

Super Acorns

Mike Resnick and Lawrence Schmel

Even super acorns don't fall far from the tree.

"As the oak grows, so shall the acorn."

Dear Ma:

Yes, I know I haven't written in a couple of weeks, and that I promised to write you every day, and yes, I'm getting my greens. And it's my cholesterol count you're worried about, not my chlorophyll count. Trust me on that; I'm a doctor, remember?

Anyway, I haven't written because I'm tired. (No, don't send any chicken soup; the last time you did, it leaked through the package and stained my copy of Playboy in a very delicate place.) And I'm tired because I went into pediatrics instead of something restful like geriatrics. I mean, I could really get into sitting around watching a bunch of old codgers give up the ghost.

Uh... I didn't mean that quite the way it sounded, Ma. Besides, you'll be shopping up a storm long after I'm in the grave, which could be the middle of next week the way things are going.

Pediatrics isn't exactly what I expected it to be. At least, not my practice. For example...

Whoops—another Code Four Emergency. Gotta run. I'll write again later. If I can keep awake.

Love, Harvey

Dear Ma:

Yes, I'm remembering to floss after each meal. Honest.

Anyway, the crisis is over. For the time being. I put Valium in all their formulas, so I ought to be able to finish this letter before the next emergency.

In answer to the question in your last letter, I can't call from work because we've only got two phones here, and I'm not allowed to use them even for a medical consultation. The green phone is for when a superhero needs an ambulance, and the red phone is a direct line to the White House.

You know, when I got the highest grades in med school, I figured I was going to get a plum job, and truth to tell, when I first was approached for this one, I jumped at it. I should have stopped to figure out why the guy who was leaving for duty in Mozambique looked so damned happy. You remember how you used to spank me and then make me stand in a corner when you caught me playing doctor with little Doris Mishkin who lived upstairs? I felt very lonely and isolated, like everyone in the world was against me (except maybe Doris). I hadn't felt that way again, until I took this fershlugginer job.

You figure at least the superheroes would appreciate us, maybe even feel a little gratitude to us for saving their lives, but the truth of the matter is they hate us for seeing how vulnerable they can be, for seeing the man or woman beneath those crazy colored pajamas. Is it our fault that they come in here with only half a blood-soaked costume left?

Of course, I don't have to deal with that very often. What I do get to deal with are all the parents who hate me because I know they're more afraid of their children than of going up against super-villains. (You wouldn't believe how hard it is to make them come and pick up their children sometimes. They think that

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Dear Ma:

Yes, I thanked Aunt Sophie for the sweater.

Today I had to help out in obstetrics. All the nurses quit in the middle of a delivery, and there was another woman in labor waiting her turn. They needed someone to assist, so who do they call on? Me. The delivery room is split down the middle by a curtain, and as I get there, some guys from Maintenance are leaving the far half of the room, and they're furious. Seems the doctor broke two of their diamond-tooth saws and their best laser drill. The Platinum Woman is giving birth, and as best I can determine, they couldn't get her to dilate enough, no matter how much oil they tried to use as lube, and had to do a C'section.

When the other doctor sees me, he

nods and says, "Take care of the woman in the next room, will you?" So I go next door and introduce myself to the woman, and all that. We go through the whole procedure, and everything is going wonderfully except that there's no baby. Like it was a placebo birth or something. She's pushing and grunting and everything, just no baby.

When it seems like half past forever, I tell her to try to put a little more effort in it. She tells me to go to hell and that the baby is already out.

Well, damn it all, nobody told me it was going to be an invisible baby!

So I pick the thing up, and carry it to the other room as best I can under the circumstances, and hold it up in front of

the other doctor. He's got a huge mask on, with a visor, and sparks are flying everywhere. There's a large arc welder set up next to the bed, and he's welding the Platinum Woman's abdomen shut. It doesn't look very sanitary, but I decide that now is perhaps not a good time to mention it.

"What do you want?" he yells at me over the noise from the machine. "Can't you see that I'm busy?"

"The baby's out," I shout back.

"So what do you want?" he shouts back. "A medal? Go cut the umbilical cord and tie a knot." While I'm wondering how to explain to him that the baby's invisible and I can't see the goddamned cord, he yells at me, "Here,

take this!" and tosses me a pair of shears that are really mangled and notched.

"Give them back to Maintenance when you're done," he adds, and turns back to his welding. Great, I think as I go back to my delivery room, now I have to take the blame with Maintenance, too. They're all against me here, Ma; it must be latent anti-Semitism.

Anyway, I've still got this invisible baby to take care of. I take a good look at it, or where I think it is, and try to figure out how I'm going to do this. By feeling along its body with one hand, and holding the scissors in the other, I find the umbilical cord. For a minute I worry about the malpractice suit they can launch against me, but then I realize

there's no way they can produce the evidence, unless the kid learns how to turn un-invisible when he grows older. If it is a he, in the first place, which I really hope it isn't. It's one thing to have to deal with cutting an invisible umbilical cord, but if it's a boy, he'll never survive the bra.

Then, just as I'm about to actually go through with cutting the cord, the alarm goes off in Room 14—

Have I told you about my ward, Ma? I get all the problem kids, and Room 14's got Pyroman's bouncing baby boy. The kid's got a problem that's not totally unlike, say, bed-wetting, except that since he's a pyrokinetic, he sets his bed on fire in his sleep instead of just

soaking it like any normal kid. I have to drop everything and race back to my ward whenever the alarm goes off, since I'm the only pediatrician on duty and I don't want to wind up with a suit for negligence or anything. (Besides, I get enormous satisfaction out of blasting the little bastard with the fire extinguisher, for all the trouble he causes. It doesn't do him any harm, but it feels good.)

So I put the scissors and the baby down and go put the fire out, and when I'm done I go back to obstetrics, to see how things turned out. The moment I set foot in the delivery room, the doctor starts screaming at me, accusing me of stealing the baby and calling me all sorts of names. I tell him the baby was

invisible, and he tells me not to be absurd and that it'll never fly in court, and I keep explaining that I already got three babies in the ward that can fly and what we're talking about is one that can disappear.

Well, we still haven't found the baby. Right now I'm hiding in the prep room in Nephrology, waiting for the hubbub to die down, which is why I've had so much time to write this long letter. But I'm out of paper now, so I guess I'd better close.

Exasperatedly, Harvey

Dear Ma:

Yes, I'm remembering to wear my overcoat when I go out.

Well, we finally found the baby. Dr.

Yingleman almost crushed it to death when he was schtupping a nurse two rooms away. It gave out a scream that cracked his contact lenses, and after a little feeling around, we located it—it's a him, poor devil—and moved it to my ward. Then, while I'm standing there in the nursery, warming a bottle of motor oil for the platinum baby, in comes this couple carrying a bucket of water.

"There's been a horrible mistake here," the man says to me. "I can fly, and my wife can see through walls, and you've given us a baby that turns into water." He holds up the bucket. "What are we supposed to do with him? The first time we try to toilet train him, he's going to get flushed down the drain." I

say maybe he can fight crime by turning into water and invading the bad guys' hideouts via the sewer system, and they just glare at me.

"This is totally unacceptable," says the woman. "We expected something that could fly and see through buildings."

"Can you fly?" I asked her.

"No," she says.

"Can your husband see through walls?"

"No," she says.

"Except for the greenhouse," he adds thoughtfully.

"Well, then, be grateful your kid can do something. You could have had one who couldn't fly or see through walls."

"But a child who turns into water..."

says the man dubiously. "The dog might drink him by accident." We talk about it a little more, and finally I suggest that if they can just make it through his adolescence, they can put him in a squirt gun and have him transform once they spray the bad guys, which sounds silly as hell to me in retrospect, but he kind of likes the idea, and she decides they can tint him with decorator colors so they don't accidentally mix him into a cocktail, and they finally leave. Then Mrs. Blumberg—you know her as Mighty Wench—brings Philbert in to get his shots, and the second she leaves to go visit the Golden Swan, who got nailed by Falconman the other night and is recuperating down the hall, the kid

turns difficult and says, "If you try to give me a shot, I'll hold my breath until I turn blue!"

"So hold your breath," I say, pulling out a syringe.

He takes a big gulp of air, and tenses, and squeezes his eyes shut. I lean forward with the needle, when I notice he's really starting to turn blue.

At first I am amused by it, but then I began to worry: What will Mighty Wench think if she comes back and finds that her precious little Philbert suddenly looks like a Smurf? And just as I'm worrying about it, in she comes, and takes one look at the kid and walks across the room and takes the syringe away from me and throws it through the

window and the last I see of it it is going into orbit and will probably prove a traffic hazard to Skylab or whatever we've got up there these days. As she's walking out with Philbert, he turns and sticks his tongue out at me.

You ever see a 48-inch-long blue tongue? Me, I'm going to be seeing it in my nightmares for the next half century.

Worriedly, Harvey

Dear Ma:

Yes, I'll get a haircut as soon as I have time. I promise.

Things are really getting hectic around here. Broke nine needles trying to give Steelman's kid a shot. The plastic kid keeps disguising himself as a raincoat and going home wrapped around Nurse

Murchison. Whiz Kid's daughter found out that I like to root for the Pirates, so she races to Three Rivers Stadium and back—a little journey of 5300 miles round trip—between every pitch to tell me what's going on. (Yeah, I know she's only 14 weeks old, but she not only talks and runs, she's committed the entire works of Danielle Steele to memory.)

Still, I have my few moments of triumph. Finally figured out that if I put one crib upside down atop another, it would prevent the Levitator's baby from floating away. And since I couldn't stop Foghorn's daughter from sneezing, I rented her out to the construction crew that's tearing down 4th Street between Main and Elm; she leveled the whole

block with two sneezes and a snuffle. Biggest problem now is little Malcolm, the Vanisher's son. He can't vanish, but he can make other things vanish. Last night it was Nurse Murchison's uniform. Maybe I shouldn't have looked so approving, because this morning he repeated his trick, and she blamed me. And now I hear that six CATscan machines have disappeared into thin air.

Oh, and there's little Penny, the Changer's kid. About an hour ago I found a 30-foot python on the floor. Just as I was about to evacuate the room and call for help, it changed back into Penny. So now every time I see a spider or a crumpled piece of paper or a half-eaten sandwich, I have to check and see where

Penny is before I stomp on it or throw it out or, God forbid, eat it. And to think—I turned down the Mayo Clinic for this.

Unhappily, Harvey

Dear Ma:

I've had it with this place. Today was the last straw. I get to work, and what do I find waiting for me in the nursery?

Copycat's kid.

You remember Copycat? She's the one who can change her appearance in half a second, so that she can look like a gang member and infiltrate the enemy.

Well, I have a feeling her kid is going to grow up to be Xeroxman. He can reproduce himself endlessly, and even as I write this I am surrounded by 78 identical babies—all with dirty diapers.

I'm getting out of this madhouse and into some sane practice, like maybe pathology or forensics. Exhaustedly, Harvey

P.S. Yes, of course I'm changing my underwear every day.

Dear Ma:

It's blood pressure, not blood pleasure, and yes, I'm watching it.

Concerning pediatrics: Maybe I was a little bit hasty.

This morning they bring in a corpse, and I am in the middle of the autopsy when what's left of the body suddenly sits up and asks me what it died of this time.

It's Spiritman, of course... and when I'm done with him, I have to work on the

Spook and then Zombie Girl and then the Vampire Bat, and I find that I am not cut out for discussing the whys and wherefores of their latest fatalities with a bunch of super-corpses.

I've got to get out of this place.

Distractedly, Harvey

Dear Ma:

You really didn't have to send the soup. In fact, I rather wish you hadn't. It leaked through while it was sitting in the mailbox and totally ruined my severance check.

Things are going along fine here at the HMO. I set a broken arm this morning, treated my very first case of gout, and gave a businessman with high blood pressure a low-sodium diet, all before

lunch. I feel like a totally fulfilled person.

There's only one problem.

I'm bored.

Love, Harvey