

Peg-Leg Flash

by Packy Lundholm

It must have been some time in mid-December. The living room was already at its peak of warmth and welcome. Furniture was rearranged to accommodate the thick fir tree in the corner while pine cones, antique Santas, and fragrant tree clippings adorned the green dresser and its accompanying mirror. Most importantly, the kitchen was stocked with perennial almond crescent cookies and enough egg nog to tranquilize a horse. As a studious fourth-grader I took great pains to finish my homework early so that I could spend the rest of the evening scooting around the house in flannel pants, inflating my chest with that unique humming blend of tradition and speculation.



Our family made do in a 2-bedroom red and brick house, a paltry living situation compared to the marble estates one would often find in our gaudy Chicago suburb. Sure, this house had a “basement,” but unlike the wood-paneled rec rooms that made up our town’s lower level, ours was lined with strange green tile and greeted its daring visitors with the sweet, pungent odor of radon and cat shit.

Most people choke on their own shock when I tell them my parents didn’t have a bedroom for 15 years. They were blessed with at least a floor to sleep on in the den, a low-elevation addition that connected the garage to the kitchen. Rather than a standard mattress/box spring configuration, my parents kept a neatly folded pile of blankets on a corner table in the den, spreading them on the floor every night to build the affectionately dubbed “floor bed.” Sometimes I myself am amazed that they managed to crank out four of their five kids (the Irish Catholic family quota) in this arrangement. But I usually stop myself, because I don’t like to dwell on those details.

My sister Liza, by far the oldest kid and the only daughter, inhabited one of the coveted bedrooms by herself. The other room held Chris, Nick, myself, and Petey. My older brothers slept in the bunk beds against the close wall while Petey and I had beds in the far corner arranged perpendicular to the bunk beds. This allowed the maximum

amount of space for basketball sessions under the Kellogg's 1992 Dream Team tribute hoop that hung over the closet door.

It should go without saying that aside from emergency holiday cleaning sessions the boys' bedroom was a complete catastrophe. Numerous factors contributed to this state of affairs, not the least of which was over a decade's worth of Legos consistently pouring into the household at unknown times from unknown sources. Not one Christmas do I remember any of us unwrapping a Lego set, yet anyone so foolish as to walk through our room barefoot was sure to exit furiously with a full set of rectangular red and yellow cleats. Add this to two generations of baby blocks, a rust-pitted Hot Wheels collection donated by a generous uncle, and a pair of brothers with an insatiable lust for non-functional 2-string acoustic guitars, and you'll find yourself with hardly anywhere to throw your dirty underwear.

A prominent group within this sea of childhood memorabilia was our action figure collection. There was Jason, the Red Power Ranger. There was an ancient Captain America, complete with a customizable shield. There was The Flash, our beacon of lightning speed, efficiency, and booksmarts. Often one Batman was thrown in the ring against other Batmen boasting various colored suits or hi-tech accessories. There was even a glow-in-the-dark mummy that we found in the bushes next to the house. These figures were the portal through which we traveled into that precious, long-lost state of simple imaginative wonder.

One might like to think, regarding our bedroom's state of disarray and the hazardous condition in which we placed our things every afternoon that we brothers lacked appreciation for the toys we were so lucky to have amassed. This, however, just isn't true. We knew quite well how important each of these toys was to the greater good of our toy universe, warts and all. Rolling a purple three-wheeled El Dorado on the hardwood floor with one finger over the front left tire was more than sufficient to supply countless hours of joy on a Saturday morning.

Perhaps, had we the means to properly store these figures, building blocks, and guitar bodies we could have had a system that allowed us to access our desired items without unstacking an immense skyscraper of plastic crates. But we were kids, kids with all the time in the world but not enough time between school and bedtime, and any delay

in the play process would be precious time wasted. It was a true sign of affection that we left our stuff all over the floor, despite the fact that it made bedtime a practice in the standing long-jump. My mom didn't buy this argument, however, and the seasonal room cleaning remained in order.

Amazingly it wasn't too often that our toys experienced any casualties. It was much more frequent that they would cause harm to the real people in the room (In fact, I think one of Batman's grappling hooks is still stuck somewhere in the ball of my left foot). But whenever we lost a toy it felt as if a part of our second family was lost forever, never to be adequately replaced by some lame drug store find. For example, He-Man villain Skeletor's career in terror was tragically cut short when he was inexplicably launched onto the roof of the garage, never to return to land. After an extended period of mourning we came together to adopt a new airborne toy policy and came out of the tragedy all the better. As for injured toys, our family capitalized on our unmatched ability to wing it with what little means we had. More often than not our damaged heroes made it back to the floor after some kind of improvised and crafty surgery using whatever extra junk was lying around. Such is the story of Peg-Leg Flash.



Despite having beautified the living room, the crew was still amidst the holiday task of getting the bedrooms in order. Apparently the rule was Santa wouldn't come unless he could see the floor. Either that or the risk of excitedly jumping out of bed early Christmas morning, slipping on a Super Ball and careening head first through the closet door seemed a bit too much a liability for my mom. Whatever the motive, Mom cued up our crackling Crosby, Stills and Nash record (with our full approval) and we got down to business.

Those brutal Legos and Hot Wheels were back in their crates. Chris's Guns N' Roses tapes were neatly arranged by the boombox. An Olympic-sized collection of soccer balls and shin guards returned to its home in the closet. Every bastard little Nerf foam ball and suction cup dart was reunited with its respective weapon. This floor was about to be so clean Rudolph's nose would shine back at him. However, as my mom was putting on a new record, the tragic discovery was made.

“Hey man, where’s Flash’s leg?” Chris said, hoping nobody of authority would hear. Flash lay on his face, his left leg nothing more than a white plastic stub, an incomplete hinge.

Trying to take the logical road I assured him, “It’s gotta be under the bed or something, don’t worry about it. We’ll just pop it back on.”

“Whatever man, it just frimma shmm hmm nmmm uhhhh...toys...can’t fuggin’ walk in here..,” grumbled Nick. In all my life I haven’t comprehended an entire sentence out of him.

Chris stuffed Flash in his pocket for later analysis and we kept working. By dinnertime the room was spotless, ripe for the slam dunk contest that was destined to go down that night. But Flash’s leg was still nowhere in sight. After throwing back a gallon of egg nog with desert we went back into the bedroom to discuss the situation. Chris pulled Flash out and laid him on the newly-made bed for closer inspection and analysis of the situation.

While Flash wasn’t necessarily a special or expensive toy, Mom and Dad would recognize the negligent nature of this damage and punish us all appropriately. In the absolute worst case, news of this infraction would possibly make its way up the chain to the North Pole and all this cleaning and generally good behavior would be for naught. Therefore Chris and I agreed with an affirming honk from Nick that this sad casualty was best left hidden from the parents. This plan would have worked out just fine, had my little brother not come in and seen our accidental amputee on the bed.

“Ohhhhhh crap dooty ass shit, what the bitch happened?” Petey was well ahead of the cuss game, having been constantly exposed to three older brothers in close proximity. But at five years old he had yet to understand swearing syntax.

In swung Mom. “Petey, watch your mouth! And don’t encourage him, you guys...Hey what happened to Flash?”

This was not one of those questions you could or should answer, because it’s merely the introduction to a series of small lectures anchored by such a thesis as:

“You see what happens when you guys leave all your stuff around? Can’t you treat your toys any better than this? We can’t just go and get you a new Flash when it breaks, you know!”

We looked straight at the ground, taking this scolding as required. Petey cracked under the pressure, wailing and running out the door before realizing that there was nowhere to run to and sheepishly returning to eat it like the rest of us.

Despite her justified frustration, my mom sympathized with our sadness over losing our super hero's sole source of super power and lent us an assuring word that would in actuality send us further into despair.

“Maybe Dad can do something about this.”

The problem was whenever Dad “did something” about anything like “this,” it usually meant we were all taking a trip to the Goddammit Chambers.

Founded by Chris during a particularly troublesome toilet repair incident, the Goddammit Chambers was a fictional emergency system designed to protect us from Dad's wrath. Upon hearing our father utter “Goddammit...” under his breath, which typically came out as a crescendo “nnngaaaaahhhhHHHDDAMMIT,” we were to immediately bolt to our room (the Chambers), assume the fetal position, and strap on our Goddammit Helmets. The reason for all this was that any home maintenance complication, speeding ticket, or unnecessary awakening that elicited a Goddammit would put Dad in a mood whose sheer force could blow shrapnel through a brick wall, and every measure of avoidance and protection should be in order. While we never really wore helmets or actually assumed the fetal position, the Goddammit Chambers was a very tangible state of caution, patience, and silence.



With helmets secured and feet stepping lightly we went down into the Den. Peering over each other's shoulders, the four of us lined up on the little stairs facing Dad's Chair. We knew this approach was all about timing; if Dad wasn't ready for this kind of confrontation, the whole thing would be screwed. However, if we caught him at a good time of night, we could enjoy ourselves a nice Flash/Captain America joint adventure in a matter of minutes. Luckily he was just finishing up an episode of This Old House, the kind of inspirational craftography we hoped he'd be watching. The show didn't entirely lighten his mood, though. As my dad heard us carefully explain Flash's

injury the curl in his eyebrows let us know that yet another series of small lectures was in order.

“But how the hell did this happen? You see what happens when you guys leave all your stuff around? We can’t just go and get you a new-”

“We already got that, Dad, just fix it! Shit!” Petey didn’t really get tact yet, either.

“Okay Petey, just calm down a second. Lemme think about this.”

My father is the king of zero-expense household mechanics, cleaning and repair. His brilliant improvisation, inspired by many years as a freelance interior decorator and a four-decade relationship with the Grateful Dead, has produced some pretty incredible performances from clinically dead pieces of machinery. These days the kitchen plumbing is comprised more of athletic tape and old socks than PVC. The bottom sheet metal of our white ’84 Impala rusted through, requiring Dad to bolt the driver’s seat to a plank of plywood attached to the remaining undercarriage. Other than dropping three hundred bucks on sheet metal this was the only way to avoid having the seat fall through the floor in a dazzling display of sparks and Flinstonian braking. If you pitted my dad against a flooding toilet armed with only with a Slinky and a drumstick he could make that thing flush like it owed him money. In short, Dad was the only one to turn to for Flash’s surgery.

After silently pondering his options Dad collapsed the duct-taped footrest on the La-Z-Boy, reached over and flung open the drawer on the night stand next to His Chair. After sifting through a dense pile of broken fine watches, “I Like Ike” buttons and spent sleeves of Zig-Zags he procured a light wood chopstick.

“Packy, go into the kitchen and get me the ah...”

Like Nick, my father is notorious for producing incomprehensible sentences, although rather than mumbling he tends to not actually finish his sentences. But in this case he made little O’s with his hands, pulling them apart as he talked. I silently understood this motion to be the universal symbol for Steel Shish-Kabob Skewers, and swiftly fulfilled his semi-vocal demand.

With precisely eyeballed aim my dad approached the chopstick, holding the skewer like a pencil in his right hand. His hands shook slightly and consistently, as they always did when he performed small, detailed manual work. This shaking always

concerned us when gauging Dad's ability to properly perform such intricate tasks. However, despite what appeared to be a lack of dexterity he had a way of guiding his hands so deliberately and confidently in their purpose they would land exactly where they needed to go. Thus the point of the skewer landed square in the center of the stick, creating a conical crater about a quarter of an inch from the top.

Dad twisted the skewer while applying force to the chopstick, using the dent as a central point of reference. The skewer was making easy progress through the wood; it was so easy in fact that it poked through the other end of the stick without warning, shooting the sharp steel tip into the meat of his middle finger. While instinctively swinging his left hand up to his lips, he let out an equally instinctive

“nngaHD—“

Dammit. Well if we weren't in for it before, we certainly were then. We all took a step back, wondering why we even let Mom inform Dad of the situation, let alone suggest he fix it. My brothers and I knew something like this would happen. This family tends to make it through projects just barely long enough to anticipate success, only to let one minor mistake or unexpected flaw in the plan drain every precious bit of gumption we had. We feared the Peg-Leg Flash tale would end like the Great Fence Building Incident of '92, with abrupt banishment to the Chambers and urgent advice from Mom to never speak of it again.

But there was no Dammit. Maybe the finger poking wasn't quite as painful as it looked. Perhaps this project had already reached a point of no return, the “I've worked on your science project too long and hard for you to screw it up now” effect. Whatever the reasoning, my brothers and I silently exhaled in relief and made especially sure we kept out of our father's way the rest of the time.

With the skewer fully through the chopstick Dad began spinning it around in larger and larger circles, increasing the hole's diameter. After numerous fittings and adjustments Flash's leg socket was complete, just large enough to fit snugly over the hip stump while allowing full flexibility. I was then motioned to “get the, ah,” hacksaw, and the prosthesis was precision cut to match the length of his functioning leg.

Of course, we weren't about to let the fastest super hero of them all sport a tan balsa wood leg. He had to at least still *look* the part. So we pulled out the Crayon Can,

our communal art supply, and dug up the cleanest-tipped red and yellow markers we could find. The bottom half-inch of the peg leg was marked yellow, matching the goldenrod winged boot that graced Flash's superhuman right foot. The upper section of the superprosthesis took on the red color of the rest of the suit. If you crossed your eyes and stood back, the Flash looked as he did the day we got him, which I guess nobody actually remembers.

So by the time John McLaughlin cast his stern weekly political predictions and analyses to my father's delight, we were back in our freshly cleaned bedroom sliding down the wood floor from the closet to the beds in our socks. This rare pleasure had to come to a halt, however, for we had to get Flash back on the scene. He fit right back in with the crew. Our boys weren't the kind to discriminate by race, gender, age, paint job condition, or disability. In fact, given the pliable nature of his hip joint the Flash could often stand up on his own better than his fully endowed colleagues.



A few years later Mom sat us down individually and explained to us that we would be moving to our grandmother's house across town. While this new home would finally give my parents their own bedroom and offer the rest of us such luxuries as cable TV and a dishwasher, none of us were excited to part with the cozy disheveled house in which we grew up and the mellow neighborhood where we made our childhood memories. However, no amount of kicking and screaming on our behalf would cure Grandma's Alzheimer's disease or make her any less dependent on our constant care and attention.

For ten years after the move Grandma and all of us fought the effects of her degenerating sickness. Before long her condition reached the point where she had to be tended to like an infant, requiring that someone be at the house with her at all times. My mom had to take on absurd hours working the deli of the grocery store so that she could be home in time to feed her in the morning and perform unimaginable tasks in hygiene and potty re-training at night. Each of us would be frequently awoken at all hours of the night when Grandma's confusions reached a point of self-inflicted, loudly vocalized terror. This living and care-giving situation certainly didn't help us financially, and

despite Dad's plumbing wizardry some home repairs were postponed indefinitely, leaving us with a house that would soon become a test of our toilet-handle-jiggling and garage-door-propping skills.

But we always found a way to deal with our situation. Be it casting a humorous light on dementia or crafting a tight schedule of household exits and returns, we found a way to work it out. Our goal was to keep Grandma healthy and help her deal with her issues as comfortably and transparently as possible, and this we did better than any retirement home could.

The toys that littered our little corner of the house were packed away more or less permanently in the garage, possibly awaiting the arrival of another generation to cherish them. The Tonka trucks, those horribly painful Legos, the tiny parking garage and the little wooden train set were boxed up tight or donated, not to be seen again for decades if ever. Yet in my parents' bedroom Peg-Leg Flash stood, on the stocky dresser of living rooms past, watching us make it work like we always did.