

Longlisted in the 2012 CBC Creative Non Fiction Canada Writes Competition out of 3,000 submissions

MY FRIEND SUPER J

Sarah Berti

The car squeaked as I glided around the last snowy curve before my turn off. The slippery drive in a minor blizzard was not something I minded. Just another winter day in Canada. It was the week after the 2012 New Year, and driving slow gave me a chance to think about the planetary events and global crises all the radio stations kept discussing. The tsunamis and earthquakes, the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Arab Spring, economic meltdown, the Occupy movement—the list of earth rumblings went on. I drove and mused, down-shifted and wondered, accelerated and reflected.

I pulled into the driveway, parked and got out. Fat snowflakes spiralled from sky to ground, with me in the middle. I knocked at the log home door and my friend Jason greeted me. His grin was pretty much splitting his cheeks. “Well HELLO Sarabi! And 2012 is the YEAR of the SUPERHERO!” he reported. He kissed me on the cheek.

“Is that right?” I said.

“Yes, that's right!” He nodded enthusiastically.

“So we should become Superheroes this year?”

“YES WE SHOULD!” he affirmed. “And Sarabi on Tuesday, it's just good to know that, and I thought, we can copy the calendar five times each, that's just the right way to ...”

His communication morphed into chatter and dissolved all cause-and-effect boundaries. He was making sense to me, but not logically speaking; I understood him because I listened beneath his words, not directly to them. Jason was autistic, and a family member, friend, or respite care worker needed to be with him at all times. Friday was my shift.

The morning passed. With a *don't-touch-that-dial* radio voice Jay read from the book *Angels Don't Know Karate* and then we moved on to writing practise, which could take different forms depending on Jay's mood. I poked out my feelers to test the Jay barometer, then I brandished our shiny red journal.

“If we're going to be Superheroes this year, we'll need Superhero identities!”

Jay's eyes lit up.

“Let's make a BIG list of ALL the Superheroes we could possibly be.” I tossed Jay the pen. “Start with you...What Superhero are you?”

Jay awkwardly wrapped his fingers around the pen and leaned over the page. His body paused, his eyes looked off to the right—and then he wrote a messy all-capital Superhero:

WAGON MAN.

I giggled. “Right on, good start. Wagon Man, the Superhero Who Can Ease Your Burdens! Tired of walking? Hitch a ride with Wagon Man! Need to Transport your Goat's Milk from A to B? Wagon Man is at your service! Okay, my turn...what would be a good Superhero identity for me?”

Jay cocked his head and pondered. Then he wrote:

MOP GIRL.

Another laugh escaped me. I asked him to explain, but his irrational answer was in nowhere-land and completely missed the point. But it was too funny. “Fear not, Planet Earth, when Mop Girl gets her hands on a long handled squishy apparatus, the World Shall Be Cleaned!”

We continued the list until our Superhero options were:

Jason – WAGON MAN, GENIE JAY, PANCAKE MAN, SMILEY GUY, HAPPY DUDE, SANTA MAN

Sarabi – MOP GIRL, LION KING, PRINCESS JASMINE, LOVE ELF, LAUGH QUEEN

“Great list Jay! Let's not pick yet—let's think about it for a few more weeks. Okay, it's time for Knight Jason and Knight Sarabi Go On A Mail Mission...are you prepared?”

He was. He grabbed his 'Friends Rock' hat and we transformed into Knights, strapping on our winter armour. We then tramped briskly one kilometre down the road, singing “Superheroes, One by One” to the tune of “The Ants go Marching.” When we reached the mailbox, Jay shakily

unlocked the door with the Knight Key and withdrew the first piece of mail. We counted like the Sesame Street Count:

“ONE, ONE piece of mail...HA HA HA HA !” up until seven.

“Seven, Seven Pieces of Mail!” proclaimed Jay. “Thanks for coming to this week's edition of Knight Jason and Knight Sarabi Get The Mail! Over to you Sarabi.”

We continued to broadcast our Knighthood radio show, passing the buck back and forth with a “Sarabi out...over to you...” and inviting our listeners—the Blue Jays and Chickadees, the Oaks and Cedars, the Sun and Sky and Earth and Clouds, and any humans tuning in to our transmission—to join our day, come with us on our Town Mission After Lunch, send any questions they might have to our emails, consider what Superheroes they really are.

Part of our Town Mission involved running errands for friends and today we were in line at the bank. Jay turned to the young woman and her four year old behind us.

“So Sarabi thinks that Mop Girl might be a funny one,” he declared to the woman. He stretched out a friendly hand to tap her shoulder. She curled her body away from him. Her head went down. She stepped in front of her son to shield him from Jay. Body message clear: Uncomfortable.

I always find this part of my work with Jay the most interesting: people's reactions to a) not knowing exactly what this total stranger is talking about and b) getting patted on the upper arm by a tall guy with a lopsided smile and a booming style of communication that tends to remind them of a radio-show host. Many don't know what to do.

Through simple friendliness and a disregard for certain societal norms, Jay created moments where someone could choose to engage or withdraw, connect or disconnect. People either shut down or emerged like a butterfly from a cocoon and responded genuinely. I attempted to facilitate a relationship—this is part of my job and skill—and in this case I translated for Jay, put things in context.

“Jay has decided 2012 is the Year of the Superhero,” I told mom and son, “and he thinks I should be Mop Girl.” I made a funny face and the boy laughed. Along with the explanation, Jay and I were emitting an electromagnetic coherence via our hearts that if translated into English or tuned into words might have said “Peace, Love, Friendship, Humour, Humility, Connection” or something like that. Say WHAT? Just good vibes. They actually exist.

Her gaze rose from the floor to make contact with mine. Her breath relaxed. The boy's eyes flashed with curiosity.

“And we were wondering...” I paused and focused on Jay.

“And we were wondering,” he repeated eagerly, “what kind of SUPERPOWERS would you have?”

In the spirit of deeper facilitation I offered some examples. “Jay was thinking of being Genie Jay who grants wishes, or Pancake Man who makes Pancakes for people. He thought I should be Mop Girl—I'm not too sure what he meant, but maybe I can help people clean up...?”

She was now squarely facing us. Her lips tugged into a smile, and she looked Jay in the eye for the first time. She allowed the boy to duck out from behind her, and he piped up, “I'd be Flyman! I'd fly and save people! SWUUUOSH!” He made a swooshing motion with his hand and dropped a box—puzzle parts flew everywhere.

The woman sighed. “I'd be SuperMom.”

Jay patted her shoulder again. “Don't worry SuperMom, you can do it!”

We both helped her pick up the scattered pieces.

“I'm Sarabi.”

“Linda,” she returned. “Thanks for helping clean up.” We exchanged glances then burst out laughing. Mop Girl indeed.

After Jay and I made our bank deposit, Jay waved emphatically at Linda. “Bye SuperMom!” he called loudly. The customers in line at the bank laughed. The tellers laughed. Linda laughed. Her son laughed. Authentically. Within the walls of this institution was an air of light-heartedness that Jay was instrumental in creating. Okay, maybe not a Superhero caliber event, maybe not flying, stopping bullets or walking through walls but then I've always thought Mother Theresa hit the nail on the head when she said *We cannot do great things in this world, only small things, with great love.*

Jay and I visited the library, the post office and a few stores. Everywhere we went Jay lit things up—a hug here, a smile there, a laugh, a new friendship created, an old one nurtured. So many folk in town knew and loved him. Who was he? An autistic guy? No, he was Jason Hollowell, aka my friend Super J, and his heart was big and real and I knew: that mattered.

On our drive home I shut off the car radio and Jay ended our day with a full-volume broadcast from the Superhero Station: “Thanks for listening to this week's edition of

SUPERHEROES IN MINDEN! Join us next week for our newest adventures in Superhero Land!”

I know I'll be tuning in.

Sarabi out.