

## THREE PANELS FROM A COMIC BOOK CHILDHOOD

by  
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### 1.

He spotted the storefront one day while being driven through the old industrial town on the banks of the Blackstone River by either his grandmother or his mother. The women had grown up in this region, several towns away from where the boy now lived, and they frequently returned to visit relatives or shop at favorite small stores, in an ancient world where malls had not yet been born.

The intriguing store, new to the boy but apparently long established, occupied the ground floor of a shabby building on a steeply sloping street. RED'S BOOKSTORE said the peeling sign painted directly onto the building. SECONDHAND BOOKS.

The boy had bought a few paperbacks in his time, mostly Andre Norton titles from Ace, for thirty-five or forty or even fifty cents apiece. But he wasn't really interested in purchasing books; libraries supplied those aplenty (he had cards in his name at three or four branches). Comics ruled his shopping habits, ate up most of his allowance (except for five-cent Zero bars and fifteen-cents soda- fountain lime drinks). He got his new titles at Douglas Drugs (the cover prices had just gone up from ten cents to twelve!), from the long low rack by the front window. But diligent study and deduction had alerted him to the fact that comics had existed for some time prior to his discovery of them. Superman and Batman had long histories, adventures he knew nothing of.

Perhaps this store held old issues for sale?

Somehow he convinced either his mother or her mother to take him one day to the store. He was sent inside alone, told he'd be picked up after a certain span of time.

The plateglass window of RED'S held a sloppy display of several canted books, some dampened by rainwater from a leak. The heavy door required some pushing. Inside was a glorious jumble of overstuffed shelves. Halfway to the back of the shadowy interior, a U-shaped wooden counter enclosed the owner.

Red was the scariest adult the boy had ever seen. His namesake hair oiled into a greaser's pompadour, his foxy face unsmiling, a cigarette sending fumes aloft, the man seemed the most unbookish fellow imaginable.

"What are you looking for, kid?"

"Uh, do you have any comics?"

"Comics? Sure I got comics. All the comics you could want."

The boy would soon learn that Red never admitted to not having anything requested. No matter what you wanted--years later the boy would start to buy books here--Red insisted he had it. The item might not be readily to hand, but it certainly existed *somewhere* in the store!

In this case, though, Red was not lying. "Here's a box to start with." He dragged out a cardboard carton full of musty comics. "Give a yell when you need more."

The boy fell to his knees and began to sort through the treasures in the box. More? In this box alone were enough treasures for a month's excited study. Issues of many his favorite titles that were five, ten, even fifteen years old!

The boy began to assemble a stack of those he had to have. Red ignored him, incessantly busy on the phone, speaking in muted tones with a number of callers.

How much were these comics going to cost anyway? Finally the boy asked.

Red grew cagey. "Well, that depends. Special issues cost more. Those big ones are, oh, a quarter. And if you buy more the price goes down. Just bring them up when you're done."

Calculating mentally, the boy collated a final stack. He stood and lifted them tentatively up to the varnished, nicotine-smudged counter. Red leafed through the pile with many knowing grunts, then finally declaimed a total price. The boy had just enough cash.

Outside the sunlight gleamed like the first sunlight ever minted. That whole experience hadn't been too frightening. Nothing he couldn't brave again, for such a reward. Clutching his bagged prizes to his chest, the boy knew he would return.

And he did, at regular intervals for a couple of years. But then Red became more cantankerous, harder to deal with, his prices rising exorbitantly, and the boy's interest in old comics also happened to fade.

Thirty years passed between visits. When the man walked into the amazingly still existent but incredibly decayed store on a whim one day, Red--his hair all yellowed with a strand or two of surviving russet--looked up at him with a ferret's glare and immediately said, "You're the kid who used to come in and buy all my comics, aren't you?"

And he had to admit he was.

## 2.

Upstairs in their home was a small unused room. Originally planned as a half-bath, the space had never been finished when the boy's father and his father had built the house. The capped pipes for sink and toilet still stuck up uselessly out of the wooden floor. Boxes of stored clothes and other junk occupied part of the room. But the rest could easily serve as an office or clubhouse for the boy, with the addition of a few chairs. So this was where he conducted his comic book quizzes.

His sister was a year and half younger than the eight-year-old boy. Their brother several years younger than her. They were mostly willing accessories to whatever scheme or activity the boy could conjure up. But this matter of studying comics and taking tests on their contents smacked too much of school. His siblings were reluctant players at best.

"All right, now how many kinds of kryptonite are there?"

"Three," guessed his sister.

Studying the pages of a Mighty Mouse comic, his little brother didn't even bother to answer.

"No, there's a lot more than three! Pay attention now, I'm going to name them again. Green, red, blue, white, gold--"

The bright summer sunlight pouring in through the lone window inspired rebellion among his acolytes. "I don't want to play this stupid game anymore!" his sister said. "I want to go outside."

"Me too!" chimed in the little brother.

"Go away then! You'll never know all about comics the way I do!"

And sure enough, they never did.

## 3.

The boulder in the wooded lot adjacent to his uncle's house loomed as large as a truck. Shaded by scrubby trees in the summer, carpeted in the autumn by drifts of leaves, the undistinguished stone was split by several large cracks, some wide enough for the

pudgy eight-year-old boy to squeeze into, others affording easy handholds and a route to the top of the rock.

To this boulder he inevitably returned each time his mother took him and his siblings to her brother's house. His uncle and aunt had no children of their own to play with, so in the absence of cousins he, as the oldest, was allowed to shed his younger brother and sister and roam solo over the untenanted rural landscape and amuse himself while the adults talked. A steep nearby cliff invariably beckoned, with its vertiginous, dangerous allure. But his ultimate destination was always the rock.

For here he had found Thor's Hammer.

There could be no mistaking the artifact. Plainly this was the same gnarled, knobby stick that Doctor Don Blake had picked up during his wonderful adventure detailed in the gloriously colored pages of *Journey Into Mystery* Number 83. The same stick which, struck randomly in frustration against the cave wall where Blake was trapped, had transformed into Thor's Hammer, and which had also transformed the puny, crippled doctor into the magnificent Thunder God, bulky of muscle, with flowing yellow hair.

When the plump, crew-cut boy had first discovered the stick, he had felt the power coursing through it as soon as he touched it. Almost afraid to trigger the change in himself, he had hesitated. But then the temptation became irresistible, and he had banged the shaft against the cracked boulder.

KHTHOOM! Hadn't the cracks in the rock widened significantly? Hadn't his uncle's house shaken? Wasn't the overweight youth now a tall, brawny Asgardian warrior? Lack of witnesses to the miraculous change was no hinderance, but only provided additional ease of belief.

Those saplings--actually the Stone Men of Saturn in disguise! Die, invading aliens! Fall beneath the Heavenly Hammer that had slain trolls and frost giants!

Each time, his flailing, leaping, bellowing conquests left him exalted and sweaty. Striking the hammer again returned him to a child and the deadly weapon to a stick. Each time, he debated taking the wonder stick home with him. But how to explain it to his mother? Wouldn't she tell him to abandon the seemingly useless stick? And would it work at all outside this magic locale? No, best to hide it here, wedging it shoulder-deep within a cold damp stone niche, to await his next visit.

Reluctantly he left the boulder and its hidden contents behind.

And then during one visit he failed to check on the stick, had no interest in employing it. Never again did he become Thor.

But the stick still waits in its cleft in the rock for the next child to find it.