ?

RALPH: Yeah. It is.

PSYCHEDELIA: Holy crap.

BOB: *(To CRITTER.)* Dude, we are so not worthy.

NEVERMORE: Miracle. Thank you for coming.

MIRACLE: I'm uncomfortable with you talking directly into my head, but I assume this must be an emergency. Your message was vague.

NEVERMORE: I don't know precisely what will happen, but it will be big and it will happen here in seventy minutes.

MIRACLE: Do we need to plan, or will this be something we can deal with on the fly?

NEVERMORE: We have to plan, but not until the others arrive.

MIRACLE: What others?

NEVERMORE: All of us.

MIRACLE: All of *us*.

NEVERMORE: *Us*.

Pause. MIRACLE stares intently at NEVERMORE.

MIRACLE: Sue Dickinson?

NEVERMORE: All of *us*.

MIRACLE: Do you really think Rath will allow that?

NEVERMORE: She won't have a choice.

MIRACLE: She won't have one, or you won't give her one?

NEVERMORE: She won't have one.

MIRACLE: I see. It's not a coincidence that this is happening today, is it?

NEVERMORE: No.

MIRACLE: How long before the others arrive?

NEVERMORE: If you're back in fifty minutes, that will give us enough time to do what needs to be done.

MIRACLE: I'll be here. (*To BOB, CRITTER, and PSYCHEDELIA as HE moves to exit.*) Pardon me.

MIRACLE exits.

MEL: That - that was *him*.

BOB: Dude, Miracle just acknowledged us.

PSYCHEDELIA: He said, "Pardon me." To us.

CRITTER: I feel so . . . so . . .

RALPH: Self-actualized? Existentially fulfilled?

CRITTER: *Awesome.*

RALPH: You would.

CATHERINE BRANNER, a TV reporter carrying a microphone, and the CAMERAPERSON, carrying a video camera, enter. CATHERINE looks around the room.

CATHERINE: Jackpot! *(Turns to the camera.)* This is Catherine Branner live with News 6, and we have confirmed reports that super-powered individuals are present at Mel's Deli in downtown Baltimore. What is transpiring here on this calm summer morning, ten years to the day after unimaginable disaster was averted by Miracle? News 6 seeks to uncover the answers first-hand from these extraordinary individuals. With me is the group who has infamously dubbed themselves the Baltimore Butt Bashers and left a path of terrorized criminals in their wake. Mystic Bob, Critter, and Psychedelia, why are you here today?

CRITTER: Um, I really ain't too clear on that yet.

CATHERINE: A fog of terror has set in on Baltimore's defenders. Is the situation critical? Mystic Bob, what can you tell me?

BOB: That's lovely outfit you've got on.

CATHERINE: Er - thank you. What else can you tell me?

PSYCHEDELIA: Peace rules and anybody out there that's got a problem with peace, we'll bash your butt!

CATHERINE: Are you bashing butts today?

MEL cuts in front of the camera.

MEL: Hey, I just want to point out here that of all the delis in Baltimore, this one here, Mel's, is the one where this thing that's goin' down is goin' down today. So you remember that, and be sure to tell your kids and your grandkids - and we offer senior discounts and all kids sandwiches are half off with a straight-A report card, because here at Mel's we believe that children are our future, so feed them well and let them lead the way. Y'know?

CATHERINE: And who are you, sir?

MEL: I'm Mel. I own this joint.

CATHERINE: Do you possess any special powers?

MEL: Uh - no.

CATHERINE: *(Looking at NEVERMORE, immediately losing interest in MEL.)* And who is this strangely garbed woman? Is she a heretofore undiscovered heroine, come to save the world in some new hour of need? Ma'am, can you please identify yourself for our viewers?

NEVERMORE: Turn off the camera and lower it.

CAMERAPERSON does as instructed.

CATHERINE: What? No! Don't listen to her!

CAMERAPERSON: I can't help it! It's like she's controlling me!

CATHERINE and the CAMERAPERSON abruptly drop into a trance-like state.

NEVERMORE: The next time you're live on the air, tell your viewers what you - *(Pause.)* - did to Patsy Collins after the homecoming dance when you were sixteen years old, then cluck like a chicken five times.

CATHERINE: Five times.

NEVERMORE: Good girl. *(Crosses to CAMERAPERSON.)* I can see in your mind what you did last night and you should be ashamed of yourself. Go home and slam the fingers of your right hand in a drawer until something breaks. If it's the drawer, then try a different drawer.

CAMERAPERSON: A different drawer.

NEVERMORE: Right. Now, this is no place for either of you. Leave.

CATHERINE and the CAMERAPERSON exit.

RALPH: Mind control?

NEVERMORE: Telepathy. The same as I used to contact all of you.

RALPH: Did you force us to come here?

NEVERMORE: No. But I would have if you had refused.

MEL: Please tell me you're not going to do that to every reporter who comes into this place.

NEVERMORE: I won't have to. The military will keep them out for us.

MEL: The military?

GENERAL RATH enters. SHE is in her forties and dressed in military fatigues and combat boots.

RATH: All right, Nevermore! What the devil is going on?

BOB: Well, hey. Long time, no see.

RATH: Shut up, boy. I'm not here to talk to you.

BOB: Ya know, it doesn't cost anything to be polite.

RATH: When last we met, your parting gesture was decidedly impolite.

RALPH: You guys must know each other.

BOB: She's a government pig. Offered us each a million bucks a year to join Higher Power.

RALPH: And you declined?

BOB: I told her she could take her money and use it for toilet paper.

MEL: Elvis H. Presley on a side of turkey! What kind of a moron are you?

BOB: The kind who can't be bought.

MEL: (To RATH.) And what did you say?

CRITTER: She upped it to two million each.

RALPH: And you still declined?

BOB: Told her I hoped she didn't chafe easily.

RALPH: And you two - you went along with it?

PSYCHEDELIA: Do we look like government team players?

MEL: You got a point.

RALPH: (To RATH.) You got powers?

RATH: Shut up. I'm not here to see you, either.

RALPH: I don't even know you. Why are you being rude to me?

RATH: You're not worth my time, fish boy.

RALPH: How do you know what I am?

NEVERMORE: It's her job. Her name is General Rath. She works for the United States government. She's the leader of Higher Power, but she's a normal human.

RATH: I hate you.

NEVERMORE: I know.

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