

Origin

Every superhero has an origin story. Every villain has an origin story.

Every loser has an origin story, too.

Did you know that?

I do.

My time of judgment officially fell one moment in middle school. This one moment clearly defined me as a loser. This one moment cast my loserdom into cold carbonite.

I was thirteen. My family had only recently moved from the tiny humble hamlet of Arroyo Plato to the sprawling opulence of Rancho Ruby.

I had returned from Math to find my locker hanging ajar, its padlock somehow picked. We had lockers in middle school—I missed the backpack hooks of my old school of yesteryear and their implicit belief in the goodness of society—and I liked to keep my paladin figurine on the topmost shelf to visit between classes.

A paladin was a warrior blessed with the power of divine magic.

I had scraped the figurine into form by my own hand from a small block of plaster, then painted it, then sprayed it with a clear coat to protect against scratches.

The sword. The shield. The sigil. The spurs.

It was my one and only copy; I hadn't learned how to cast molds yet, or electroplate, or airbrush, or any of the other things I would later master.

On this day, I opened my locker to discover the figurine had gone missing. In its place was a line, drawn in white chalk, leading down and away. Scrawled instructions read:

THIS WAY SUNNY DAE

I knew this clumsy handwriting; I suspected it was that of Gunner Schwinghammer, who had been born as a fully grown man-child and wowed the adult administration with his preternatural ability to catch and run a football with high school-level acumen. While my friend count never grew beyond two—Milo and Jamal—Gunner's friend count was always increasing.

And indeed, as I followed the line past the water fountains and down the breezeway, I glanced up to see Gunner following me with glittering eyes.

I shook him off. Gunner weighed fifty-two thousand pounds; I weighed six. Gunner was royalty incumbent; I was a serf with stinking mud caked on my boots.

For now, I could only hope that the figurine hadn't gotten dinged beyond the point of reasonable repair.

I continued to follow the line of chalk as it skipped over

cracks and jumped down a curb and into the fresh stinking black of the parking lot.

ALMOST THERE PUBIC HAIR

How far did this stupid line go?

As far as the last car, and into the eraser-red concrete of the baseball area. Down three quick steps, careening right into the shade of an empty dugout.

Around me, the indifferent sun was busy sparkling the dew of another beautiful morning laden with the scent of fresh-cut grass, which was actually a distress chemical released by the mutilated blades in an anguished effort to repair themselves.

The line finally came to rest in the perpetual darkness beneath the fiberglass benches.

PRIZE-A-PALOOZA

YOU TOTAL NERD LOOZA

What I saw was worse than all the looks and all the whippers. What I saw would always be worse than all that Gunner would come to offer: the outright name-calling, the cafeteria-tray flipping, the body checks in the hallway. All the stuff that would follow me past middle school and across the quad into the domain of senior high.

What I saw was my first warning ever.

Paladin Gray had been worn down to a nub, because the figurine itself had been used to draw the line that led me here.

This, the line warned, marks the end of your childhood.

From that day on, I understood.

I understood that here, in Rancho Ruby, no part of my thirteen-year-old self was up to standard. I understood that from now on, every day was a new day in the worst possible

way: each day I would be challenged, and each day I would likely fail.

I could not afford to cry—everywhere was now a dangerous place—so I kicked a hole in the orange earth with my heel and dropped the chunk in. I covered it over. I stomped thrice to mask the seam.

And I stepped back into the sun to survey the new realm before me.



Mimic octopuses change shape and hue.
When they are scared, they become something new.

Spark

I was now seventeen.

I now lived on the other side of the quad, at Rancho Ruby Senior High.

It was Monday. It was school.

What was there to say about school?

Lockers. Class bells. The pantheon of student archetypes: the introspective art girl, the loud jock, the rebel in black. Put your phones away. Will you help me cheat on the quiz. Who will sit next to me at lunch. The kind teacher. The mean teacher. The tough-as-nails vice principal with the secret soft spot.

There was the hot girl, Artemis, whose locker was next to mine, who answered every one of my *Good mornings* with a broadcast-quality eyeroll.

There were the nerds, who were me, Milo, and Jamal.

There could of course be no nerds without a bully—for the bully makes the nerd—and mine was and would ever be Gunner.

Gunner, the human Aryan Tales™ action figure. Gunner (orig. *Gunnar*, Nordic for “warrior”), now the superstar feature back of the Ruby High Ravagers, celebrated for his high-RPM piston quads and record number of berserker-gang end-zone dances.

Gunner would invade my table at lunch to steal chips to feed his illiterate golem of a sidekick and tip our drink bottles and so on, like he had routinely done since the middle school era. He called it the *nerd tax*. By now I was able to instinctively avoid him and his sidekick, with an outward annoyance that was actually barely disguised fear.

What a cliché.

I regarded Ruby High through skeptical eyes, as if it did not really exist. It was a school like many other schools in the country, all repeating similar patterns in similar fashion, again and again throughout all ages, world without end.

Track and field—*track* for short—was where I could lounge with my two best-slash-only friends in the Californian golden hour, picking clovers for fifty minutes straight before performing a few minutes of burst activity: long jump (me), shot put (Milo), and high jump (Jamal).

Ruby High was a football school. Track was what donkey-brained football superstars and their sycophantic coaches did to obsessively fill every minute of every hour with training. No one gave two dungballs about track. No one came to track meets.

I loved track.

Track fulfilled the Physical Education requirement with almost no effort.

“Here comes Coach Oldtimer,” said Jamal. Coach Oldtimer’s real name was We Did Not Care What His Real Name Was.

“Pretend you’re stretching.” He opened his arms and mimed shooting invisible arrows, *pew, pew*. Jamal (third-generation Jamaican-American) was stretched so tall and thin, he was nearly featureless.

“Oh, stretching,” I cried.

Milo (third-generation Guatemalan-American) lay flat and gently rolled side to side, flattening the grass with his muscular superhero body, which he had done nothing to achieve and did nothing to maintain. He even wore thick black prescription glasses as if he harbored a secret identity.

I, Sunny (third-generation Korean-American), bent my unremarkable physique to vigorously rub calf muscles as tender and delicate as veal, rub rub rub.

Together, we three represented 42.85714286 percent of the entire nonwhite population of Ruby High. The other four were Indian, Indian, East Asian, and nonwhite Hispanic, all girls and therefore off-limits, for Milo and Jamal and I did not possess the ability to talk to girls. At Ruby High, we were the lonely-onlies in a sea of everybodies.

“Stretching stretching,” I said.

“Go away Coach go away Coach,” said Milo under his breath.

But Coach Oldtimer did not go away. Coach, an older white man with the face of an enchanted tree scarred by the emerald fires of war, drew near. He’d been with the school since its founding six thousand years ago.

“I like this little dance you guys got going on right here,” said Coach. “Miles, you sure you don’t want to run tight end for the football team? Quick, strong guy like you?”

“It’s Milo,” said Milo.

"I'll join football," said Jamal.

Coach gave skinny Jamal an eyeful of pity. "It gets pretty rough," he said.

"Toxic masculinity," coughed Jamal into his fist.

"What?" said Coach, pouting.

"How can we help you, Coach Oldtimer?" I said.

Coach shook off his bewilderment and maintained his smile. "It's huddle-up time to give all you boys the dope on next week's track meet with Montsange High."

A football jock in the distance cupped his hands to his face and juked an imaginary blitz. Gunner.

"Give us the dope, Coach!" said Gunner. Then he gave a crouched Neanderthal glance over to the girls' track-and-field team to see if they noticed. They did, spasmodically flipping their long flawless locks of hair in autonomic limbic response.

Track was what mouth-breathing football cheerleaders did to ensure they remained visible to donkey-brained football players for every possible minute of every day.

I sat up. "I'm not sure our performance will be significantly enhanced by your dope."

Finally Coach's smile fell. "Your friggin' loss." He stalked away.

"Final grades are decided by attendance, not performance," I called.

"Friggin' nerds," muttered Coach Oldtimer.

"We're not nerds," I whined.

"Okay, nerds," said Gunner.

"Nerds," said some of the girls in the distance.

"Nerds," whispered the wind.

"Why does everyone keep calling us nerds?" said Milo, and

made a worried face that asked, *Did someone find out about DIY Fantasy FX?*

He was referring to our ScreenJunkie channel, where for three years we had been posting homemade videos showing how even the most craft-impaired butterfingers could fashion impressive practical effects from simple household materials for their next LARP event.

LARP, or live action role playing, was when people dressed and acted like their Dungeons & Dragons game characters out in real life.

We did not LARP. We could never. In this temporal plane, we would only get discovered and buried alive under a nonstop torrent of ridicule. As it was, we made sure to never show our faces in our videos—my idea.

Jamal leaned in. “So there’s some pretty exciting audience activity on our channel.”

“Give us the dope, Jamal!” yodeled Milo, and gave an ironic glance over at the girls’ team, who glared back at him like tigers in the sun.

“We finally broke a hundred,” cried Jamal.

Me and Milo exchanged a look. One hundred ScreenJunkie followers. One step closer to advertisers and sponsorships.

“And,” said Jamal, with a wild smile, “we sold three tee shirts! Three!”

Me and Milo exchanged another look, this time with our mouths in twin Os.

“And finally,” said Jamal, hiding his glee behind his very long fingers, “Lady Lashblade *liked* our ‘Pod of Mending’ episode.”

“She liked my glitterbomb,” I said.

“She liked your glitterbomb,” said Jamal.

I gripped the turf like it had just quaked.

Everyone knew how influential Lady Lashblade (best friends with Lady Steelsash (producer of *What Kingdoms May Rise* (starring actor Stephan Deming (husband of Elise Patel (head organizer for Fantastic Faire (the largest medieval and Renaissance-themed outdoor festival in the country)))))) was.

“That is huge,” said Milo.

I hugged Jamal, who recoiled because physical contact was not his absolute favorite, before hugging Milo, who was big on hugging as well as simply big.

“We gotta keep going with new episodes, you guys,” I said.

“Heck yeah we do,” said Jamal, with a grin as wide as his neck.

“We gotta brainstorm our next custom prop,” I said.

Milo pushed up his glasses. “Right now?”

“Right now,” said Jamal.

“So, I was thinking, what if we made a—” I was saying when a football glanced off my temple.

“Catch,” said Gunner.

“Asswipe,” I muttered.

“What?” said Gunner. “What did you call me?”

Coach Oldtimer reappeared upon a fetid cloud of menthol rub. “Ladies, take a powder.”

“He started it,” I said, instantly wishing I hadn’t sounded so whinging. I pointed at my temple and the football on the grass.

“I don’t care who started it,” said Coach Oldtimer. “Warm-ups, let’s go.”

“Coach said warm-ups, nerds,” sang Gunner, who caught up with Coach Oldtimer to share a side-hug and a laugh.

I heaved myself up. “Right as I was pitching my idea.”

“Asswipe,” said Milo, loud enough to make Gunner glance

back and make Milo cower. This made as much sense as a pit bull backing down to a Chihuahua—Milo was big and strong enough to easily kick Gunner back into first grade if he wanted.

“To be continued, you guys,” I said. I broke into the world’s slowest jog, still rubbing my temple. “To be continued!”

I ran my long jumps and averaged three meters, a new personal low.

Milo threw the shot put n meters, n being a number Milo neither remembered nor cared about, because shot put meant about as much as playing Frisbee in the dark with a corpse.

Jamal got the high bar stuck between his legs while midair and abraded the groin muscle next to his right testicle.

But who cared? Who cared about track, or Gunner, or his football? What was important was that DIY Fantasy FX had reached some kind of tipping point. Its next phase was about to begin.



The week accelerated until it became a multicolored blur smearing across time and space. This happened whenever I focused hard on a new prop project. You could say this was what I loved most about DIY Fantasy FX: the effect it had on time.

I spent my school day sketching prop ideas on the sly, then holding my phone under my desk to text photos of those sketches to Milo and Jamal. In this way we held our design meetings.

Materials too expensive and not common enough, Milo would say.

Totally fun FX but maybe not quite feasible for a real-world use case? Jamal would say.

No but how about this one, I would counter, moving my previous concept into a cloud folder named Idea Archive. The folder contained more than a hundred note clippings spanning my entire friendship with Milo and Jamal.

Milo was the Production Adviser. Jamal was the Promoter. I was the Idea Guy.

Our group chat was named the SuJaMi Guild, for Sunny, Jamal, and Milo.

In Chemistry, we three huddled in the back of the classroom and drew on notepads while the rest of the students boiled strips of balsa wood or whatever those bucktoothed lemmings had been told to do.

Me and Milo and Jamal were strictly B students.

“Excuse me,” said Ms. Uptight Teacher. “What do you three think you’re doing back here?”

I thought fast. “It’s STEAM.”

STEAM referred to any activity that involved Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math. Falling off a skateboard could be STEAM. Eating tacos could be STEAM.

Ms. Uptight Teacher peered at my scribbles. “Huh?”

“STEAM,” I insisted.

“STEAM,” said Jamal.

“Okay, but—” said Ms. Uptight Teacher.

“STEAMSTEAMSTEAM,” said me and Milo and Jamal.

She left us alone to brainstorm in peace.

While picking clover in the golden Friday afternoon light of another track practice, me and/or Milo and/or Jamal—it was hard to remember who said what first—came up with Raiden’s Spark: electroluminescent wires spring-launched from a wrist-mounted device.

"It fulfills our CREAPS requirement," said Milo.

"Cheap parts," I said, counting on my fingers.

"Readily available," said Jamal, counting on his, too.

"Easy to assemble," said Milo, nodding.

"Awesome effect," said Jamal, nodding, too.

"Portable," I said.

"Safe!" cried Milo.

"We got ourselves a plan, Karaan," I said, referring of course to the god of all lycanthropes.

I reached out both arms to exchange high fives with Jamal and Milo at the same time. Jamal's was gentle as a baby's kick. Milo's could break a cinder block.

"Hey," yelled Coach Oldtimer. "Let's get lined up for sprints, pronto."

"In a minute, beef strokinoff," I snapped, irritated.

"Jeez, you guys, come on," said Coach, waving his clipboard in vain.

I turned back to Milo and Jamal. "I'll get building over the weekend."

"Early start," said Milo. "Bravo."

"The early bird rips the worm from the safety of her underground home and bites her in half while her children watch in horror," I said.

I spent all Saturday shuttling back and forth between home, Hardware Gloryhole, and Lonely Hobby in Dad's sapphire-blue-for-boys Inspire NV, an electric car that cost triple the average annual American salary and was crucial to *looking the part*. Mom had one, too, in burgundy-red-for-girls. She was forever taking it in for service because *The more expensive the car, the more attention it needs—but the more attention you get*.

Armed with supplies, I holed up in my room.

Here in my room, I felt safe. I felt free. Free to be 100 percent me. I had all the things I loved surrounding me, all hidden away in Arctic White airtight storage containers.

In my room were maces and shields and swords. There were dragons and dice and maps and pewter figurines, all painted in micro-brush detail. There were elven dictionaries and fae songbooks. There were model pliers and glue and solder guns and electronics and wood.

I banged containers open and closed, and gathered the tools I'd need. I had a whole system. I preferred opaque containers because I did not want anyone to see, and therefore judge, the things I cared deeply about. The things that made me me.

I flipped my face shield down and got to work. I soldered. Glued. Test-fired. Live-fired. I took notes in my lab book. I crashed asleep, sprang awake the next morning, and kept right on going. I fell into a fugue state deep enough to alarm even Mom, who took a full ten-minute break from her twenty-four-hour workday to cautiously offer a plate of simple dry foods to keep her younger son alive.

Mom tapped her ear to mute her call—a gesture gone automatic over the years. “Even nerds gotta eat,” she said. She was working, even though it was a Sunday. She wore a cream-colored work blouse incongruously paired with yoga pants and horrible orange foam clogs, because *Video meetings are from the waist up*.

“I’m not a nerd,” I said from behind my face shield. “I’m an innovator *for* nerds.”

“Right, Jesus, okay,” said Mom, hands raised.

By the time Monday evening came around, I was up to version twelve of the Raiden’s Spark. I turned off the lights. I aimed

my hand at the door, thumbed a button, and let fly a ragged cone of neon-bright wires.

The wires streaked across the stone chamber in a brilliant flash and wrapped Gunner's steel helm before he could even begin a backswing of his bastard sword. The rest of my party cowered in awe as a nest of lightning enveloped Gunner's armored torso, turning him into a marionette gone mad with jittering death spasms, with absolutely no hope for a saving throw against this: a +9 magic bonus attack.

The wires of Raiden's Spark retracted smoothly into the spring mechanism via a small hand reel. Gunner lay steaming on the flagstone.

I turned the lights back on. I flipped my face shield up. I blinked back into my room.

I opened my lab book, which I had meticulously decorated into the hammered-iron style of medieval blacksmithery.

DIY FANTASY FX—SUNNY DAE

From the tiny arms of a tiny standing knight I took a tiny sword that was not a sword but a pen, and muttered words as I wrote them.

“Raiden's Spark, success.”

Fakery

You're not wearing that," said Mom.
"I always wear this," I said.

"Not to dinner at the club, you're not," said Mom. She had traded her usual WFH yoga pants for a long gray wool skirt.

I looked down at my clothes. Glowstick-green vintage Kazaa tee shirt. Cargo shorts the color, and shape, of potatoes.

Dad appeared in a suit and tie, which is what he always wore. He put down his phone, sighed at my room and its many white plastic storage containers, at the newly completed Raiden's Spark, and at me. He shook his head.

"Still with the toys," he murmured to Mom. "Shouldn't Sunny be into girls by now?"

"The book said kids mature at their own pace," murmured Mom back.

"I hear everything you're saying," I said. "And the Raiden's Spark is hardly a toy."

Dad went back to his phone. Dad also worked twenty-four-hour days. Dad and Mom worked at the same company, which they also owned and operated.

“We’re at the club tonight,” said Mom. “Please wear slacks and a button-up and a blazer and argyle socks and driving loafers.”

“And underwear and skin and hair and teeth,” I said.

“And a tie,” said Dad, eyes locked to his screen.

“Get your outfit in alignment—now, please,” said Mom, and turned her attention back to her buzzing phone.

I changed my clothes, hissing. Then I prepared to descend the stairs. I hated stairs. People slipped and fell down stairs. Our old place back in Arroyo Plato had not been cursed with stairs.

Gray, my older brother, once called me fifteen going on fifty. He didn’t call me anything now.

Dad’s blue-for-boys Inspire NV wound silently through the spaghetti streets of our neighborhood: Rancho Ruby.

Rancho Ruby was developed all at once in the late nineties as a seaside mega-enclave for the newly wealthy. It was the setting for *Indecent Housewives of Rancho Ruby*. It had its own private airstrip for C-level executive douchebags of all denominations.

If you thought Playa Mesa was fancy, that meant you’d never seen Rancho Ruby.

Rancho Ruby was 99.6 percent white. We, the Daes, were one of the few minority families, and one of two Asian families, possessing the wealth required to live in such a community.

Being a minority in a crowd of majority meant having to prove yourself worthy, over and over, for you were only as credible as your latest divine miracle. For Mom, this meant seizing the lead volunteer position at my school despite her unrelenting work schedule. For Dad, this meant pretending to care deeply about maintaining an impeccable address setup and swing amid the endless poking and ribbing at the Rancho Ruby Country Club.

Mom and Dad's company, Manny Dae Business Management Services, was started by Dad's late father, Emmanuel Dae, a first-generation Korean immigrant who gave his only son his name, his charisma, and his client list. Once upon a time, the company was run out of his old house in Arroyo Plato, which after his death became our house.

This was the time when big brother Gray and I would rattle the floors of the old craftsman with our stomps and jumps and sprints. When clients—all immigrant mom-n-pops from the neighborhood, understandably intimidated by American tax law—would happily toss back any toy balls or vehicles that happened to stray into the living room, where Mom and Dad held meetings in English, simple Korean, and even simpler Spanish.

It was also the time when Gray helped me make my first costume—a tinfoil helmet—so that I could play squire to his knight. Together we conquered the backyard lands and stacked the corpses of pillow goblins ten high, often joined by customers' children enchanted by Gray's charms. Even back then, Gray had charisma like no other.

Magic missile! Gray would scream. And I could practically see it!

Magic missile!

But.

Mom and Dad—hustling like hell all over every county in Southern Californialand—landed their first C-level client with C-level cash. After that, they could not imagine going back to the mom-n-pops with their handwritten checks and collateral jerk drumsticks.

Landing a few more C-level clients—all in Rancho Ruby, all acquired through word of mouth—enabled them to move us into the seven-bedroom monstrosity we lived in today.

“We’re here,” said Dad.

I jerked awake. The Inspire NV had taken us to the cartoonishly oversize carriage house of the Rancho Ruby Country Club. Three young valets—one for each of us—helped us out of the car. They wore hunter green. They were all Hispanic.

“Sup,” I said to my valet.

“Have a wonderful evening, Mr. Dae,” said the valet. He looked about twenty-one. Gray was twenty-one.

Dad handed him the key fob. “I appreciate everything you and your team do,” he said.

The valet, unaccustomed to such sincerity, brandished the fob with a smile.

“Of course, Mr. Dae,” said the valet.

Lion’s-head doors opened to reveal a heavily coffered oak corridor leading us toward the restrained din of a dark velvet cocktail lounge and beyond, deep into the cavern of the dining room proper to sit in deep leather booths as rusty crimson as a kidney.

A waiter—dressed in real steakhouse whites with a real towel draped over his forearm—led us to our booth.

“Thank you, Tony,” said Mom.

“My pleasure, Mrs. Dae,” said Tony. “Medium rares all around, extra au jus?”

“You know us so well,” said Mom.

The dining room murmured away, for this was where the serious networking happened; I watched Mom and Dad as they alternated between scanning the room and checking their phones, scanning and checking.

“Now, will we be needing this fourth place setting?” said Tony the waiter.

“Not tonight,” said Mom. She’d been saying this for three years now.

Tony began stacking the place setting.

In order to distract Tony, I pointed and said, “Is that stag head new?”

Tony glanced back at the wall, giving me time to palm a miniature teaspoon.

“That thing’s been creeping me out for years,” said Tony.

I glanced at Mom and Dad, but they of course did not notice my pilferage.

Tony whisked the plates and utensils away. That fourth place setting had been meant for Gray. It was sweet that the staff still put it out, just in case.

Gray had forgone college against Mom and Dad’s wishes. He was living forty minutes away in Hollywood, the glowing nexus of every dazzling arc light crisscrossing Los Angeles, and well on his way to becoming a rock star.

I imagined Gray, lit from all sides by flashbulb lightning.

“Honey, did you get my Hastings Company email?” said