

Must Save the World Before Breakfast

a short story by

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inspired by Peter at 'In the Kitchen'

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Trevor rolled over as the alarm sounded. He looked at the time and contemplated it before hitting the 'stop' button. Two hours before dawn. He let his head sink back onto the pillow. Why was he waking so early? He thought hard and then remembered – he'd promised the old man at the café he would join him at five o'clock to help him save the world. He groaned and then slowly rolled himself off the bed.

As he showered he contemplated how his unthinking responses to people's remarks sometimes landed him in things he really would rather avoid. This was an example.

He thought back to the day before. He'd been sitting in a local café with a cup of coffee, enjoying the fact that he'd been able to leave work early for a change. The owner of the place had quipped about some people taking it easy, instead of doing something important with their lives.

Trevor had responded with, "Oh, I have. I've already saved the world today."

"That's nothing, mate," came the quick reply. "I did that before breakfast."

"What do you mean?"

"I get up early every morning to save the world before breakfast. You know, fix up the mess while most people are still in bed."

Trevor didn't know how to take this. "You're joking, right?"

"No mate. Every morning before breakfast."

When he went to pay for his coffee, Trevor joked, "Want some help?"

"With what?" the owner asked.

"Saving the world."

The owner considered Trevor, then nodded. "Right you are then. Five o'clock tomorrow morning, here."

"You're *not* joking, are you?"

"No mate, I'm not joking. Important work to be done"

The owner gave Trevor his change and called after him as he made for the door, "See you in the morning then."

Trevor gave a thumbs-up sign as he left.

Now, as Trevor dressed warmly, he was having second thoughts. Not about getting up and out so early (this would be an adventure), but about the old man – whether he was off his tree and, maybe, even dangerous.

He arrived outside the café ten minutes early. It was too cold to stand still, so he walked up and down and repeatedly slapped his arms around his shoulders. He kept looking at his watch – had he been taken for a ride? Then at five o'clock on the dot, the old man came through the front door, carrying two steaming cups of coffee.

"Thought you might need waking up and warming up," the old man said as he handed Trevor one of the cups. "In fact, I doubted you would show."

"Always up for a challenge," Trevor replied. "What tasks have you got lined up today?"

"Just the one," was the reply. "Come, we'll take my car. It's 'round the back."

They drove for almost an hour along the bay and into the city. The only conversation was an exchange of names. The old man said his name was Ronald, but that some people called him Batman, because of the large, black coat he often wore. "Call me Ron," he offered.

Ron pulled up and parked in a 'No Standing' zone outside the main railway station on the edge of the city. It was still dark and the cold air hit Trevor as he stepped out of the car.

From the back of the car Ron called, "Here, give me hand."

Trevor joined him and saw two huge cooking pots in the boot. "You take one, I'll take the other," Ron told him, as he lifted one pot out and started carrying it into the station concourse. Trevor followed with the second. Damn, it was heavy! And it was uncomfortably warm against his leg.

"What's in them?" he called to Ron's back.

"Soup," Ron called back over his shoulder.

Inside, there was a large gathering of dishevelled people. Many wore coats; some had scarves or beanies or both. Their breaths were clearly visible in the cold air, even under the concourse roof.

As Trevor and Ron proceeded with the heavy pots, the people in the crowd moved to make a path for them. At the far end stood a row of trestle tables on which were portable gas cookers, piles of bowls and spoons and mountains of bread rolls.

"Morning Batman," called an old man, as Ron lifted his pot onto a cooker. "You've brought Robin with you today."

There was laughter from those who heard this. Ron smiled. "Yeh. Saving the world is hard work on my own." There was more laughter.

Someone called out, "When are you going to bring Batgirl?"

"When she turns up," Ron responded.

Other people arrived with more pots and soon the hungry assembly was tucking into bowls of steaming soup and fresh bread.

"Who are these people?" Trevor asked quietly as he ladled soup into bowls.

"Ask *them*," Ron said.

"I can't do that!"

"Yes you can."

Trevor felt self-conscious and it showed.

Ron grinned and addressed a teenage girl standing close by. "Hey Amy, tell Robin here where you spent the night."

The girl shrugged and pointed over her shoulder. "In the doorway of the church out there."

Trevor felt shocked. "But you can't be more than fifteen. How come you don't have a home?"

The girl shrugged again. "I'm twelve and me mum kicked me and my brother out when her new boyfriend moved in."

Trevor didn't know how to respond. He looked at Ron and raised his eyebrows in a question.

Ron inclined his head towards the crowd. "All of them live out on the streets or in derelict buildings."

Trevor looked out at this gathering of society's neglected and rejected, but didn't have much time to dwell on his thoughts – there were empty bowls to deal with and bowls to fill for those who wanted seconds.

Trevor's belly rumbled. "Have some yourself," Ron said as he handed Trevor a bowl of steaming soup. Trevor took it with a smile and "thanks". He already felt warm from the work and from the growing feeling that he was doing something worthwhile. He watched people who had come in on the first trains glance awkwardly towards the

homeless eating their one 'good' meal of the day. Some of them looked affronted at this invasion of their world.

As people finished eating, most brought their spoons and empty bowls back. Some voiced thanks; others indicated their appreciation with a nod or a wave; some simply walked off.

"Do you come here every morning?" Trevor asked Ron.

"Yep. Every morning, no matter what the weather or the season. It's easier in the summer, though."

Some of those who had been fed hung around to help carry things back to cars and to collect bowls and spoons which had been left lying around the station concourse. One old man grumbled loudly, "Some people have no dignity," as he picked up a broken bowl and a mess of bread pieces.

Trevor noticed that one of those clearing up was a woman of about his age – mid-twenties. He had noticed her earlier, because her clothes seemed in better condition than most. She caught Trevor looking at her and half smiled, before turning away. He asked Ron if he knew the woman.

"No, mate. Saw her for the first time last week. Don't know who she is. Why d'you ask?"

"I don't know. She looks vaguely familiar." When he looked up again, he saw the woman walking off towards the street.

As the last of the soup kitchen was packed up and removed, the concourse was increasingly taken over by commuters, most of whom had no idea of what had been happening there for the past hour. It was as if the normal world had reclaimed its territory.

When Trevor and Ron returned to the car for the last time, there was a parking attendant standing nearby. Trevor expected a parking ticket, but the attendant spoke to Ron like a friend. "Morning Batman."

"Morning Rachmoon," Ron replied. "Thanks again for looking after us."

Rachmoon raised his hand. "No problem. Always happy to help you people."

Trevor smiled at this obvious bending of the rules. The circle was wider than he realised.

As they drove back along the bay, Trevor asked Ron how long he had been doing this.

"Oh, I've been saving the world for years." He thought for a while. "Must be about four years now. I started after I opened the café."

"Why?"

"I had to come through the city real early one morning and saw stuff being carried into the station, so I stopped and found out what was going on. I said I could help out with soup. The others are all from various restaurants. The rolls are donated by a couple of bakeries. It's all organised by one of the Rotary clubs."

Back at the café, the place was abuzz with people tucking into eggs and sausages and bacon and fresh bread and coffee and juice.

"Hungry?"

Trevor nodded.

"What'll it be?"

"Scrambled eggs'd be great, thanks."

Ron called out to one of the staff, "Usual for me and scrambled eggs for Robin here. And..." He looked at Trevor. "Coffee?"

“Long black, please.”

Trevor felt good. He looked at Ron, who was leaning back in his chair with a pleased look on his face. “Do you want help again tomorrow?”

“Sure Robin. I’d enjoy the help... and the company.” He winked.

Trevor smiled. “I can’t wait to tell people at work how I helped save the world before breakfast.”

“Oh, you haven’t done that yet, mate. You’ve only just started your apprenticeship.”

Next morning Trevor let himself in through the back door and helped load the car. He happily sipped his coffee as they drove into the city.

As he was filling bowls of soup, he noticed the better dressed woman again. She was standing on her own, leaning against a pillar. Ron noticed him looking.

“Go talk to her. We’ll be alright here.”

“No, it’s okay,” Trevor said, blushing.

“Go on, mate. Take yourself a bowl of soup. I know you’re dying to.” Ron handed him a full bowl and gave him a friendly push.

Trevor felt self-conscious but tried to look nonchalant as he sauntered over to where the woman stood. “Hi,” was all he managed.

She looked up, was about to say something but took a bite of her bread roll instead.

“I’m sorry,” Trevor ventured. “I know this sounds stupid, but I think I know you from somewhere.”

“Maybe. You were here yesterday, right?”

“Yes. But I mean before that.” He studied her as she went back to eating. Then it hit him. “Heidelberg Heights Secondary, right?”

She looked up, with a puzzled expression on her face.

“We were in French together, at school. My name’s Trevor. Trevor Amorie.” He waited, holding his breath.

The woman studied him for a moment. “Yes. I remember you. You used to piss the teacher off with your lame jokes.”

Trevor nodded, remembering how he used to try and cover his difficulty with the language by making fun of it.

“You’re Julie, aren’t you? You used to be really good.”

She nodded but didn’t say any more.

“What happened? I mean, how come you’re here?”

She looked up and tears glistened in her eyes.

“Sorry,” he said. “I don’t mean to pry.” He didn’t know what else to say. Then he had a thought and pulled out his wallet. The woman looked shocked. “No, no,” he assured her. “I’m just going to give you my card from work.” He handed her a card and she looked at it and put it in her coat pocket.

“Please ring. I’d like to talk some more. When you feel like it. Please do,” he added.

She nodded and walked to the trestles to return her bowl and spoon. Then she left.

On the drive back with Ron, Trevor was quiet, deep in thought. He couldn’t imagine why Julie would be out on the streets. Ron didn’t say anything, or ask about Trevor’s interest in the woman.

The next two mornings, Julie didn’t come to the station for breakfast. Trevor worried that he had frightened her off. Then on the fifth morning of his helping Ron she was

there again. Trevor nodded to her in acknowledgement, and left it at that. Later that morning, at work, the receptionist buzzed him and said there was a woman on the line claiming to be calling on a private matter. Trevor's heart skipped a beat as he said he'd take the call.

"Hullo, Ron Amorie here."

There was silence for some time, then a hesitant voice. "Hi... I... I'd like to talk... but ... I... but not on the phone."

Trevor arranged to meet Julie after work. He suggested a café in Fitzroy, near where she was sheltering in a disused warehouse.

Next morning he drove to Ron's café half an hour early, knowing that Ron would be in the kitchen.

"Good morning Robin," Ron said in surprise, when Trevor let himself in. "Saving the world has become more urgent, has it?"

"Actually..." Trevor hesitated.

Ron stopped and looked intently at Trevor. "Out with it, lad. What's on your mind?"

"Well, you see... Remember that woman at the station a couple of days ago? The one I told you I know from school?"

Ron nodded. "Yes?"

"Can we give her a lift into town?"

"From where?"

"Eh, well... from here," Trevor blurted out.

Ron studied him. "What have you done, mate?"

"It's not like that, Ron."

Ron raised his eyebrows.

"Honest Ron, she slept on the couch. I told her I might be able to help her find a job." He stopped and looked at Ron, who was looking worried.

"It doesn't work like that, mate. You can't go taking them *all* home, you know."

"I don't intend to. But I've heard an actress say recently that she can't save the whole world at once but that she'd save the world one child at a time. And this is someone I went to school with and I think I can help her before she sinks down to where most of the others are. There's still a good chance for her."

Ron shook his head. "Could be dangerous, you know, getting personally involved."

Trevor grew angry. "It's all well and good for you, saving the whole world each morning. But what about really saving one person? Why's that wrong? What are you afraid of? I don't..."

Ron held his hand up and Trevor stopped his outburst. "You may be right, mate. I shouldn't judge. By all means bring her along."

"Ta, Ron." Trevor took a breath. "You'll understand when you talk to her, none of it's her fault." He went out through the back door to fetch Julie.

On the drive along the bay, Julie talked haltingly with Ron. She explained that she'd been married and had a two-year-old son. Her husband and son were killed in a car crash. She had no siblings and no family – her parents had both died some years before. Her husband's family would have nothing to do with her after the crash, blaming her. She'd become depressed, started taking drugs, lost her job and was kicked out of the rented flat.

After breakfast at the station, Julie helped clear up. Ron invited her back to his café for a “better breakfast”. As the three of them tucked into their eggs, Ron was more thoughtful than Trevor had seen him before.

“Maybe I’ve been wrong,” Ron offered, looking at Trevor, then at Julie. “Maybe I’ve been hiding, hoping not to get personally involved.”

The other two said nothing as Ron went back to eating. Then Ron looked at them again. “Maybe the world can’t be saved before breakfast. Maybe it takes all day.”

Trevor and Julie still said nothing.

Ron looked at Julie. “I need another waitress here, for the afternoon shift.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Would you like the job?”

Julie’s mouth fell open. She looked at Trevor, who smiled back and gave a nod in Ron’s direction. Julie looked back at Ron. “That... that would be great. I mean... yes please.” She smiled.

“Well,” Ron said. “We must all try and save the world before dinner.”

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