



Batman and I: The Crusade

By Daniel Bugarin

Often, I find myself gazing at my “man cave.” It is a small, drab corner of my 600-square foot apartment that holds room for my desktop computer and our kitchen table. Where my eyes see blank walls, my mind sees comic posters adorned from the ceiling to the floor. Upon barren windowsills would be figurines and collectibles that represent my fascination with the caped crusader. I can only hope that one day when my wife and I are ready to move, we can find a place with multiple rooms so that I can make this daydream a reality. My “man cave” would be my home within a home. Just the thought of what this cave would look like reminds me of the strong connection I have with Batman.

One day, when I was cleaning out an overstuffed drawer, I found a photo of me wearing an old homemade Batman costume. Suddenly, my mind was flooded with memories of the past and wondered about the reason I never wore that costume again. I never wanted to be a super hero. To this day I still haven't found myself running across rooftops and fighting bad guys.

Bruce Wayne didn't care to be one either. He didn't ask for his parents to be killed, and he certainly did not anticipate encountering super villains in his life. However, I am enamored with his resources, intellect and indomitable will because they are the key

attributes that make him the world's greatest detective. If he doesn't need super powers...then neither do I. If only my young self could have grasped this concept, perhaps it would have saved me from spells of depression and body image issues that arose from bullying. Maybe if I were best friends with The Flash — I would have him run back in time to deliver a personal letter that only I could decipher saying that everything would be okay.

When I was a kid, my elementary school had a Halloween parade where we would march around the block in the afternoon with people acting as chaperones and taking photos. My classmates at the time wanted to be ninjas, Power Rangers, Superman and Spider-Man. Amidst a sea of those characters, I was the only kid that wanted to run around with a dirty black cape that my Tia made for me. The costume was comprised of the cape and some beat up old grey sweats. A cowl was made from a black hoodie with horns glued on, and was to be worn underneath a grey batman pullover sweater. The final piece to my costume was a black domino mask that covered my eyes and was meant to conceal my identity from everyone else. Or so I thought. I was the “discount” Batman. Often, I would perch myself atop the jungle gym in search of kids that needed help from bullies. In my mind, I was invincible...until I saw Wesley.

Wesley was a tall, beefy kid that showed up in a Superman costume from Party City. It was extremely intricate with a blue that shimmered in the sun and most distinctive-looking muscle patterns built into the design. I couldn't believe how much Wesley looked like the Man of Steel. Wesley was an overall cool kid and was well liked by others. I was actually pretty jealous of him. I tried to one up him by jumping off the top of the jungle gym as I had practiced many times before. Sometimes I would stick the landing, but other times I would get the wind knocked out of me. This time, I stuck the landing perfectly. I even think my childhood crush, Aubree, saw my “heroic entrance.”

As soon as I managed to pick myself up and strut toward Wesley to compliment him on his awesome costume, a cackle erupted from behind me. My ten-year-old mind raced to identify the sound as I tried to match it to a person I knew with that same laugh. My stomach sank as I felt a lump grow in my throat. This villain came straight from my rogue's gallery and his name was Craig. He was the “Joker” to my “Batman,” and was laughing up a storm behind me. As far as bullies go, Craig was the epitome of scum. He'd take your lunch money, tease you and rough you up however he pleased. Sometimes he'd do it for no gain at all other than a good laugh. I was not prepared to face him that day.

Craig took advantage of the fact that my costume was obviously made from scratch. Although I loved the hard work that went into it, I couldn't hide the fact that everyone else's seemed more authentic. I tried to make my way over to Wesley, but Craig's laughter cut through me like a katana sword through bamboo. I lost the game by turning around to face him. Anger got the best of me and, although the memory of the discourse is a bit fuzzy, I believe some words came out that shouldn't have, because before I knew it Craig was in front of me ready to knock the daylights out of me. POW! SMACK! THUD! One more punch to the face and a hard shove to my chest was all it took to send me to the floor. Tears welled in my eyes and his heckling continued.

"Nice double chin, boy blubber. Have Alfred make you a salad sometime, Fatman. Take that trash off. I thought Batman beat up *frijoleros* like you."

I knew I was chubby but I didn't understand why he had to say all of this, let alone do it in front of my classmates. My lack of understanding of what that last name even meant bugged me most. Once the small crowd of kids and Craig got tired of laughing at me, they were gone as fast as they had surrounded me. I went home later and asked what *frijoleros* meant and my mom became furious upon hearing it. I figured it must have been bad for her to be clenching the bar of soap as if she were ready to wipe my mouth clean of such filth. She must have realized that something had to have happened for me to be curious about such a word. She looked at me and could only utter a short response. "It means *beaner*, she said"

She explained to me the history behind the word and that people who are insecure about themselves do things like what Craig did. I didn't care. He had already said everything and it had already dug its way into my mind. What was I supposed to make of this information? The only thing I knew about the color of my skin was that I experienced fewer sunburns than my lighter skinned friends. My world flipped upside down as I became aware for the first time that I was different, and that Batman indeed wasn't like me. He was tall, in peak physical condition and Caucasian. Craig was right...a lot of the common thugs Batman put in jail were people who looked like me. The thugs all shared a similar appearance. Darker in complexion, not as well dressed and all of them spoke another language — just like me.

Since then, I don't remember where that old costume ended up. I vowed to never wear it again and retired the cowl because I didn't feel worthy of the mantle of the "caped crusader." I felt ashamed of being a pretender. Craig didn't finish out the year because he was expelled. His words had scarred me and I would never get a chance to stand up to him. During this time in my life a battle raged inside my mind between

trying to cling to my childhood while feeling society's shove into the abyss of the "real world." My innocence was ripped away in what seemed like a blur, just like Bruce Wayne's was - except my tragedy came from some punk kid telling me I was different and doomed to feel like an outsider for the rest of my life.

Unfortunately, the world is filled with people like Craig. There were many bullies spouting the same mean words that came out of Craig's mouth. It was nothing new. But I eventually got tired of hearing it. One day I decided to make a change and asked my parents to help me pick a martial art to learn. My parents enrolled me in Judo classes, later followed by youth wrestling. I developed a level of self-confidence and resilience that went unmatched in the schoolyard and on the mat. I learned that I could defend myself, and others, if ever threatened...while at the same time, I never went looking for a fight. Bullies were no longer a threat because I learned that my presence alone was enough. I didn't have to be Batman to save the world and make a difference. My lineage stems from a long line of laborers that took pride in their work. I now take pride in my heritage and no longer suffer at the hands of others because I look different.

I might have ended up toughened by past childhood experiences, but my affinity to show kindness and help others was remained my own. My innate sense of justice, truth and compassion were attributes that I am proud of. I may never put the costume back on, but I have become my own hero. If I ever find the Batman costume my Tia made for me, I'll make sure it is the centerpiece of my "man cave." Even though I'll forever cherish the memories I have from wearing it, I now know that I don't need it to define me. The crusade I embarked on years ago was to prove to myself, and others, that although certain moments in life can leave scars, those scars do not have to define your life. Thanks to Batman I learned that not all heroes wear capes.