

Captain Ordinary

by Terry Bisson

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1,500 Words.*

“It’s a bird!” said a little boy.

“It’s a plane!” said a little girl

A man on the street looked up. A perfectly ordinary man, in tights and a cape. It was indeed a plane, trailing white smoke over the city.

“A biplane!” he muttered. “Can it be ...”

It was. The summons he had long awaited. Even as he watched, the words began forming:

CALLING CAP

He didn’t bother looking for a phone booth. They had all been hauled away years before. While everyone else on the street was watching the plane, he stripped off his tights, his cape ...

CALLING CAPTAIN ORDINARY

And before the words were fully formed, there was a neatly-folded costume on the curb. If anyone looked down and saw a man in slacks and a sport coat standing in line at a nearby Starbucks, they thought nothing of it.

Nothing out of the ordinary in midtown New York.

Unnoticed by all except a select few, every third Starbucks has a narrow door between the broom closet and the unisex john/jane. Captain Ordinary’s decaf soy latte order got him the key.

He felt a moment’s claustrophobia as the rain-forest-free faux wood door clicked shut behind him, and then--

Nothing.

Twelve hours later, Captain Ordinary was in abandoned quarry on the side of a remote Adirondack peak, passing his hand over the damp stone in a mystical pattern handed down for centuries. He stepped back, waiting for the door to lens open.

Nothing.

He rang the bell.

“Over here,” said a bearded, tweedy figure, beckoning from a nearby cleft in the rock. “You’re late.”

“The teleporter was on the blink,” Ordinary said, as he followed his host down the winding stairway into the bowels of the mountain. “I had to take the subway. Then the bus.”

“Tell me about it,” said Doctor Forever in the thick brogue that identified him as one of the Immortals charged with guarding humanity against extraordinary dangers. “The others are just now getting here themselves. There is no time to lose.”

Captain Ordinary felt a thrill as he entered the electrically-lighted conference room and saw that the oval table was surrounded by familiar figures in colorful costumes. It wasn't every day that his leader and mentor assembled the entire Rad Pack of differently-abled emergency mutants from around the globe!

“I have dreadful news,” said the dour Scot as he seated himself at the head of the table. “I have reason to believe that the Earth has been covered with some kind of Mundanity Shroud that renders us all powerless, more or less.”

“Tell me about it,” muttered Nano Man, groaning as he squeezed into his seat. His ability to make himself microscopic was the key to many of the Rad Pack's successful efforts. Full sized, he looked a little broad in the beam. Not to mention annoyed.

“I suspected as much,” said Rolex Girl, whose ability to travel backward and forward in time at will had proven so handy in the past. “My watch has stopped in the present.”

“Something has slowed me down for sure,” said Ftl, the bullet-headed dwarf, whose ability to outrun light itself had resulted in so many thrilling rescues. “I came at a trot. My Nike's are hardly warm.”

“Where did this shroud come from?” asked Captain Ordinary, adjusting his balls in his slacks as he sat down at the table. “How can we overcome it?”

“First, we need a better look at it,” said the gruff Scot, turning to Seti, whose gift for intimate contact with alien explorers had resulted in so many penetrating insights. “I was hoping that you could ask the Visitors to examine the Mundanity Shroud from the outside.”

“I wish,” Seti responded despondently, squirming on the donut-shaped cushion that he was never without. “I have been trying to contact those who probed me in the past, but without success. I'm beginning to wonder if it wasn't all a dream.”

“This is bad!” said the tweedy Scot, beginning to look dismayed.

“What about the Hawking?” asked Captain Ordinary. “The interstellar space ship that was dispatched several years ago to look for Earth-like planets among the distant stars? Perhaps that intrepid crew can look back at our planet and tell us what they see.”

“I thought of that,” said the immortal mentor, who was starting to sound shaky. “But they've all gone starkers from the smell on the ship. They began to lose it last month when methane ball futures went south. Plus it would take hours to get a message to them through the Shroud.”

“Oh, dear,” said Captain Ordinary. “It's that powerful?”

“It is apparently woven out of some kind of multidimensional superstring,” the hibernian groaned. “A tight weave indeed.” Then, rallying his fading powers, he turned to the latest arrival, who was circling the table, having a hard time deciding where to sit.

“Quantum Gal, perhaps you can use your wormhole lens to get a better view. From an alternate but nearby universe, perhaps.”

“I tried it on the way over,” she said sadly. “All I can see is a hole, with what looks like a worm at the bottom.”

“Then all is lost,” groaned the failing Scot. “This impenetrable Mundanity Shroud doubtless portends some awesome evil, I fear. And we are powerless against it.”

“Power unless is awesome doom!” said a rasping, metallic, but welcome voice.

They all brightened. They had forgotten Aye Eye, the emotionless but brilliant computer intelligence that had constructed itself after a nuclear mishap and since given them so much crucial guidance.

Even Doctor Forever seemed encouraged. “What can you tell us, Aye Eye? Speak up, for God’s sake!”

“Is God there no speak awesome,” the digital consciousness droned dispassionately. “And is as does doom say ever.”

“Gone bonkers,” said the newly-dismayed Scot. “That’s it, we’re all done for, unless ...” He closed his eyes and his chin dropped to his chest.

They all stared. “Unless what?” they all asked at once.

No answer.

“What’s he thinking?” Ordinary asked Psi Guy, whose uncanny ability to read minds had proven so helpful in past crusades.

“Beats me. I have trouble reading my own mind these days, much less his.”

“No wonder. He’s dead,” said Nano Man, who could tell by looking, even without microsizing and entering any of the expired Scot’s several orifices.

“I thought he was immortal,” said Rolex Girl disgustedly.

“Perhaps, in a way, he still is!” said Cyberboy, whose mutant ability to surf the matrix had shown them so many cybernetic shortcuts. The diminutive teen lifted the former Doctor Forever’s gray ponytail and pulled a tiny device from the slot in the back of his thick neck. “Just for kicks,” he said, “I downloaded our leader’s brain into this flash drive.”

The Rad Pack breathed a collective sigh of relief as Cyberboy stuck the flash drive under his tongue and sucked. But their hopes were dashed when he said, “System failure. All I’m getting is an error message: digital overload.”

“Shit,” said Rolex Girl.

“Bit of a problem,” said Nano Man.

“We’re fckd,” said the dwarf.

“Not necessarily,” said Captain Ordinary. He knew it was his job, as Control, to step up and take

command. “I have a plan.”

“What’s that?” they all asked at once.

“Go home,” he said. “Get a job. Get married. Have kids.”

“I’m gay,” said several.

“You can adopt,” said Captain Ordinary. He was getting into the swing of it. His voice had a sudden ring of authority. “Take a break. Don’t you deserve a rest after all you’ve done? Dress down. Live it up. Eat out. Watch TV. Mow the lawn. There are power mowers, you know. Take a course, learn physics...”

“Don’t even think about it,” said Quantum Gal, who was still circling the table, trying to decide which chair to take.

“... or form a book club,” said Captain Ordinary. This was what he was here for. “Read Jane Austen or, better yet, Kim Stanley Robinson.”

“Who’s she?” they all asked at once.

About the Author

[Terry Bisson](#) hosts the popular [SFinSF](#) reading series in San Francisco and writes This Month in History for *Locus* magazine.

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