# The Day the Hero Came

## By Stevie Leslie

## 2nd Place in the Over 26 Age Category

My day had been no different from the one before, or the one before that. Another long shift at the theme park, sweating inside a polyester superhero costume, telling children—too earnestly, perhaps—to be heroes in their own lives and to work hard at school. The children ignored me; the adults smirked knowingly, as if my costume proved I was unqualified for anything more demanding. I regretted not working harder at school, regretted being the joker who never quite grew out of it.

The heat was relentless as I drove home, the sun glaring off car bumpers like a procession of bright beetles. Traffic crawled, then surged, then crawled again. Inside my car, the air conditioning coughed out recycled warmth; outside, the air shimmered with fumes. I tugged at the costume, wondering why humanity could put men on the moon but not design a breathable outfit for a grown man who had made poor life choices.

That was when I saw him.

A teenage boy in a wheelchair at the crossing lights, struggling to get off the pavement. One wheel had dipped down, the other refused to follow. I could see the angle was wrong; he needed to start again. But the lights would change soon—this was a dual carriageway, and he had only moments. His frustration grew, shoulders shaking, tears brushed away with angry hands.

He reminded me of my older brother, who had once used a wheelchair too. He had died ten years ago, and perhaps that was when I decided to become the joker, trying to make everyone smile because my family had forgotten how.
I made one of my famous split second decisions.

The driver's door was jammed in the heat, so I hauled myself out through the open window, sprinted across the road, and reached the boy. I lifted the chair back onto the pavement, repositioned it, and then pushed him across the road

as fast as my legs could carry us, using his weight to propel me forward. We reached the other side just as the lights changed. I saluted him—because I was still wearing the ridiculous costume—and raced back to my car.

In the rear view mirror, I saw him smiling and waving. I hoped he'd choose a safer route next time. Then the moment slipped away, swallowed by traffic and heat.

That night, at home, my parents bickered softly while the news droned on. I wasn't listening until the final "fun" item. Someone had added computer generated imagery, but the scene was unmistakable.

"Spiderman came to the rescue of a boy in trouble today," the presenter announced.
The boy was interviewed. He said he'd be more careful, but the experience had given him confidence to go out alone more often because "there are good people around."

For the first time in a long while, I felt like a proper hero – not the polyester clad pretend one I was routinely paid to be.

I smiled as I went to bed; my brother would have been pleased. I imagined him giving me the sneaky thumbs-up he often did, when I did the rash, but right thing. For a moment, I felt him very close to me again.