

Superhero after eight:
(Part 1 of 2)

Liverpool twisted, the colours faded, the cheer of the crowd echoed into silence. The world was black. Herbert Lighting disappeared.

Herbert Brown was rustled awake.

"Wake up, Herbert! Wake up, then! This is what... reading all night does to you!" his mother stripped the blinds. "My word, boy, people are eating lunch by this hour!" she smacked his head. "Working people, that is! O! when will you be one of them? Are you dead, or just lazy?" he mumbled back indignantly. "Breakfast's ready at any rate...table isn't the same without you." She patted him on the cheek "Do sleep at a proper hour tonight." He heard the creasing of plastic bags. "And clean this mess while you're at it, eh?"

He caught only a glimpse of her gray head, before the door shut, it sounded incomplete without the click of a lock and key.

An hour more, Herbert Lighting? He inspected the tissue-box under his bed. *She can't have found it!* And indeed, searching under the tissues, he found his hyro-pen. The metal of the highlighter-esque hyro gleamed in the noon-light. *Of course it's there...no-one would dare to touch a man's hidden tissues!* He pressed the last button, third button from the top, a blue line beside indicated it was filled three-quarters. *Behold: Herbert Lighting's super-serum! "Salvation lies within!"* He pressed the top button once.

Herbert held the hyro to his neck before pressing the second button.

The hyro-pen fell. Everything churned into darkness, the self, the room, the pain in his leg. Herbert Brown disappeared.

Herbert Lighting, the people called him, (considering half of them were a Houghphry or Raymond, Herbert Lighting was a bargain of a superhero-name) uniformed in his cape and spandex, he patrolled Liverpool's streets.

He policed the square of the Merseyside Maritime Museum when the siege came, the gobstopper in the chewing-gum of justice: people! And there were many people.. "Herbert lightning!" the men cried "Mr.lightning" the women purred "My hero!" the children screamed. One could wonder how this man, who breathes our air, eats our food and without discernible lineage to octupy, could entertain all these good people whilst managing the other lot, and here was the answer! He shook one-hundred-two hands, signed fifty-three body parts and avoided thirty-six suggestive advances in less than a minute! For he was Herbert Lighting! Fast as lighting!

"Thank you all!" he said in his signature pose (hands on hips, chin to sky, muscles to wherever they please. And there were quite a lot of all three) "But I really must be going."

A wheelchair stormed through the crowd. "Herbert lightning!" it cried "Herbert lightning!" The people fled as a mass of flesh laying in a smoking wheelchair sped to the hero. "You can't wait any longer! You must stop Dr.Bad!" (Herbert Lighting was indeed a bargain of a superhero name) the heap said. And a heap this person was, not a bone to be betrayed, the person's face was as much a part of their torso as the hand is of the wrist.

"Fret not, citizen!" he cried to the clouds.

“End him, lighting! End the suffering he’s caused! Just look at me! I ran in the Olympics 2026, now look at me! He took my abilities, my vitality, my body. I’m...gone.”

The words echoed, distorting with each repetition, the faces churned, the square shook, everything looked as though underwater. The world spun, the colours greyed, Herbert lighting disappeared into darkness.

Herbert felt refreshed, ready to toil, trudge and wade through reality, until he could dream again. *What would I do without you?* he thought, hiding the newly filled hyro in his tissue-box. He stood up (if “up” lay somewhere north-east); then he was reminded. A sharp pain shot into his leg. He sat down. “Wretched leg!” He ventured to see if the swelling had worsened but his stomach was in the way. He stared at his bellybutton, the crest of this mountain, its roots quaking in hunger. Herbert sat there hating it’s command, hating it’s undying dominion, hating how much it defined him. Herbert cried.

“Took you well long.” his mother said as Herbert trudged into the kitchen. Fortunately it wasn’t winter yet, so Herbert could get to his place without smashing into the stove, fridge, sink, cupboard, table or chairs, (the kitchen was like a gang: cramped for starters, and one thing couldn’t hit you without the rest getting a go).

“Mum, will we ever get a lamp?” he said, as the fridge blew over his clammy face.

“Son, will you ever get a job?”

He grabbed five turkey-sandwiches which smelled the least like the bird was still dying and sat down.

“Dunno.”

Her left eye pinned him as if framing a butterfly. The right eye was staring into the afterlife on account of last week’s stroke.

“Head up, boy.”

“What?”

“Put your... head up.”

“Why?”

His mother rounded the table, forcing his head to the window, as if trying to pull it off. She studied his chin.

“I’ll be damned.”

“Wha-”

“It’s grey, boy! Your beard’s grey!” she said as if announcing a terminal disease. “And you’re still without a job! Waiting for retirement, are you?” she sat down, burying her face in her hands, shaking more than usual.

Seeing his mother in that state always hurt him. Living under her roof, eating her food, yet being regarded as more than a breathing recycling-bin, (without the ability to give back) pained his heart even more. And the tears...

“I’m sorry. They just won’t give me a job.” he prodded a sandwich, wishing it would disappear to a worthier thing, a mole, for instance. He smiled at the thought.

After a long silence. “Don’t you understand the position we’re in? I can’t work anymore...my hands won’t do what I tell them. And the government,” she scoffed “after the war...they can’t spare anything

for us. The days you know are over...dear Mr.Stroke made sure of that. It's due to start working. Goodness, this is what had to happen..." After a long silence, she said "I have a proposition." He felt her hand clasp his, trying to be firm. "Margaret told me there's a position at the elderly home... ripe for a spry young man such as yourself! You show that interviewer what a good soul y'are, recite... some passages from those books you always read, not the comics: the impressive ones, and like magic, you've got a job!" she smiled as if picturing herself on a yacht, with lamps.

"Margaret? Must be some plot to embarrass me, rob me...assasination, even!"

"Herbert, she's a librarian, not Al Capone!"

"She hates me!"

"She's a librarian, it comes with the job! Can't be a miner without a pick!"

He conceded the point. "Still, she hates me! Told me the only reason I liked comics was so I could prepare for a future of wearing only underwear and being unemployed! She made an effort to make me feel useless-"

"You've gotten over that...comic-phase, haven't you?"

He took a long pause. "Of course, that's childrens' stuff."

"Son, this world isn't that interesting, librarians aren't plotting your demise...just do this, okay?"

"I don't have a chance! I'm a mess, a mouldy, dusty, dull mess! Who gives an overweight middle-aged man living with his mother the time of day?! This system doesn't! No, no, it doesn't. Might as well find a comfortable rock to die o-."

"I'm not gonna be around much longer-"

"Mum!"

"I'm not! And I don't want to leave you knowing you'll wake up at noon, eat expired meals and read 'till dawn...without a job or family to support you. Just do the interview. It's at...at...what was I saying?"

"When the interview wa-"

"Yes! Right. It's at..." she took a long moment "Three! Yes, at three!" She pressed his hand. "And you'll do great at three!! Just...do something. No-one'll pay you to sit still at an Olympic level!"

The sun blazed on his sweaty face, his body screamed in the heat, legs of needle-clad cheval de frise, lumbered him on. It was heavy. His back protested. He breathed fire from the volcanoes that were his lungs (feeling always near eruption), searing his throat. Thus, Herbert walked down the streets of Liverpool. He felt like a vampire in the summer sun. *A monster*, he thought, as men frowned at him, women scowled at him, children laughed at him. How he wished the heart of our solar-system would turn him to dust, how he hungered for the hyro-pen, how he craved Herbert Lighting!

He had to sit down. Herbert pulled out his phone. "Mum, I can't do it."

He looked out of the car window. The Victorian elderly home loomed ahead.

"Go on, then.."

"I don't want to do it."

"Oh, plea-"

"I probably have more liquid outside my body than in! They'll never hire me...looks like I'm dying!"

"They're quite used to that."

"That's not the point!"

The engine was shut off. A door was opened.

"Come on."

"No."

"Want me to call for them, do you? I bloody will! Want to make a first impression with your employer sulking in your mothers car, do you?"

He got out of the car at a defiantly slow pace, making sure his mother was looking before he didn't close the door. Retaliation.

"No, "thank you for risking your... stricken self to save me from heatstroke"?"

"You sent me out in the heat."

"You insisted on being independent...I was too shocked to intervene."

A nurse showed him to a fine oak door.

"Just behind here, sir." she said with a smile.

Herbert couldn't speak, her deep brown eyes took his sense, her smile tied his tongue (lest the smile should be broken), her beauty stole his thoughts.

"Sir? Are you alright."

"Alri- Yes, yes! Perfectly, very...yes! By- yes!"

"Just behind that door. Is there anything more I can help you with?"

This is your moment, Herbert Lighting! That's the smile, just like the hyro-trips! Pull yourself together, now or never!

"Could you show me to dinner?"

"The dining room isn't open , si-"

"No! Like...me showing you to dinner. That I can eat. And you too. Like-like, eating together...sounds good?"

"Right behind that door, sir" she said, running away.

"Mr.Herbert Brown, why should you acquire this position?" the gravelly interviewer said , between twirling his pointy mustache and adjusting his Victorian suit (he only wore black).

Herbert considered this, staring at the bookshelves, blocking the moulding bits of the oaken walls. The place must've seen seven generations of failed interviews (and by the looks of the interviewer, he probably conducted each).

"Mr.Brown!" The man tapped the desk irritably (he did this because a spirited pat would've probably turned it to dust, freeing all Dickens' discarded ghosts in the process)

"I like helping people. Been helping my mother the last couple of...decades, more so the last week, she's not so well, y'see. And...I helped an old woman across the street just now." he said, remembering to blink at regular intervals.

"Right. Mr.Brown-"

"Call me Herbert." he said in his best Super-man impression. *Confidence is key, they say.*

"Mr.Brown," he said, adjusting his wedding ring,"your resumé portrays your qualification for this position as on par with that of a doughnut. Despite this...goodwill...why should we hire you?"

Herbert sighed deeply. "I don't see any doughnuts in the waiting-room, why are you even bothering with me?"

"Marga- not important!"

"Do I even have a chance?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe."

The condescension of the man, the futility of the interview, the rotting building wrapped around him like a noose. *One tied by the world.* He was choking with the sorrow of wasted effort, with the humility of failure, with the disappointment of being no more than this. What would his mother say?

"I have to go, urgent."

"Mr.Bro-"

"Sorry."

"He said what?!" his mother shouted, on the drive from Beechwood road.
 "He called me a useless doughnut with no chance to get the position."
 "Bloody...I'll sue them!"
 "You can't make them pay for words, mum. Just accept it: they don't want people like me."
 "If those suits and ties can make me pay for basic human necessities, if they can't provide for a stricken old woman because her son can work, if they can....nothing's off the table! Those bastards hurt my son."
 "Please, no plotting!"
 She sighed "Alright, but I must... do something! What can I do, doughnut?" she said with a smile.
 "Pizza would be nice..."
 "Can't do."
 "Why not? Eight slices won't kill me! I hardly eat pizza."
 She patted his stomach. "You did some weeks ago."
 "That was two weeks ago! Won't do it again!"
 "You said that two wee-"
 "Please! I'm heartbroken, remember? Do you have to make me feel bad about my weight, too?"
 "Alright, alright! One. But that is, as they say: it!"
 "Thank you."
 "And remember...that gym membership isn't up yet."
 "And...I will get a job. I promise.
 Suddenly, she inhaled sharply. "Herbert...please take the wheel."
 "You alright? Mum, you alright?"
 "Fine, fine, just...I don't think I should be... driving right now."

He felt horrible when the last slice was swallowed: feeling his heart protest, his blood flowing as if of grease, the exhaustion from simply eating. His leg throbbed in pain. But it was to go away. Herbert dug under his bed, exhuming the box of tissues. He'd made sure the door was locked before ripping out the contents to reveal his hyro-pen. It beeped as he pressed the first button eight times. *Hard work, hard remedies. Only six hours tomorrow to even it out.*
 And after a stick in the neck: Herbert Lighting was ready for action.

Herbert Lighting was running, buildings, cars, people, passing like streaks of wet paint. But he knew where he was, where he was going. Always.
 "Help!" a woman screamed from an alley. Before the robber could draw his knife, Herbert Lighting had noggied him and put him in a cell (with his weapon tied into a pretty bow) and ran back, for he was Herbert lighting: fast as lighting!
 The woman shook his hand vigorously.
 "Thank you Herbert Lighting, thank you! Do you accept jewelry?" her deep brown eyes imploring him.
 "No, no, miss! It is only my duty to aid the good people of this city!"
 "Buy, my good Mr.lighting, there must be something I can do." she said, taking off her coat.
 Herbert Lighting was good at avoiding advances like these, practice does make perfect...
 "Say, miss, have you any information concerning...Dr.Bad?"
 "Dr.Bad? Why, that man spoke of him just now, threatened, really."
 "What did he say, citizen?"

"Something or other, something or other, your ability to function is forfeit, something or other, something or other, you'll be brought to the cathedral, then he...kinda wanted to kill me."

"The cathedral? That's where he's hiding, aye?" Herbert equipped his signature stance and voice, people loved that.

"Fear not, good woman of Liverpool, for I, Herbert Lighting shall bring this peccable proctor of paralysis to swift justice! Cheerio!"

The anglican cathedral rose before Herbert Lighting. Looking at it, he was surprised to have not considered this location before, looked menacing and gothic enough for a supervillain.

The congregated gasped at his appearance.

"Flee, good citizens, this is a hazardous place, for I shall battle Dr.Bad!"

After allowing an apt amount of dramatic silence, Herbert Lighting made for the cathedral doors.

His footsteps echoed through the sandstone, flying past the vacant chairs, up the splintered antependium, to the altar, up the cross, rising to the angels, before the vaulted ceiling smote it. The candles were melted, though frozen to crowns and craters. What shone was the twilit stained glass, like windows to hell.

Herbert was trembling. He expected Goliath anywhere in the colossal chamber; and he was without a sling. *But I am Herbert Lighting*, he thought, (sweat freezing on his neck) *nothing can best me, that happens to lesser men!* He held onto the apron of the antipodium's stage to keep upright.

"I see Mona did her part! Well, well, well!" a gravel-gurgling voice echoed everywhere. "The doughnut! The child in a cape! The person every soul wants to destroy, right? And he did not even bring his mother!" the voice crackled as a high fire.

"Stop it! I mean. I... Stop! I'm here to stop you, you...menace of a man!"

"Ardent alliteration announces... ah screw this."

The organ howled as the altar-window burst. A great dark figure shattered the stone before it.

"You've tarnished my image far enough," Dr.Bad said, twilight glittered on his metal armour, covering like skin (Herbert reckoned it had to stretch under the black victorian suit, aswell). "I am terribly sorry it must come to this...ultimatum." he said, twirling a metal-moustache. "But I suppose...it was always to end this way." He drew a highlighter-esque cannon, a muzzle on it's side issued a bright ray into him. *The source of his power. Quick hit, when dizzy, grab!*

Dr.Bad shot a great lazer, but Herbert Lighting was fast! Swallowing the heart in his throat, he dodged, speeding to the Doctor. Hitting, circling, moving constantly, his fists, as a swarm of bees, struck Dr.Bad. But the stingers were of rubber. None hit.

Herbert didn't yield. He punched the villain, imagining the interviewer, when laying the ire of a broken self into the scourge of his realm. Yet wherever a fist fell, there was a hand to repel, Dr.Bad was too quick. His lungs were burning, body aching, ready to fall, as if he were walking to the elderly home again. Herbert drew back, he couldn't continue.

"Why, I thought lighting was faster than that." the Doctor drawled. "More powerful, as well...I suppose that happens when it doesn't bother striking the ground. Wearing pyjamas can't aid much, either."

Rage flooded him: of the boy that couldn't be a hero, the adolescent who 'wouldn't be anything', the man who believed that was true. He who couldn't change it.

Herbert charged. In a dance of speed, strength and spite, he fought.
Not to capture, but to kill.

A billow of blows, a storm of strikes, flurry of fists fell, and smote air. Before Herbert could quell his rage, to calm and calculate, he was beaten out of breath. Fists of steel marshalled him to a world of pain. Fists too swift for Herbert Lighting.

Upon the cold sandstone, daggers of pain stabbed everywhere. He didn't want to breathe, not just for how it hurt.

"Is that all the fight in you, boy?" Dr.Bad raised the whirring cannon. "Liverpool is due for another hero, no?"

Herbert coughed as defiantly as he was able, blood shot over Bad's suit.

"Reservations? Speak, or forever hold your peace!"

Herbert could form a protest, he could stand, in all this pain, he knew he could fight; but as soon as leg screamed after trying to move it, he gave up. *Perhaps it was due. Someone better than me.*

"None? Well, then he ought to greet the masses! But first."

Herbert heard the cannon scream. It's ray pierced him, twisting his tortured muscles, numbing his minds to all but pain, draining him, his eyelids were too heavy to keep up.

"That should cover it, don't want mushy peas." Dr.Bad lifted him as if he were an empty sack. In an instant, Herbert heard the beating of rain. Men crying, women gasping, children screaming. Dr.Bad spoke.

"Citizens of Liverpool, your saviour has come!" He allowed a dramatic silence. Herbert felt the seconds an eternity. He cursed himself to wake up, to end the pain. "Long has this impostor portrayed himself as your hero, your janitor of crime, as it were. What if I betrayed a different truth?" another moment of silence, after counting to seven, he continued. "That this man is but a...loser. That the only thing he applied himself to... is a bed! That he is nearly as old as Julius Caesar became, and yet has his mother make this bed. How, good citizens, could he care for you if not he can care for himself?"

" 'Es quick as li'ning, 'e is!" a boy squeaked..

"Good, good, little citizen! Your teachers must like you!" Dr.Bad makes his best impression of a smile.

"But alas, this is false! A projection, an act! Do not ask how, but it isn't true! Were he so swift, how come I defeated him? One can't battle lighting! No, good citizens, this man is a lie, a doughnut, a failure, he is not your hero, I am! I am your good hero!"

"Bu' y'name's Dr.Bad!" the boy said, confused.

"Why, you see, not only does he lie about himself, he lies about others! This man will have those more hard-working appear as monsters! 'Canons that steal your vitality', 'Dr.Bad', nonsense, nonsense! If I were as he projected me, would there not be play-dough upon my shoulder? Would he not be dead? See, good citizens, we had an honourable duel...for you! I won, as you see, the lies are defeated!"

The boy cheered, followed by more, as a plague, it spread.

"Wha' shoul'ee call you?" the boy laughed.

"Why, I am yours! People, decide!"

"Ow abou'...Doctor not that bad?"

"Doctor not that bad!" echoed through the streets of Liverpool, a chant that reduced Herbert's heart to mist. And the streets, and the colours, all to a mixing, swirling mist, darkening and darkening, until there was nothing.

He shot up. Cold sweat streamed, his legs screamed, falling to the floor, Herbert thought he was dying.

"Mum!" he screamed.

Unwavering silence, save the rain, invisible in the night.

"Mum!" his vision blurred. The thunder rumbled.

"Mum!" he passed out as lightning roared.

Herbert woke up as noon streaked the sky. He couldn't form a thought, he could hardly move, but he was alive.

"Mum!" he screamed from the floor.

Silence. This was not like her, she was always by his side, even before he was. Herbert knew something was not right.

Crawling, Herbert made for the door. Twisting the key, flinging his arm around the handle, letting his weight do the rest.

"Mum!" he shouted in the hall. There were four doors, one before his (the entrance), and two presently before him, some ten feet from his own: a bathroom and a kitchen. His mother let him have the bedroom. Despite everything, she did.

"Mum!" Herbert shouted before the kitchen-door. He threw himself on the door, he would have knocked it down had it not opened.

"Mum!" he made for the armchair where she was sleeping.

"Mum! Please! Something has happened! Something bad, terrible, I can feel it! I had the- the worst...dream ever! Please, I need you! Mum!"

He pulled at her hand, a freezing cold hand.

"Mum? Wake up."

Herbert pulled himself upright, wobbling on legs of agony. He shook her shoulder.

"Mum, people are eating lunch at this hour, remember? Wake up. Do you want a blanket?"

Herbert shook her gently. She didn't stir. He shook her again, hands trembling.

"Mum!"

He patted her cheek.

"Mum!"

He slapped her.

"Wake up!"

He shook her like a piggy bank.

"Why don't you wake up? Mum! It's noon! You can't sleep! Please don't sleep."

He lifted her eyelids. Empty eyes gazed into oblivion.

"Wake up. Oh, please, wake up. I'll be better, I'll be the son you deserved, just wake up. Please, Mum. Wake up!" he roared as his tears flowed, as his heart burst, as his world collapsed. He fell to a heap, no more than a weeping mass of flesh, pleading her to wake up, until all sense of the words was lost. Herbert knew his mother was gone. She was to meet the god to which she prayed for her son's fortune, to the family that left them, and to the worms; a world away from him. Who would love him now? Who would wake him when he'd forever want to sleep? Who would fight for him when the world was his enemy?

There he cried, hugging her cold feet for warmth, until worried neighbours had called the police, until they broke the door down, until they took her away forever.

And then the casket was buried.

No heat, no electricity, the only running water lived in the toilet. Government support got him only so far, and even that wouldn't always last. He could still eat in the kitchen, opposite his mother's chair.

That lamp, yet a forlorn hope.

Time was, like showering and the sun, a lost concept. He might have wrinkles and gray hair, he might still be wearing his funeral-suit.

He got hungry, he ate stale bread, he got sad or lonely, he went to bed.

Were those his mother's tears that fell from heaven as he filled the hydro-pen? Was it her protest that blazed the sky when it stuck? Did the thunder declare Herbert a failure as he gave up on this world? He didn't know.

Herbert pressed the top button as much as it allowed for Lightning's last dance before he rests in the clouds.

End of part 1