Hobo-Man, Super Hero from Hoboken

a story by Joe Oppenheimer
told to Owen Russell Berland while he was three.
With love, because every person can be a super hero if they help someone they love.

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Comments, criticisms welcome
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‘Old-Eagle-Eye,’ that’s what all the kids called Mrs. Aamira Epstair. She could see everything her students tried to hide. Once during a test, Joe and Betsy exchanged a slip of paper. Billy stuck gum under his desk. Old-Eagle-eye wasn’t even in the room. She had stepped out into the hall to talk to the principal. When she came back she walked right up to Joe and Betsy, picked up their papers, and threw them in the trash can. Then she sat down at the front of the room. After everyone else finished their tests and handed them in, Old-Eagle-Eye calmly announced, “Billy, you will have to come in after school and clean all the gum from under the desks.” No one got away with anything. Ever.

But that didn’t stop Jamie McIntyre from trying. He was in the third row off to the window side. It was a sunny day and everyone was reading an assignment in their geography books. Not Jamie. He was reading a comic he’d snitched from his Dad’s collection. Captain Marvel was in an epic battle with Superman.

“You never were good at fighting magic,” said Captain Marvel, as he tossed Superman against a mountain, causing it to crumble on top of the man of steel.

“Jamie McIntyre, what on earth are you hiding in that geography book?” barked Mrs. Epstair from her desk. But Jamie was so lost in the action he didn’t even hear his name. So Mrs. Epstair walked over to his desk and repeated the question.

“Nothing,” came his lame reply. He raised his eyes and saw Old-Eagle-Eye standing tall in her grey button-up sweater. Her hair was made up in a small bun and the tight collar of the sweater went half way up her neck. Jamie thought of the joy he would get if the collar choked her.

“Give it up to me, Jamie. Now! If you please.”

Jamie was expecting a terrible scolding. But when she took the comic he was in for a surprise. Mrs. Epstair returned to her desk, and then called him up.

“You always have your nose buried in comics and super-heros, Jamie. It’s time for you to meet the real world. Find someone real who is interesting. Maybe then you will find comics are neither as important, nor as exciting, as the world you live in.” Suddenly her eyes gleamed with invention. “Indeed, I know what you should do. Your assignment, Jamie: find and interview Hobo-Man. Do the research. Write it up. Or get an F for not doing your assignment today in class.”

“Hobo-Man? Who’s Hobo-Man, and how am I supposed to find him?”

“You’ve probably passed him a hundred times, Jamie. He plays the trumpet on a corner very close to our school and he is a surprisingly interesting human being - maybe even interesting for someone who only reads about super heroes. Some people say he is a super hero. And Jamie, knowing Mr. McIntyre, I don’t advise that you take the F.”

As he walked back to his desk, Jamie realized he had seen an old man who often played a trumpet. He saw him whenever he walked home with his friends and stopped at McDonald’s. The trumpeter was usually dressed in some raggedy old clothing: a dirty shirt, old jeans, and ratty old shoes. Jamie hoped that this was the man Old-Eagle-Eye was calling Hobo-Man.
And so that day, without his friends, Jamie detoured from his usual route home on Bloomfield Street and walked to go by the McDonald’s on Washington Street. He was going that way because Old-Eagle-Eye was right: his father wouldn’t be happy if he got an F. Jamie knew two things for sure. First, he really wanted that ratty looking guy who played the trumpet to be on the corner of Washington and 6th Street. And second, Jamie really hoped he was Hobo-Man. If he wasn’t Hobo-Man how would Jamie ever know how to find him? But even if the man was there, and turned out to be Hobo-Man, interviewing him would sure be a boring waste of time. But Old-Eagle-Eye demanded it, and so, he was on his way: Jamie had an assignment.
Jamie meets Hobo-Man

The comic was taken on Wednesday, November 21st in the year 2009. Jamie walked out of the double red doors and down the steps of A. J. Demarest Middle School in Hoboken. It was a beautiful day. But it was also like all the other days. People were happy. People were sad. Children were being born. Old people were dying. Some people were pan-handling for pennies. Some had big bills in their wallets.

As he went down Bloomfield Street toward 6th Street he listened for the sound of a trumpet. All he heard was the honking of horns, a siren, and loud yelling. No trumpet. Jamie’s mind was going a mile a minute. “What a waste of time this is. Old-Eagle-Eye doesn’t know squat about super-heros and comics. I’m never going to find this old man, and Dad’s going to be mad at me for snitching his comic book and getting that F, for sure.”

But when he turned right at 6th Street, there, at the next corner, he could see an old man. No trumpet sounds to be heard, but that didn’t mean Jamie couldn’t hope the old guy would be Hobo-Man. As Jamie approached he saw the old man was sitting on some sort of wooden crate outside a place with a big red awning. The crate was covered with colorful labels of pictures of melons. A bit further from the corner was a tree planted in a hole in the side walk. Maybe it was the season, but it looked as if it never could have had any leaves on it.

The old man was wearing a grey old hat. It had a wide brim that shaded his eyes from the sun. Jamie noticed it looked like the sort of hat his father sometimes wore when he went to work. But the old man’s hat wasn’t a nice hat. His father’s had a small feather stuck in a wide ribbon that went around the hat. The old man’s hat had neither a feather nor a ribbon. It was weather beaten and stained. The rest of his clothing wasn’t any better.

The old man had a dark face framed with white sideburns. He held a trumpet in his left hand and was busy watching a pigeon eat popcorn on the sidewalk between the man and the tree. An old Styrofoam coffee cup stood next to the crate. It had Dunkin Donuts imprinted in the company’s orange and pink colors.

As he walked toward the crate two conflicting warnings popped up in his thoughts. The first was the stern warning of his parents, “Don’t talk to strangers!” And what was this man who was sitting right there and had been staring at a pigeon if not a stranger. Should he disobey this first great commandment that he had been taught?

The second was the frightful quiet threat of Old-Eagle-Eye: “And Jamie, knowing Mr. McIntyre, I don’t advise that you take the F.” So here he was, afraid and thinking maybe he should go straight home and ask his mother what to do. But asking his mother would mean telling her that he got in trouble, that he took his Dad’s comic book to school. He could picture his father’s anger for the borrowed comic book and the F. He had no choice, it was now or never.

So Jamie screwed up all the courage he could discover inside himself. He walked up to the man who was so dirty, so different from himself or anyone else he knew.
“Hello, mister. My name is Jamie. I hope you don’t mind my asking, but I’m looking for a Mr. Hobo-Man and I wonder if you’re him or if you know him? I’m pretty sure he has a trumpet like you do. And I think he plays around here.” Jamie didn’t notice that he had scared the pigeon away. The rush of air from its frightened flight scattered the uneaten popcorn all over the sidewalk.

The old man turned from looking at the spot where the pigeon had been standing to look at the young boy. He placed his trumpet on the far side of the crate out of Jamie’s line of sight.

“Well, well, Jamie. Whatcha lookin’ for him for?” asked the old man in a surprisingly friendly tone. He was looking at Jamie square in the face. He could see Jamie’s red hair, blue eyes and freckles. He also saw Jamie’s clean blue shirt with its white stripes, his new running shoes with a Nike ‘swoosh’ on them, and his green back pack that said ‘Land’s End’ on it.

“I got in trouble reading Superman comics at school. My teacher said I had to interview a real super-hero and write a report about him. She said that Hobo-Man is a real super-hero.”

“So you like Superman comics. Any others?”

“Sure - I like all super-hero books.”

“I’ve always thought they’re all pretty much alike.”

“I don’t think so. They’re all really different. Haven’t you ever read one?” Jamie said, immediately doubting the old man’s judgement.

“Sure. But it’s been a while. All those super-heros fight bad guys, and then save people and have secret identities and disguises. Each one has some super powers to do things we humans can’t do.”

“Maybe,” said Jamie, who now thought the man’s answer sounded reasonable. “But I really like ‘em. Anyhow, do you know a Mr. Hobo-Man? I have to find him.”

“Do you anything about this ‘Hobo-Man’ guy?”

“All I know is that my teacher said Mr. Hobo-Man lives here in Hoboken and plays a trumpet. I’m supposed to interview him.”

“Some people call me Hobo-Man but it isn’t my real name. And no one has ever called me Mr. Hobo-Man.”

“Wow, that is so great. Are you the Hobo-Man that she thought was a super-hero?”

“Could be.”

“Well, if you are the Hobo-Man she meant, I hope you have some time to talk. I’ve got to write this report about your life or I’ll get an F.”

“My, oh my. There’s a teacher who really wants a student to write about me?”

“Well, my teacher’s mean. We call her Old-Eagle-Eye, and she was going to give me an F for reading that comic.”

“What’s her real name, kid?”

“Mrs. Epstair.”
The old man paused, looked as if he was thinking of something very different, and then finally softly said, “Mrs. Epstair? Do you know her first name?”

That made Jamie think that the old man maybe knew his teacher, “I’m not sure what it is, it begins with an A. Something like Amir or Amira.”

“Anyhow, I really am interested in super heroes. And as I told you, Mrs. Epstair said some people think you’re a super-hero.”

Hearing that people thought of him as a super-hero seemed to cause the old trumpet player to laugh. When he finished, he wiped his eyes on his jacket sleeve. It took almost two minutes just to catch his breath.

“Well Jamie, I don’t think of myself as any super-hero. But there are some who do call me that. Start by noticing I am not in the comics. I’m a real guy who lives right here in Hoboken, right on the street most nights. So that means I can’t be like a comic super-hero.”

“But why do people call you a super-hero then?”

“Who knows why people do things? Maybe because I saved a little boy from a speeding truck. But that wouldn’t make me a super hero, Jamie. Just lucky to be in the right place at the right time.”

“But maybe you did it cause you have super powers.”

“Some people might say that. I did move fast. Very fast, that day.”

“So maybe that’s why I am supposed to know your story.”

“OK. I am not very busy just now, what do you need to know?”

“The story of your life.”

“My life’s been 70 years long. You don’t want to know all about that. You’d be sitting here a very long time,” the old man chuckled,

“Just the important stuff, then.”

“Well, Jamie what’s important to me is that I have a warm place to sleep and some good food. But that probably isn’t what you want to know about either.”

So Jamie couldn’t just start his interview with Hobo-Man because he had to think about what he should ask about.
HOW HOBOMAN GOT HIS FIRST SUPER POWER

Jamie didn’t know what he should ask about. After all, this old man wasn’t even saying that he was a super hero. That meant that the whole story began with big doubts. But it was a beautiful afternoon.

Suddenly Jamie knew how he wanted to start his interview. “How did you get your first super power, Mr. Hobo-Man?”

“My mother said . . .” but he couldn’t finish the sentence, because he had started to laugh. Jamie didn’t like that. Was the old man laughing at him? He wiped his eyes and said, “My mother said, Henry, you got yourself a super-power!”

“Was that your first super-power?”

“I suppose so. If I ever had any.”

“Then that’s what I want to know about – that first one. How’d you get it?”

“Well, it’s a pretty long story, Jamie. Maybe you better sit down on the sidewalk and make yourself comfortable, if you really want to hear it.”

Jamie looked up and down the street. He didn’t want any of his friends to see him sitting down on the curb and listening to this old poor street guy. Super hero or not. And he didn’t want to get his pants all dirty. But he didn’t see anyone he knew, and he didn’t want that F. So there Jamie was, sitting down on the sidewalk on Washington Street.

The old man began without any introduction. “Before I became Hobo-Man, I was Henry – a boy, like you. I went to school – every day. Do you go to school every day, Jamie?”

“Of course, I told you. My teacher is Mrs. Epstair. All kids go to school.”

“Well, that isn’t right. Maybe it’s almost right, ’cause most kids go to school. But some kids don’t get to go to school. Even here in Hoboken. And a lot of kids don’t go every day. They cut school. I didn’t do that. Everyday I would leave home and walk to school with my Pa.”

“Oh, I never thought about your father, Hobo-Man. What did he do?”

“Remember, my real name is Henry. Call me Henry. Pa didn’t have a real job. He played the trumpet - he was real good. But he didn’t play in a band. He played at a corner near here in Hoboken. He’d sit out on a crate, at Garden and 9th. He’d have a cup out and play his trumpet. Some people who passed liked the music. Some even came by everyday. Those who liked what he played would leave a little money in the cup. That’s mostly what we used to buy us some food.”

“What about your Mom, Henry?”

“My Mom? She sometimes was working at a store. Sometimes not. Depended.”

“Do they live in Hoboken?”
“Oh no Jamie,” he chuckled, “they died more than a few years back.”

“What was your home like?”

“Well, we sure didn’t have a lot of toys. And the house was very small: only 3 rooms. A kitchen, Pa and Mom’s bedroom, and the family room where my younger sister Alice and I slept.”

“Didn’t you want to have more toys? Weren’t you sad?”

“Not really, we didn’t think a lot about toys. We were happy we had a house. Some people lived out on the street. Like I do now. But we had a house. We didn’t have a lot of money. Some days we had trouble buying food at the store.”

“So you weren’t sad?”

“Not really. Whenever everyone came home – from the store, the corner in Hoboken, and school – well then it was like the sun shone. We’d all be laughin’ and singin’. We’d often even dance. And played. Everyday. Always. Until . . .,” Hobo-Man suddenly stopped talking.

“Until what, Henry.”

“Until that day when things were entirely different,”

“How were they different?”

“When I tell you about that, you’ll understand how I got my first super power.”

“What happened?”

“Hold on Jamie. I told you it wasn’t a quick story. While I was in school, Mom hurt herself at the store. So I didn’t know when it happened, cause I was at school. They said she fell down and couldn’t get up. That scared me. They told me she had to go to the hospital in a big ambulance. They said it used the siren. Sirens always scared me so when they said they needed to use the siren it made me worry even more.”

“Did your mother die? My mom has gone to the hospital only one time, and then she came home with my sister,” asked Jamie. But he really wasn’t interested in hearing about Hobo-Man’s mother. This did not seem to be the exciting story he had hoped. “This is going to be a long story isn’t it?” he asked before Hobo-Man had a chance to tell him whether his mother had died.

“Pretty long.”

“Maybe we could go into McDonald’s and get a coke, or something. It’s getting chilly out here sitting on this cement.”

“I don’t have any money for McDonald’s, Jamie.”

“Well, I could buy you a Coke.”

“No thanks. All my stuff is in this bag right over here,” Hobo-Man pointed to a plastic bag near to where he was sitting. “I can’t just take it into McDonald’s.”

“How could that be all your stuff? You wouldn’t bring all your stuff from home to here.”

“Jamie, this is where I live.”
“Where, you can’t live on the crate.”

“Of course not. I live outside here in the city.”

“But where’s the rest of your gear?”

“Everything that I got is in that bag over there. I got nothing else.”

Jamie was trying to imagine those two things: First that this old man had all his stuff in the one plastic bag. And then that he couldn’t go into McD’s. But they were beyond his experience and he couldn’t get his mind around it.

“We don’t need to finish this story. If you’re getting tired, we’ll stop. You can go home.”

But Hobo-Man’s just suggesting that the dialogue end, led Jamie to remember that ‘F’ Old-Eagle-Eye threatened.

“Oh no, Henry. I was just a little thirsty.” he lied. And even though he didn’t remember quite where the story had let off, he continued, “Tell me, what happened next.”

“Well, I came home from school, and Momma was in bed. Little Alice was in Pa’s arms. She was crying. Pa was trying to keep Alice quiet so Momma could sleep. I was real scared. Momma never took a nap when we all got home so I yelled, ‘Why is Momma in bed?’ But Pa didn’t answer. He just said, ‘Shhh, Momma’s trying to sleep.’”

“Is that really what happened? What did he really say?”

“You know it was a long time ago, but that’s what I remember. And that’s the only story I can tell you. What I remember. Anyhow, I am pretty sure about the next thing. I yelled, ‘I want my Momma.’”

“Momma’s hurt herself at the store. She has to take a lot of medicine. She can’t get up,’ said my Pa.”

“I want my Momma,’ I repeated angrily.”

“It seemed that day the sun wasn’t shining. No one was laughing. No one was singing.”

“We have to wait until she can get up, and then you have to be very gentle,’ said Pa.”

“Then we can dance,’ I said.”

“No,’ said Pa, still holding baby Alice in his arms. ‘Momma won’t be able to dance for awhile, she has to be very careful and can’t move a lot.’”

“I want to make her better.’”

“Well, Henry, there isn’t really anything you can do to make her better. Momma has to take her medicines and I have to keep the house up,’ said Pa.”

“Just then my Momma had such a pain she cried for help. Pa put Alice down on the floor next to me and ran to their bedroom. It was the first time I can remember having to watch Alice when she wasn’t asleep. She started to cry. I didn’t want there to be a lot of noise, so I didn’t want her to cry. I put my hand gently on Alice’s head and moved my face close to hers. Then I made funny faces and she stopped setting up to cry. And then we both laughed.”
“That’s so cool,” said Jamie. “I have a younger sister too. She’s called Tess and I do that and we laugh.”

“Well, maybe all kids do that. But when Pa came back in the room, he was very pleased that I had helped with Alice.”

“Did your Mom get better?”

“Certainly. Mom’s are like all of us. We get hurt sometimes, and then most always, we get better.”

“But how did you get your super power?”

“Well, just as I learned to help by taking care of Alice, I learned how to play quietly by myself. I would just take out a toy or a book and play sometimes alone, sometimes with Alice. One day my Mom got up. I was real excited, but I remember I just wanted to be quiet for her and I said, ‘Hey Mom, your up!’

“I remember what she said. She said, ‘Yes Henry. And you, my love, are much bigger now, aren’t you! You’ve almost become a big boy. You helped me get better by playing quietly and helping keep Alice happy. That was such a big present you gave Pa and me.’”

“I love you Momma.’”

“I love you too, Henry. You are always my special boy, my hero.’”

“I’m not a hero Mom. Superman is a hero. He has super powers.’”

“So do you, Henry. Didn’t you notice? Because you love Pa and Alice and me so much that you were quiet, and helped with Alice, and played by yourself, you were able to help me get better. Isn’t that a super power?”

“Maybe.’”

“And do you know how you got it? You got it with love and then by looking inside yourself to see what you could do. Then you found the super-strength to do it. You became a super-hero Henry!’”

“Well, I don’t know. I don’t have real super powers.’”

“Maybe you don’t think so. But I do. You just found your first one: find what you love, go after it, and try hard. That’s the key to finding all your super powers, Henry.””

“And Jamie, that was it.”

“Did anyone else tell you that you had super powers?”

“Oh, that’s another story, Jamie. And it’s getting late. I’ve got to start playing my music.”

Jamie couldn’t believe that all he had just learned was how this old man’s mother thought he got super powers. Of course, it wasn’t a real super power like Superman’s. But still, maybe there’d be more another day.

“Remember Jamie, my Mom was right. To find your super powers you have to find what you love and go after it. If you don’t do that, you’ll never even find out what you can do.”
That part of the story made sense to Jamie, and he felt he had learned something. “Thanks for
the story, Henry. You’re right, it’s getting late and cold. I have to go home.”

“Glad to have met you Jamie.”

“I’m gonna come back Hobo-Man. Can I?”

“Course you can. I’m usually sitting right here.”

And Jamie left. And it was getting dark. And Hobo-Man took up his Dad’s old trumpet and
played with its keys for a minute. He moved the Dunkin Donuts cup out in front of him and he
played a little tune called *Saint James Infirmary*. He played it real slow, and pretty. Jamie could hear it
in the distance as he walked away.

Some people stopped. Some of them put money in the Dunkin Donuts cup. Others just
hurried home. Hobo-Man didn’t have far to go to home - he’d sleep on the grate around the corner
that night. So he played till all the people left the big buildings and the sky was dark and the city
went to sleep.
How Hobo-Man Got His Super-Speed

Jamie went to visit his Grandpa in White Plains, so he couldn’t come back to see Hobo-Man for a few days. But when the next week came, Old-Eagle-Eye asked him whether he had met Hobo-Man and whether he had interviewed him. She reminded Jamie that if there was no assignment handed in he would have to answer to his father.

So when Jamie had some extra time on Wednesday after school, he went back to the corner of Washington and 6th Street. Jamie remembered that some people thought Hobo-Man was a super hero because he saved someone from a speeding truck. But Hobo-Man himself hadn’t said that made him a super hero. So one of the questions Jamie had been wondering about was how Hobo-Man had gotten to be so fast as to be able to save someone from that truck.

So when Jamie finally passed the bank and turned the corner and saw Hobo-Man sitting on his crate, playing his trumpet, Jamie knew what he wanted to ask him. But by the time Jamie got right up to where Hobo-Man was, Jamie was so happy to see his new friend he asked a different question.

“Hi Henry! Did you have a good week?” And then, without even waiting for an answer, he continued, “I am happy I could come to see you today.”

“Hi Jamie. Well I am glad to see you too.”

“Where’s that pigeon, Hobo-Man?”

“Oh, it doesn’t always come around, and when it does, it usually is a little later. Anyhow, I haven’t put out any popcorn yet today.”

“I got you a present Jamie.”

“You got me a present? How could you do that? You shouldn’t get me a present. You don’t have enough money.”

“Oh I had enough money for this present. It didn’t cost me anything. I just went into the grocery store and asked if I could have the small crate the oranges came in when they didn’t need it anymore. And here it is.” Hobo-Man pulled out a crate slightly smaller than the one he was sitting on.

“Grab a seat, Jamie.” he said. Then he continued with enthusiasm, “I had a really good week. Lots of people liked my music. And that left me with more money than usual.”

“Wow, Henry, that’s great.”

“And another thing. A woman who sometimes comes by invited me to play in a band for a party. I told her I didn’t have fancy clothes. And she said it didn’t matter, she just wanted there to be a good trumpet player. I had a great time playing in the band. They said they’d like me to do that again - and that they’d even pay me to play next time. But hey man, it’s good to see you, Jamie.”

Jamie laughed and sat up on top of the crate, “I’ve still got to ask you a big question.”
“What’s that?”

“How’d you get to be so fast, that you could save that boy, Henry?”

“Oh that’s easy,” said Hobo-Man.

“Remember I told you when I was growing up I lived with my sister Alice and my Mom and Pop.”

“Yup, I remember. In a small house. And you didn’t have so many toys.”

Right, but I wasn’t . . .” and then they both said at the same time “sad!” That caused them to laugh.

Hobo-Man then went on, “Well we had a family who lived near us, a neighbor. And they had a lot of money. At this time I was in high school. And they had a two little kids, an older daughter and a young boy. The boy was about 4 years old when I was in high school.”

“What was his name, Henry?”

“You know, it was a long time ago. So I’m not so sure. But I think it was Amin.”

“Hey look, Hobo-Man, there’s a pigeon coming right up to you on the sidewalk,” Jamie interrupted.

“Right. This is the one that comes almost every afternoon about this time. Sometimes I give him some popcorn, cause we’re friends.”

“Do you have popcorn today?”

“I do.”

“Can I feed him?”

“Sure, but we have to be very calm and gentle in our movements, or he’ll fly away.”

Hobo-Man moved very smoothly and slowly and took a small bag of popcorn out of his plastic bag. The pigeon moved to be right next to his boot. Hobo-Man handed a few kernels to Jamie and said don’t move suddenly. Just scatter them near the pigeon. They both watched the pigeon turn toward the kernels Jamie dropped. It hobbled over to them and picked one up in its beak.

“Look Hobo-Man. He has a bad foot!”

“I know. That’s how I know it’s always the same pigeon who comes over to say hello.”

They fed the pigeon a while, and then when it no longer was eating, Jamie asked Hobo-Man to continue with the story.

“So did I tell you Amin’s father was rich? He had a lot of money but it didn’t make him happy.”

“Yup, you said he was very rich.”

“So one day Amin’s father thought, ‘If I just bought me a very fancy car, that would make me happy.’ So he did. He bought a bright red race car. And they parked it in front of their garage in the driveway.”

“Was it pretty?”
“It was the prettiest car any of us kids had ever seen. We all wanted a ride in it. Everyone said it was very fast. And Amin’s father loved Amin. Amin loved Batman and Superman comics, so his Dad had a very famous artist paint pictures of one of those super heroes on each of the car’s doors. It was so fancy. All us kids in the neighborhood would ask Amin and his sister for a ride.”

“Did you ever get a ride?”


Jamie didn’t see anything funny in that answer and asked, “Was it awesome?”

“Depends who you ask. Anyhow, if you want to hear this story finished before you have to go, we better get to it. It’s getting dark.”

“OK - I won’t ask any more questions.”

“Well the family’s house was up a little hill, and the car was always parked in the driveway on the hill. Lot’s of times we would all try to get into the car to pretend to drive it. But the car was always locked. But one afternoon someone forgot to lock the door. And Amin and his friends were able to get inside. I was coming home from school, and every time I passed his house, I would look at the car. This time I saw something surprising: I saw Amin and 2 of his friends get into the car. That got my attention.”

“Why did you pay attention to that?”

“Because the car was never unlocked. And I got curious as to how come they were able to get in. And anyhow I worried a little because kids aren’t supposed to play in cars you know.”

“Why not, Henry?”

“Because there are too many things that can go really wrong. Some buttons are safe. But others aren’t. One could unlock the brake. Another could turn on the engine.”

“So did something bad happen?”

“You can say that again. All of a sudden, one of them must have pressed the button that released the brake. And the car starting rolling backwards. It was slow at first, because you know when something is rolling down hill, it starts very slow. Then it just goes faster and faster. While it was still going slowly, Amin’s two friends jumped out. But Amin didn’t jump out.”

“Were you very far away?”

“No, I was getting closer. And then, when I noticed that Amin wasn’t getting out, I started to run. Well, you know when you have a heavy back pack you can’t go fast enough. So I dropped my backpack and really started going fast. I was getting pretty close to the driveway when I heard Amin yell for help.”

“Was it scary?”

“Very, the car was heading straight for a big tree.”

“Why didn’t Amin get out.”

“He’d had played with the seat belt, and was stuck inside - he couldn’t get out.”
“What did you do?”

“I ran so fast I got to the car, jumped inside released the seat belt and grabbed little Amin. I jumped out of the car and rolled on his lawn. The car just picked up speed and hit the tree. Then it exploded.”

“Wow, was that your ride?”

“Yup. Noone could ride in the car after that. And it was because I was so worried about poor Amin getting hurt that I ran so fast. And ever since then some people say I have super - speed.”

“So you saved Amin’s life? That could make you a super hero for real Henry.”

“That’s what his sister always said. Anyhow, so now you know how I got my ‘super-speed.’ My mother was right. If you want something really a lot, and make a big effort you just could get it.”

“It’s getting dark and I better go home. But I have to do something first.”

“You’re right, it is getting dark. What do you have to do?”

“I brought you a present.”

“Really?”

“Yup, I told my mom about you and she made you some brownies and told me to bring you this sleeping bag.” And Jamie climbed off the crate. He took off his back pack, and gave Hobo-Man a plastic container with brownies in it and unstrapped a warm sleeping bag.

“Gee, thanks Jamie. That’s the first present I’ve gotten in a long time.”

And Jamie gave Hobo-Man a hug. And Hobo-Man said, “Hope I’ll see ya soon.” Jamie left and was thinking he could write a good essay now.

Hobo-Man put out his cup, and picked up his trumpet. He put away the second crate he had gotten for Jamie, and played a beautiful tune called Old Man River. Jamie walked slowly so he could hear more of the music, but pretty soon he had to turn the corner and the noise of the traffic was too loud to hear the trumpet any more.

People walked out of the big office buildings and passed the man with the trumpet, and some put money in his cup. When no more people were left to go home, Henry took out the brownies and ate them, and thought about how much fun it was to tell his stories to his new friend.

Finally, the city was going to sleep. Hobo-Man thought about his new warm sleeping bag. He realized he didn’t need to sleep on the grate in the middle of the sidewalk just to stay warm. So with a smile in his heart he took his bag of things and went to sleep under a beautiful big tree in nearby Stevens Park.
It was mid-December when Jamie next had time to revisit his friend near the corner of Washington and 6th Street. And as Jamie turned the corner of Washington it was Hobo-Man who saw Jamie first. He took his trumpet from his lips and waved it in the air. Jamie waved back, and with a quick step started to cross the street.

“Stop, look out!” screamed Hobo-Man. Luckily Jamie heard him and stopped. A car drove right where Jamie would have stepped if Henry hadn’t shouted. Jamie waited for the walk sign to signal his turn, looked, and came over to Hobo-Man.

“That was too close. You’ve gotta look buddy!”

“Right. I just forgot.”

“Forgetting never counts. You could be running away from a robber, or a wild lion, or even an alligator, but not looking is the worst.”

“I’ll try to remember.”

“Look, Jamie, it’s important. It was because a kid didn’t look that I got the reputation of being a super hero.”

“Really? Tell me the story!”

“First, I gotta tell you - it’s nice seeing you. Haven’t seen you in a while, buddy.”

“I know, I had a science fair project.”

“Really? What was it about?”

“I tried to design a nifty, tent for people who live on the street. It had to collapse and open.”

“Did it work?”

“Sort of. But I couldn’t get the collapse and go up part to work. It was a bummer.”

“Sorry about that. But I gotta tell you something important: that sleeping bag sure helped on some of these cold nights!”

“Great, my Mom has been wondering about that.”

“Did you feed the pigeon today?”

“Yeah, it’s already left. I hope it has a warm place to sleep.”

“Me too. But the sun goes down and it gets cold pretty early now too. So maybe you could begin the story about how you got the reputation of a super hero.”

Hobo-Man pulled out Jamie’s orange crate and set it up next to him. Jamie sat down on it and Hobo-Man began his story:

“Well it was a beautiful fall day. I was sitting on a crate, playing my trumpet in front of the
Church of Our Lady of Grace on Willow.”

“Is that the big brick church with the fence around it?” asked Jamie.

“That’s the one. Anyhow, there was this kid who was walking with his mother and they had stopped right by me to cross over into the park. The kid liked my music, and asked his Mom to stop and listen. I remember exactly what she said:

‘We don’t stop to listen to a beggar. If you want to listen to music like that, I’ll download some for your I-Pod.’

“He asked again, but she just said they were in a hurry and he was to stop whining about something so silly. I kept playing my music. She was watching the street and talking on the phone. Then she started to go across the street. Well he was hanging back watching a low flying helicopter that was making an awful racket. Suddenly he saw that his Mom had crossed the street. He immediately started to run into the street. I saw this big grocery truck coming his way. Clearly the kid wasn’t going to make it. The mother just continued to walk while talking on the phone. She didn’t notice that the kid had not crossed the street.”

“What happened then, Henry?”

“Well, I dropped my trumpet, and ran as fast as I could into the street, and swept up the kid in my arms. I sort of slid into the curb on my belly but holding the kid in my arms. He didn’t get hurt. I busted my tooth - see?” And with this, Hobo-Man opened his mouth and pointed to a bottom front tooth that had a big piece missing.

“Gee, you must have run real fast.”

“I did. The driver of the truck slammed on his brakes. After the truck stopped he was very shook up. He was hauling a million water melons. Lots of them fell out and broke into pieces in the street. He started yelling at me and the kid. The mother didn’t know what happened and how come her kid was in my arms. She was very shook up. There were a few bystanders. They all clustered around the kid and me. When she realized what had happened she started to cry. Then she realized I was the ‘street-beggar’ that the kid had wanted to listen to. She seemed very embarrassed.”

“Didn’t she say thank you or give you anything? Or do something?”

“I think she was too stunned. She was crying. But she did say ‘Bless you’ and then took the kid’s hand and they walked away.”

“You mean no-one gave you a reward you for saving the kid’s life? Did you ever learn his name?”

“Oh yeah. His name was Charles Hutton, Jr. Well the next day the father came by. He thanked me and asked if I had a bank account. I said no. He took me to a bank right there and then. Then he wrote some fancy papers to give me a bank account. He deposited a big check in my account and said thank you.”

“Oh, so that meant you have some money.”

“I do. In case I ever need it, I have an account.”
“How come you sleep out on the streets if you have money?”

“Oh it’s not that much money. Not enough money for an apartment or a room. Anyhow, I don’t know. I am sort of used to the street. All I’ve got is what they put in my cup.”

“But you could play in that band.”

“Yeah, I could. But I haven’t gotten back to them.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Maybe.”

“Did you ever see any of the family again?”

“Used to be someone in the family would come by to say hello. The boy must be about 12 now. I think they moved to the suburbs a while back. I don’t see them anymore.”

“You said this is how come some people know about you. How did that happen?”

“One of the bystanders wrote a piece for the Hoboken Reporter. I got a copy in that black bag. She said I was a super-hero, and was super-fast. That’s where my reputation got started.”

“Why did she call you a super-hero?”

“She said super-heroes are those who will help people who they don’t even know, and even those who aren’t particularly nice to them.”

“Do you think she is right?”

“Jamie, look at me! I’m just a regular human living on the street. How could I be a super-hero? Super-heroes are in comics. I just do what I feel I’ve got to do.”

“Wow, Henry, I think you are a super-hero. I think she was right. Helping others who aren’t even nice to you is pretty special. Were you living on the street back then?”

“Yes, I slept in a big cardboard box.”

“You’ve helped a lot of people, haven’t you Henry?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been around on the streets and some times people need a little help. If I’m there, I try.”

“I am so glad I have gotten to know you. I’m going to write up that essay for Mrs. Epstair.”

“I’m glad you had to do the report, Jamie.”

“Well, my Dad and Mom said it was getting pretty cold tonight and we were talking. We wondered where you are sleeping tonight?”

“You know, it’s supposed to get pretty cold. Maybe 10. So I am thinking I would sleep in the shelter tonight.”

“Would you want to sleep at our place? My parents said it was almost Christmas and you shouldn’t be out on the streets when it is this cold.”

And Hobo-Man went home with Jamie. During that winter, whenever it was really cold, he’d
have a place at Jamie’s. And he started playing regular in that band on Saturday nights, and was able to put some money in his bank account.

But most days even in the winter, he is still out on the corner, playing his Dad’s trumpet. And most nights unless it is very cold, you can find him in one of Hoboken’s city parks. Some afternoons there’s a second crate out on the sidewalk. And some of those days, a boy named Jamie is sitting on it, talking to Henry: a man others call Hobo-Man.