

Matt felt the muscles in his arms twitching, then screaming. It had started again.

The baseball bat swung at his head, but he had so much time to react, he felt like a house fly. His left hand stopped the bat with a crack like thunder, and his right fist drove into the villain's head so hard, the face wetly crumpled, before the head left the body and ricocheted off the alley wall.

Matt was what they called in the comics a super hero. His costume had been sewn with precision by his mum, so he was looking cool.

He had been sat at home watching telly when he got the feeling. He likened it to a spider sense. He knew when and where people were in trouble. He made some excuse to his mum about the Internet and sidled upstairs, and even as he went his body was transforming. He became like the Incredible Hulk, only slimmer, smaller, less monochrome, and better looking. He took his costume out of the wardrobe and quickly got changed.

The woman's scream was full of fear. She smelled the fetid breath and felt the weight of her attacker. Suddenly the weight was released and a new smell, that of fresh arterial blood, filled her nostrils. A hand

reached out of the darkness and with a kind word she was helped to her feet.

The air buzzed with the hum of radios, and the flashing blue lights were giving her a headache. For the fifth time she tried to tell her story to the hard-bitten cop.

Rattigan spat into his radio, "Goddamn vigilante again." This was the third case this week and they seemed to be accelerating. He put a large pinch of Old Holborn on the paper, evened it out, and expertly rolled a cigarette, licking the gum to fasten it down. Sucking the pungent smoke into his ravaged lungs he sighed to his partner and repeated, "Goddamned vigilante."

Matt loved his comics. Judge Dredd was his favourite. "I am the law," rang through his very being, so when his transformations first began, he knew what was happening, as if he had been expecting it his whole life, and he knew what he had to do. "With great power comes great responsibility," and for Matt, the borders between fantasy and reality had always been blurred.

The Pimp felt his rib cage give way. The nutter in the fancy dress suit had hit him so hard it was like being struck by a train, or so he imagined as his legs buckled, and blood-stained vomit spewed down his suit. He loved that suit, a dark grey vintage Armani, left by a punter scammed by one of the girls, and everyone said how sharp it was.

About as sharp as the fractured rib that had perforated his liver causing the internal bleeding that was draining the life out of him.

Matt felt great with each rescue, or mission, as he liked to call them. It was as if the essence of the villains fed his super-ness, like a street vampire sucking the life force out of its victims. He felt great, and let's face it he was a goddamn hero.

Rattigan hawked up a mouthful of nicotine stained phlegm and spat at the feet of the reporter. "Goddamn vigilante," he repeated for the dozenth time.

The Journo was no rookie. He knew Rattigan's reputation, and treated him with a mixture of contempt and respect. "Rattled because he's doing your job," he taunted, and straight away regretted it as Rattigan gave him the eye.

"Piss off punk," Rattigan snarled and the Journo backed off a step.

From out of the darkness, a fist smashed like a striking snake into Rattigan's head, knocking him flat. His ear split and exploded with blood from the force of the punch.

Matt sidled into the kitchen and handed his blood-stained costume to his Mum to put in the wash.

"Cup of tea, love?" she asked as she leant over to peck him on the cheek. "Busy night?"

Betsy screamed with joy and skittered down the corridor to the nurse's station. The abandoned room beeped loudly with the alarm on the life support machine.

Consciousness, when it came, was clear and sudden. Rattigan had lain in a coma from massive head trauma for six long weeks, but now, he felt great.

The head nurse ran into Rattigan's room to find him standing naked but for his hospital gown, buttocks exposed to all the world, rolling his Old Holborn tobacco, whilst staring out the window. Feeling her legs buckle slightly, her starched years of training saved her as she told him, "Put that cigarette out right now, Mister Rattigan."

The last thing Rattigan remembered was talking to that goddamn Journo, and then, suddenly, he was here. Betsy, through joyous sobs, filled him in. Punched by a masked vigilante, he had suffered extensive brain injury, and now, a miracle.

Rattigan didn't know what all the fuss was about, he felt great! In fact, it was as if the world had been polished. His vision was fantastic, and he could hear a faint conversation at the nurse's station, wonder mixed with fear,

"But it's impossible..."

"No one could recover from such an injury..."

Rattigan had had enough. "Stop whining," he snapped at Betsy, "and get me some goddamn clothes."

The Journo was nervous. For the last six weeks he had been the man of the moment. On the scene, his front-page story was rumoured to be up for the Pulitzer. Now, summoned to Rattigan's office, he pushed the door open.

"Not so goddamned cocksure now," Rattigan growled between drawn lips, precariously balancing his rollup. He was back on the case and the fact that he had suddenly become the Vigilante's latest victim was baffling him. However, that had been six weeks ago. Since then there had been another twenty-three deaths. Rattigan was the only victim to have survived.

To the young Journo, Rattigan was now as big a story as the Vigilante. According to the hospital, Rattigan had made a complete recovery. "A Medical Miracle?" He was already playing with his headline.

Seeing that the Journo was distracted, Rattigan squeezed his shot glass of bourbon in irritation, and it exploded in a hail of fine glass shards. Rattigan, as surprised as the Journo, but not showing it, threw

the remains into the trash. The Journo inwardly gulped, the cop's hand wasn't even bleeding.

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"Breakfast!"

Matt heard his Mum yelling up the stairs and went down for his breakfast. Glancing at the newspaper on the table, he spat his tea out in amazement. There was a picture of that cop, what's his name, Rattigan, walking out of the hospital looking right as rain. Recovering his composure, Matt put jam on his toast and gazed at his suit, freshly ironed and hanging on the clothes horse.

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Rattigan tilted his hat forward and pulled his collar up as he stepped out of the station back door into the alley and pouring rain. He could feel something was happening, didn't know what, didn't care. "Bring it on you goddamn pansies," he muttered.

Without thought he spun around, his left arm moving up and back, catching the punch on its inward flight, gliding it past his head as his right fist came around in the same motion, and connected with the

jaw of the guy in the red costume. Rattigan exulted. Never had he moved so fast or hit so hard. His assailant's head and body shot sideways into the wall of the narrow alley and brick fragments exploded outwards as the wall smashed with thunderous applause.

Rattigan was just a bit too cocky, because next it was his turn to bounce off the other alley wall. The blow to his ribcage should have shattered it, but instead the punch sent him rocketing within the confined space.

Light from the open station door flooded down the alley as the open-mouthed Captains and clerks stood in the rain watching the two titans hammer each other, doing little damage, except to the architecture.

Matt was beginning to panic. What the hell was going on? He had crept silently up on the cop, to finish the job for good, when all hell had broken loose. Suddenly the cop was as strong as he was! Matt was getting tired. He wished he'd had an extra slice of toast for breakfast this morning. With an unexpected twist, he broke off, made a run for it, and jumped the six-foot iron gate at the end of the alley as he made his escape.

Rattigan watched him go. Goddamn Vigilante, that was two suits he had ruined. Picking his crumpled hat up from the side walk he

started rolling a cigarette and shuffled back to the station. Goddamn, he needed a drink.

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As the slugs hit his chest, Rattigan staggered. A good grouping, he would think later when he examined the bruising with Betsy. He wasn't wearing a vest. Didn't need a vest. Why waste the budget on a SWAT team, when all they had to do was send in Rattigan. Goddamn Pinkos.

The Pinko was sat at the bar. His face was a nest of activity, full of ticks and grimaces, rodent features, oddly disturbing.

The Girl put the coffee in front of the Pinko and skittered back to the other end of the counter. The Pinko gave her a gap-toothed leer and slurped his coffee from the saucer. He'd seen it done in an old movie and thought he was the height of cool.

"Give me the goddamn money!"

The round end of the revolver filled the Girl's vision, terrifying her with its cold metal precision.

Two almighty crashes, so close together only an audio dilettante could have told them apart, heralded the entrance of a hard-bitten cop, trench coat flowing in the wake of his passing, hat rakishly balanced on his head, and a masked guy in the red fancy dress costume that looked like his mum had made it.

Matt, having the slight edge in super hero experience, got there first and slammed the Pinko's head so hard into the counter a

horizontal wave of blood shot out in all directions as if he'd slammed a ketchupped burger with the grill pan.

"Goddamn Vigilante," drawled Rattigan as he grabbed his nemesis and rocketed him into the juke box which exploded in a flash of smoke and flames, still managing to beat out Marvin Gaye's old tune, 'I heard it through the grapevine.'

"And, another thing," yelled the Captain to Rattigan. "How in hell's name is the department going to pay for the damage?"

Rattigan just looked down at his shoes and rolled a cigarette. You could be as tough as you like and a super hero, but no one wanted a grilling from the Captain.

"And another thing," the Captain shouted, his face beginning to blotch purple, "not only did you trash the place, the goddamn vigilante got away, and the Girl's family is suing the department for a lifetime's care at the local nut ward."

Betsy was in a bit of a daze. She was ironing Rattigan's shirt in front of the TV and she was sure she could smell burning. She looked down and screamed at the sight of the iron smoothing out the back of her hand. The smell was the blackened fine hairs. She ran to the faucet and shoved her hand under the cold tap. She knew how to treat a burn, she knew first aid. It must be the shock, but there was no pain, in fact, although the hair had burned away, her skin wasn't even red. Betsy had her moments, and cautiously went back to the ironing board, picked up the iron. Her heart beat excitedly with anticipation, as she gently touched the hot iron to her palm.

The Journo got the call from his Editor. Some perve predator, well known in the seedier parts of town, was in the local hospital with multiple fractures in both his arms and his legs. Although his head was

in plaster and his jaw wired together, the Journo heard him silently rattle, "It was a broad, a goddamn beautiful broad."

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Betsy was fed up. When was that goddamn Rattigan going to come and get her out?

The duty sergeant reached his hand through the bars and lit the cigarette held firmly in Betsy's bright red lips.

They were treating her like a goddamn criminal when she had been fighting for justice, the Metropolitan way. Where was that goddamn boyfriend of hers?

Rattigan was at his wits end. Bad enough dealing with the goddamn Vigilante, now Betsy had gone super, and made mincemeat of some perve from the sticks.

She would have got away with it too, but apparently was so angry at laddering her stockings, she kept smashing the Perve's face into the edge of the sidewalk.

"About goddamn time," Betsy purred as she flicked her lipstick coated butt into the ashtray.

There was an edge to Betsy that Rattigan hadn't seen before, and he wasn't sure he liked it. What in hell's name was going on? He knew one thing for certain, he was going to have to find somewhere to send his shirts.

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