

Geo's plastic skateboard had been a gift from his father. He didn't want to be seen riding it in public, but it was all he had. The plastic had ablated as he cleared the gap over the nuclear reactor(?), leaving only the now very hot magnesium trucks, which also promptly melted and fell away. Geo wasn't sure what to think, and he was never quite sure how he had made it to the other side.

Gaining access to the facility had been easy. All he had to do was wait in the parking lot of The Cellar until it was time for the usual Friday night delivery of seventy-five-odd pizzas. He crouched in the bed of the delivery truck under some boxes, then, while the driver unloaded the order, he snuck through the temporarily open gate.

Once inside there were numerous options. Geo skated several small outcroppings before he discovered a large concrete mound that terminated in an attractive gap over... what was it, anyway? You know what, who cared.

It took a few minutes for him to work up the courage, but that gap was calling out to him. Not audibly, don't be ridiculous. He could see the jump unfolding in his mind. He knew exactly how to handle the approach. He only hoped that the inferior construction of his plastic board was up to the task.

It all happened more or less as he had imagined. Except for the part where his board melted. Geo didn't know what to think about the fact that no one had challenged him the whole time he was on the base. Eventually he ran out of steam and climbed back over the fence, then hitched a ride back into town.

The next day he knew something had changed. When Matt went to "trade punches" with Geo by hitting him on the arm with his fist, Matt broke his hand. "F-fuck, George," Matt had said. In response, Geo punched him through a wall.

Being a super-hero was shit, and Geo didn't adjust to the change in lifestyle right away. He designed a costume for himself one day during study hall. He had no idea what to do with it, so he ended up wearing it to skateboard.

It was a bad decision.

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Geo was patriotic, sure. He had integrated the flag into his costume. Beyond that, he tried to stay out of politics. People just couldn't get along. He tied the flag bandana around his head to signify that freedom was ever on his mind.

Other constituents of his costume included: football pads, cleats, fingerless gloves, rock t-shirt (stretched and ripped by the pads), loose-fitting cargo shorts. He figured that just about every interest group was represented, somehow, in his ensemble. At this age his view of the big picture was necessarily somewhat constrained.

"America first!" hollered Rolly, as Geo faceplanted, shredding his American flag do-rag on the pavement. His friends found the costume amusing. "These colors don't run," Wheels observed, as blood from Geo's fresh wound stained the solemn bandana. "Oh, say, can you see?" asked Kickflip rhetorically, gesturing to Geo's predicament. On and on in this vein. The comments eventually trailed off as it became apparent that the joke had run its course.

The fact was that no one believed him. Every time he had contrived to demonstrate his new powers, some interruption would occur, like the cops rolling up on their spot, or someone's mom calling them home for dinner. Even he had to admit that it all sounded like bullshit. But. Ever since he skated that gap something was different. He couldn't feel pain. He couldn't feel much of anything. Also, when he was on his skateboard, he could *fly*.

Like, in the sky.

Ultimately he decided to keep it to himself. No one had believed him anyway. He'd tried being honest but none of his friends had heard him, almost as if they couldn't perceive the idea. From now on he would proceed under a cover of secrecy.

But... what was there to do? From whence, and to where, was he proceeding? And how would he get there?

First of all, he had to get a new board.

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Of course, no number of boards would ever be enough. After his bedroom was full he began stacking them in the garage. This drew complaints from his mother, who aside from the space considerations also had questions about some of the deck graphics. Geo promised to get rid of (some of) them.

This led to his part-time business buying, selling, and trading skateboards. If anything, it only exacerbated the problem. Now he also needed a large work area where he could package up and label the boards. His mom gave up complaining when he started paying for his own food and clothes.

Geo's best customers were his friends. They had made fun of his super-hero costume, but now it had become a sort of group mascot. He devised a logo based on the costume and had it made into a rubber stamp for marking the bottom of the decks he sold. It was popular with his friends.

Presently, Geo's biggest problem was that he was getting bored with skateboarding. Not the business. The business was fine. But with skating itself. He told no one about this crisis of faith, and the profits continued to pour in.

When Geo finally gave up skating it was for health reasons. His knees, his back, his hips; none of them were working as well as they used to. It made him sad, but what was he supposed to do?

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Geo's handwriting was terrible. His mother helped letter the catalogs. It was never quite clear why he didn't just use a computer.

"I don't really care about any of this," his mother would say whenever he brought up skateboarding. She didn't want to talk about comic books, either. It was not long before she refused to do any more lettering. "Well, thanks for the work you have done," Geo said, and that was that.

Being a super-hero was less fun than he'd hoped. Basically, there was nothing for him to do. Now, with his back, he wasn't sure there was much he *could* do. Even without being needed he felt like he wasn't doing enough. At least he was making money.

Rolly told him about a mark who had shown up at The Cellar asking after him. An older man with long hair, dressed entirely in brown, like a UPS driver. Geo took his card and said he would get back to him.

A lot of his regulars came through this way. Word of mouth seemed to snag the big spenders. They'd just show up in person, having done all the legwork themselves. He often wondered if they'd even seen his ads. Why did he bother?

His inventory was light, so if this guy wanted to place a large order it would mean he would have to do some scrambling. Fortunately he kept some reliable sources on standby. And at least a couple of them owed him favors.

In his mind he was already spending the money.

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When he tried again he took along the boombox. It was already falling apart, having been dropped several times on previous excursions. This time he clamped it tight to his shoulder and tried to keep his balance.

The cassette door was long gone, victim of a prior fall. Even though he remained upright, somehow the cassette itself was falling apart. One of the reels rolled across the sidewalk, unwinding a long trail of brown tape. "Type one," Geo said, reflexively.

He bent down to scoop up the loose tape and the boombox tipped, ejecting the other reel from the now fully disintegrated cassette. Both halves of its plastic shell clattered noisily to the ground. He set down the boombox and without prompting its battery compartment popped open, dislodging two D batteries, which likewise rolled away from him in opposite directions.

Geo still wore his old green Vans everywhere he went, even though he never skated. They seemed to be the only shoes that really fit his odd-shaped feet. People in the board room always said they clashed with his suit, but what did they know?

He would sit at the head of the big conference table, the one painted with his logo, and preside over the day-to-day operations of his company. Now he was regional. Now he was national. Now he was global.

Now he didn't care.

"We've the money," the man who was always dressed in brown, like a UPS driver, said. "You've the goods?"

"Of course," Geo said, smiling again. He found he didn't even want to stop.

Business.

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#### PERSONAL INVENTORY

- I don't fall down. Others shatter against me and fall down.

- I am not hurt. I feel nothing at all.

- I don't know what any of this means.

Geo felt that there must have been a reason why he was chosen as the custodian of these remarkable powers, but he had no idea why someone like himself should have been chosen.

It didn't matter. His schedule was full of meetings and he didn't have time to think about it. He'd shoulder the burden and sort out the philosophical questions when he had a moment of spare time. Which would be never.

It was funny, he realized that this was the decision he was making, even as he made it. Call it a rare moment of honesty with himself. He terminated the inventory.

He'd think back to that original costume sewn while watching TV. Had some random show or commercial influenced him? He supposed that this was a general question rather than something specific to the context of his career as a super-hero. To be honest he couldn't remember most of the shows he had watched back them. Busy with his work, he had only occasionally glanced up at the screen.

The modern version of his logo had, of course, been modified from that original design. Let's say streamlined. It served well enough.

One of his minor annoyances was constantly being asked to explain the symbolism. Why had he chosen the American flag motif? As if it should need to be explained. He guessed that it did. And so he would suggest that it had all been a joke. This usually worked. His interrogator would laugh, wink at him, and then move on to something else.

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Geo wasn't certain when the interrogation had begun. Searching his memory it seemed that the interrogator had always been there. He strained upwards, craning his neck toward the aperture centered far above his head. Save for this solitary shaft of light, the tall narrow cell was completely devoid of illumination.

Geo felt around on the floor, his hands trailing through damp puddles. He realized now that he had wet himself, maybe several times.

How long had he been down here?

Always?

The interrogator was apparently taking a break. Geo used this opportunity to get his story straight. Whatever this was about, Geo had had nothing to do with it. It would be easy for him to sell this explanation because Geo honestly had no idea what he had done.

Had he in fact done anything?

The cell door creaked.

Day after day he kept track. He gave up trying to count after he noticed he'd filled every available surface with marks. It seemed to him now that the only life he could remember was his life in the cell. His only friend was the interrogator. Was this how they'd planned it? With him able to recall only his captivity? The interrogator asked questions that pertained only to his previous life. At this point Geo just didn't know.

What if the interrogator was himself? Geo had approached this most prickly proposition several times, but the environment always colluded to distract him. What could it be they wanted him to tell himself that he didn't already know?

The cell door creaked.

Geo was led outside, into an implausibly bright, sunlit half-pipe, seemingly constructed to competition standards. The guard issued him a blue plastic skateboard with chunky yellow wheels. Geo just didn't get it. What was he supposed to do? He rubbed his eyes.

The guard withdrew, locking the exterior door behind him.



Geo was alone.

"Skate," his little voice said.

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He was given full run of the half-pipe for one hour a week. Privileges could be, and were, revoked over the slightest infractions, perceived or otherwise. He was never explicitly told the rules, but he was able to piece together a working definition through a process of trial and error.

Back to his cell.

They were trying to convince him he was someone else. They would ask the second person questions about the real him, get him talking about himself in the third person. Cute. He wondered what they really wanted to know. At some point he decided that he was not going to give it to them. Immediately, his life took a turn for the worse.

No more skating for Geo. They'd broken him down, built him back up again without the desire to skate. His new focus would be the mission. Because of this new configuration he wouldn't even miss it. Besides, with his pending workload about to explode, there just wouldn't be time for hobbies.

His thriving business likewise fell away. All that remained, all that he could see his way clear to think about, was the mission.

Details of which arrived presently.

And it was all too much. The data dump overwhelmed his ability to file the incoming bits. He couldn't perceive, couldn't interpret. How was he supposed to

secure the objective?

He attacked it like a skating problem: plan the approach, gauge his time in the air, figure out where the wheels would touch the ground.

Skate the gap.

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He wasn't Cameron, or Andrew, or Shinji, or Carmine, or Stan, or Daisuke, or Daisuke's boss. He wasn't even himself. He knew that now. It had all been built up, on top of him, to provide him with a framework in which to answer the questions they wanted to ask.

The interrogation never ended. The interrogator never left. The questions were always still being asked.

He tried to remember each phase, the details, but already it was all slipping away. How was he supposed to tell the interrogator what he wanted to hear when he couldn't even keep track of the construct used to pry it out of him? It was all he could do to respond, at all. He simply didn't know the answers.

Let's try again: Cameron and Andrew, dead. Shinji (sorry, Carmine), dead. Shinji... he didn't know. Stan, back at the Post Office (unless he was at home, or out on his route). Daisuke, doing some job for his boss. Daisuke's boss remained a mystery.

He was pretty sure that he had gotten all of that right, but there was never any indication of how the interrogator was taking what he was saying. Just more questions. The cell door would creak and he would be alone again. The cell door would creak and he would have company. After a while he stopped trying to distinguish the two states. To him, it was all the same.

Geo sat on the floor.  
The frame dissolved.  
Plot concludes.

*Stanley Lieber is busy.*



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