

Zetaman: An unknown Superhero

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Moving to Portland required some adjusting.

Here baristas are respected like wine connoisseurs. Recycling is more serious than knowing the difference between plastic and glass. A tattoo can mean everything or nothing at all. Home owning is hip. Home renovation is even hipper. Anything bought second hand is better than new. And homeless people symbolize the city just as much as all of the above do.

It's sad to admit, but at first I was startled. Not since my childhood in New York City had I been around so many homeless people. Surely they would try to take something from me, I thought. And so, I always had an eye out. I planned my walks home around streetlights and late night crowds. I pretended to be on the phone. I did the pitiful money search pat or the apologetic shrug and headshake at the mere glimpse of eye contact. But then, an even sadder thing to admit, I simply forgot about them. They began to go by unnoticed and ignoring their pleads had become as routine as walking to Stumptown on my way to work. So naturally the moment I heard of Zetaman I was intrigued. Zetaman is a self-proclaimed Superhero who traveled the streets of Portland to help the homeless.

I wanted to know who this man was. I wanted to know how he managed the strength to help day after day. I wanted to know where he hung. What he was into. Did his family know? Just how seriously did he take the title Superhero? And perhaps above all, I wanted to know how this man had built up the courage to actually wear a Superhero outfit, complete with a cape and goggles. Was it made out of spandex? Did he have several? Did he have an arch nemesis and a calling symbol? My questions were ready. I found his contact information and quickly sent out an email hoping for a meeting. Zetaman had an email address. How modern.

A couple hours passed and no response. Clearly I was getting too used to the immediacy of offices email responses. I waited longer. With my impatience I began to delve deeper into my background research. Zetaman is a 30-year-old man who lives in Portland. He maintains his daytime job and travels through the streets at night to hand out blankets, at times even giving the shoes off of his own feet. He certainly did not seem like one to let messages go unreturned. After a couple of silent months passed I begin to think differently. Soon I stumbled upon an article that spoke of his desire to remain private. His work, Zetaman said, was done out of goodwill and so he'd like to avoid any media attention that might come his way. Well then what about the cape? The goggles? And why go out of your way to proclaim yourself a Superhero? Who, above the age of seven, would say and wear the things this man does and not want any attention in return?

And then I remembered where I am. I'm in Portland. A city whose motto is to stay weird and this certainly fits that bill.

I decided to take a different approach. I would seek out the people he has helped, rather than him directly. I would go looking for the Superhero. On my first outing I walked directly up to a shelter and began asking if anyone had met this mysterious man in a cape. Within minutes Bill, who worked at the center, came outside. Helpful, I thought. A minute into our conversation I realized if I didn't make

some immediate reference to the fact that I have a bank account, an apartment and am not currently on any prescribed medications, I would soon be shuffled into the building behind him and placed away somewhere amongst the masses. I left Bill. More people, more places. I kept explaining. Yet still, no one seemed to know anything about this Zetaman. It seems I was either on the wrong side of town, in the wrong groups, asking the wrong questions or just as crazy as Bill had pinned me to be. I took a step away.

Maybe the allure of Zetaman is just as good as his actuality. After all, why did I feel the need to see, touch or question him senseless in order to believe in his existence? Couldn't I find the little reserve of faith and imagination from my childhood? A little belief in the unbelievable. Or had I drained it all like an unsealed tub?

After sometime now, I'm happy to be left thinking that some things are meant to be weird, some things are meant to be secret and some things are meant to be believed in. And so I'll let Portland remain, along with all its inhabitants, as it wishes to remain: unquestionably weird.