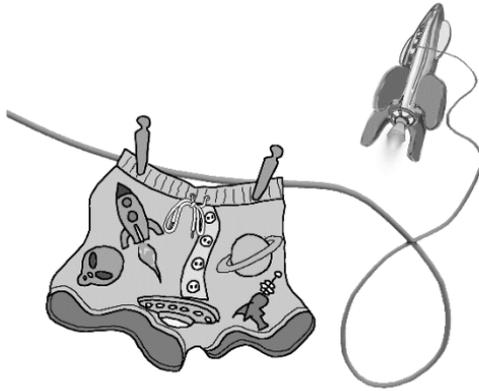


Sci-Fi Shorts III

by Mark Roman



Sample chapter



Grinning Bandit Books
<http://grinningbandit.webnode.com>

Superpower



At the ripe old age of 81, I have discovered I have a superpower. It's not one of those incredible ones you see in movies – like leaping tall buildings, or bare-handedly bending steel girders, or throwing balls of fire at things. To be honest, I'd have preferred one of those, but, like my dear departed mother used to say: *You must be grateful for what you have, Winston.*

And what I have is the ability to make people's AirPods fall out of their ears – solely with the power of my mind. *Pop – out they drop.*

Now, as superpowers go, this may not sound much. For example, I'm unlikely to be enlisted by the Fantastic Four to make up a quintet. Or asked by Batman to help

fight crime in Gotham City. Nevertheless, it provides me with much mischievous entertainment whenever I'm irritated by someone who happens to be wearing those overpriced devices. Say, if they push in front of me in a supermarket queue, or walk towards me zombie-like focusing solely on their phone, or don't give up their seat to a less able person on the bus, or don't clean up after their dog has fouled the pavement. I could go on.

You can think of me as a geriatric superhero with the power to mildly inconvenience wrongdoers. It's such a joy to see those AirPods tumble out and to witness their owners shriek and fly into panic mode as they frantically scuttle after their precious accessories. Keeps me chuckling for minutes afterwards. You'd do the same, admit it.

I discovered this gift by accident about a month ago when travelling on the London Underground. Sitting opposite me on the train was a scruff-looking youth manspreading his legs and arms to the obvious discomfort of the two lady passengers on either side of him. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt that both looked like they'd been through an industrial shredder, and his tattooed face was skewered with more metal than in a modestly sized family car. Added to this, he was tucking into a pot of the smelliest curry I've ever encountered, its fiery aroma filling the entire carriage. And, as if all this wasn't annoying enough, he was singing loudly and tunelessly – with mouth full of chicken vindaloo, or whatever it was – and making jerky, upper-body, dance moves. In his ears were a pair of AirPods that were clearly providing the backing track to this infuriating behaviour.

I've seen many irritating people on the Tube, but this guy took the biscuit. I threw him a withering look and screamed in my head for him to *SHUT THE HELL UP!*

To my amazement, he did – for the simple reason that the AirPods had dropped out of his ears. Accompanied by much swearing, the lad scurried to retrieve them from the carriage floor and plug them back into his lugholes. On returning to his seat, he resumed his bad singing, inelegant shoulder twitching, and odious eating.

I scowled and willed him to *STOP IT, FOR GOODNESS SAKE!* My telepathic entreaty had the same result as before: two ejected listening devices.

Was it a coincidence or was I indeed responsible?

I tried again; this time just mentally *willing* the earbuds to drop out. Same result, but better, in that one of the buds landed in his curry. The guy had to suck it clean – a disgusting enough thing to behold – before reinserting.

This felt good.

The lad, of course, wasn't enjoying it half as much as I was. Eventually, perplexed and furious, he gave up and put his listening devices away, visibly wondering what the hell was wrong with them. He remained blissfully silent – and no longer seat-dancing, albeit still manspreading and still scoffing his stinking food – and fuming all the way to his destination.

When I told my wife Beryl about my superpower, she didn't believe me. And, as neither of us were the owners of such hearing devices, I wasn't able to prove it to her.

*

It wasn't until our daughter Sally, and her young son

Daniel, came to visit, that I was able to provide a demonstration. Granddad's little party trick proved a great success, and left Daniel begging to know how it had been done.

I tapped my nose mysteriously and told him, "That's my little secret." In truth, of course, I had no idea. I wondered if, perhaps, AirPods have a built-in 'eject' function that I was somehow triggering, but that was a crazy idea.

Sally said, "I know someone who works at the local TV station. I'm sure they'd love to do a little piece on your superpower for London News."

"No, no, it's too silly to broadcast," I said, waving her suggestion away.

"Go on, Winston," urged Beryl. "It'll be great. You'll be a celebrity."

"Well, all right."

So, a few days later, a reporter arrived with a camera crew to interview me. She seemed very young and couldn't stop giggling whenever I telekinetically knocked her AirPods out. After half a dozen takes, she managed to get through without losing her professional demeanour.

"What possible use might your superpower be?" she asked me.

"I'm using it to clamp down on selfishness and antisocial behaviour, and only target annoying people. Indeed, I'm hoping the broadcast of this interview will help make people more aware of how aggravating their actions can be."

I must admit I laid it on pretty thick, describing myself as a 'vigilante against inconsiderate conduct' and a 'champion of civil etiquette'. She seemed to buy it, which

pleased me.

In the days after the interview was broadcast, I did indeed become a bit of a local celebrity. People smiled at me at the newsagents. Some spoke to me in the street. One asked for an autograph. And at my local gym, where I go twice a week, my fellow oldies cheered my entrance like I was a returning war hero.

*

Then, one day, I was kidnapped.

OK, that sounds rather more dramatic than it actually was. It's not like I was bundled into an unmarked van by a bunch of thugs wearing balaclavas and armed with submachine guns. In fact, it was rather of a civil affair. Two posh, politely spoken gentlemen approached me in the street and graciously invited me into their car – a fancy-looking and very shiny Jaguar. Despite their courteousness, it was clear they wouldn't brook 'No' for an answer.

So I obliged, like you would. While one man drove, the other sat in the back with me, chatting. Good looking, suave, and exuding what was probably an expensive aftershave, he was very cheery throughout the journey. It turned out we had a lot in common. We both love the opera, hate Manchester United, and had been to the same boarding school in South London, albeit several decades apart. The one thing the man wouldn't discuss was where we were going, or why. All he did was to give an inscrutable smile, and mime zipping his lips. Reginald, he said his name was. The driver was Arthur.

As the car approached South Kensington, Reginald asked whether I'd mind terribly putting on a blindfold, if

it wasn't too much of an inconvenience, and just for a short while. I nodded and a silk scarf, smelling of Reginald's aftershave, was wrapped around my eyes.

Minutes later, the car stopped and I was gently helped out of it, still blindfolded, before being led into a building, up a short flight of stairs, and into an echoey room. There, Reginald removed my blindfold before folding it and tucking it into his coat pocket. He shook my hand and bade me farewell, wishing me a pleasant day.

I found myself alone in a room containing just a bare desk and two chairs either side of it, wondering what next.

What next turned out to be the door flying open and a flustered, elderly woman – possibly in her sixties – dashing in carrying a bundle of papers. She wore high heels, a short black skirt and a somewhat revealing blouse, none of which struck me as age-appropriate.

“Winston Doddington, right?” she asked in an Irish accent, clearly in a hurry.

I nodded.

“Patricia Midgely.” She indicated one of the chairs and dropped the stack of papers, about an inch thick, on the table in front of it, placing a ballpoint pen on top. “Just need you to sign a few papers.”

I sat down, blinking in bewilderment, eyeing the papers. “What are these?”

“The usual forms. Non-disclosure agreement, Official Secrets Act, Visitor Contract, Insurance details, Statement of Plausible Deniability, Medical History, Dietary Requirements, and a feedback form on your kidnapping experience. Oh, and your bank details so we can pay you

for your time here.”

“Ah,” I said, with an impressed nod. I liked the sound of the last of these, although thought it impolite to ask how much I’d be getting.

“And lunch is on us.” She flashed a humourless smile. “OK? I’ll leave them with you.” She turned and was gone in a shot.

I must admit I hate filling in forms. Instead, I took out my phone and, after looking around surreptitiously, called my wife.

“Beryl,” I said in an urgent whisper when she answered. “I’ve been kidnapped.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry, you won’t be getting a ransom demand. It’s all very friendly and charming. They say they’ll pay me for my time here.”

“Is this about your superpower?”

“Probably.”

“Where are you?”

“No idea. Actually, I think I may know.”

“Will you be home for lunch?”

“No, they’re providing lunch, apparently.”

“Dinner?”

“Don’t know. I’ll text you.”

“OK, love. Take care.”

“You too.”

Then, with a deep sigh, I pulled the pile of papers closer. I started with the kidnapping feedback form. ‘Lovely abduction,’ I wrote. ‘Very professional. Would gladly be kidnapped again. 5 stars!’ I figured Reginald and Arthur would appreciate that. Next it was the Official Secrets Act. Yawn.

Half an hour later, Patricia burst back in like a hurricane in human form. “Done?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Grand,” she said, gathering the forms up. “Come this way.”

She shot out of the room, and I hurried after her, barely able to keep up. She clattered down the corridor in her high heels and into a lift, waiting with an impatient look for me to catch up.

“What’s this about?” I asked, as I fought to get my breath back and considered beefing up my gym workouts. “Is it about my superpower?”

Patricia gave a slightly manic laugh. “Like I’d know!” she exclaimed. “No one tells me anything around here. ‘Just get him to sign the forms, Patricia’. ‘Take him up to see Dr Baron, Patricia.’ That’s it. Twenty years I’ve worked here, and they still don’t trust me with any information. Nothing.”

I rather wished I hadn’t asked.

On the seventh floor, I chased after her as she charged into a laboratory smelling strongly of acetone and looking like an antique store full of ancient computers, microscopes, balances, benchtop meters and other equipment.

From behind one of the machines came a thin man in a white lab coat two sizes too small for him. He had tousled hair and a pair of dark framed spectacles. He appeared bursting with enthusiasm as he hurried to greet me.

“The AirPods guy!” he exclaimed, holding out a hand. “Pleased to meet you. I am Dr Robert Baron, but you can call me Rob.”

“Winston,” I said.

As we shook hands, Patricia said, “I’ll leave you to it, then – whatever *it* is.” She turned away, muttering, “Too important for *me* to know.”

Rob rolled his eyes as he watched her whoosh off. Turning to me, he grinned and rubbed his hands as he ushered me through a side door. “This way, this way. I’m so excited to meet you.”

We entered a darkened room, its walls lined with sound-absorbing foam wedges that looked like hundreds of egg boxes.

“Let’s check out this superpower of yours, shall we?” said Rob closing the door behind us. In the anechoic chamber his voice sounded like we were out in the open air, which lent a slightly surreal feel to it.

He sat me in a battered old armchair while he positioned himself on a rickety chair opposite. Next to him was a table with an array of curious objects arranged on it, like a bric-a-brac market stall in a town fallen on hard times. He picked up a computer tablet and tapped a few notes on it. Then he picked up a couple of AirPods and inserted one in each ear. “Can you make these drop out?” he asked.

I was happy to oblige, particularly as I was getting paid.

As the AirPods hit the ground, Rob laughed and clapped his hands. “So cool,” he kept repeating as he chased after them like a dog after a ball. “So cool.” He retrieved them and sat back down to make a note on his tablet. “How’s it done, though,” he said, thinking aloud. “Triggering the stapedius and tensor tympani muscles, perhaps? Can’t be. The auricular muscles? Hmm, maybe.”

He then tried a selection of other earbuds – Sony, Samsung, Bose – and I had little trouble ejecting those too. I was pleased to discover my superpower wasn't solely Apple-centric.

Rob was almost choking with excitement each time he scampered after them.

Then came the peanuts. With the solemnity of a man dedicated to Science, he inserted an unshelled peanut into each ear.

It seemed cruel to laugh, but I must confess a slight snigger escaped me.

When I tried to dislodge the nuts, nothing happened. I don't know who was more disappointed – him or me. Him, I think.

Rob frowned and made a note. Then he tried another pair of objects from his bric-a-brac collection. And then another. And another.

Each time he plugged some new thing into his earholes, that earnest look of his made me crack up inside. I was determined to keep a straight face even though it was becoming more and more of a challenge. But it was the pencils that broke me. There he sat, an HB pencil shoved in each ear, eraser end first, wobbling with every head movement, and I lost it completely.

“You OK?” asked Rob in concern, as I tried to disguise my chortles as a sudden coughing fit.

“Sorry,” I said between coughs and snorts. “Just give me a moment.”

“Curious,” he muttered, pencils wobbling, making more notes on his tablet.

I expect he was noting, perhaps with disappointment, that I couldn't dislodge anything other than earbuds. But,

in my experience, it is rare for people to have peanuts or pencils or other objects stuffed in their ears, so I hardly considered myself a failure.

Then it was on to more AirPods. He explained each pair had had a different component removed.

I was unable to budge any of these inactivated items. My power seemed only to work on whole, fully charged and fully functioning AirPods, or similar earbud products.

“Interesting,” said Rob, again noting the results and scratching his head.

*

At lunchtime, he took me to the canteen: a fairly minimalist establishment with cheap-looking furniture, zero decoration, and a rather limited choice of food – although the fish and chips looked good.

The views of London through the panoramic windows allowed me to work out my location and confirm my suspicion I’d been brought to the MI6 building in Vauxhall – the headquarters of the British Secret Intelligence Service.

The canteen was full of diners. Presumably most of the people here were spies and secret agents: the real-life James Bonds, Harry Palmers, and George Smileys. Or, perhaps, the real-life Austin Powers and Johnny Englishes.

Seated in a corner were Reginald and Arthur, the two men who’d kidnapped me. I smiled and waved to them, and they waved back. It was like we were old chums now.

I followed Rob with my tray of food to a table where a slightly shady looking man was already seated. He had a

hooked nose, dark-framed glasses, bushy eyebrows, fulsome moustache, and a bow tie. It looked like the worst disguise ever. I couldn't help wondering if there was a camera hidden in the bow tie, beaming its video directly to GCHQ.

"Alright, Phil?" Rob asked the man as he sat down.

"Yeah, you?"

"Good. How's work?"

"Top Secret, mate, innit," replied Phil with a wink. "You?"

"Same."

As I joined them, I wondered if this routine was a running joke among the employees here, for I heard it being played out three tables down. "How are you?" "Top Secret, innit." "Yeah, me too."

I nodded a greeting to Phil, who nodded back.

If everything here was Top Secret, I wondered what topic of conversation was safe to broach. Try as I might, I couldn't think how to get the small talk started. The standard question of "So, what do you do?" was clearly off-limits.

Consequently, the entire lunch was eaten in awkward silence. In fact, the whole canteen was eerily quiet, apart from the clinking of cutlery, as though everyone was facing the same issue.

*

Back in the lab, Rob tried a new set of experiments with AirPods placed on different surfaces or embedded in different holes and crevices. Try as I might, I couldn't budge any unless they were plugged into a human ear. Then it was off to the MRI scanner to identify which

parts of my brain fired up when I was using my superpower.

“My, oh, my,” Rob kept saying, but didn’t expand.

At the end of the day, Rob shrugged and said, “Well, I’ll be honest. I am baffled. Totally baffled.”

The poor chap looked utterly deflated, and I almost felt sorry for him.

“I’ve confirmed your superpower is genuine,” he continued. “First time in ten years and hundreds of trials that I’ve witnessed a genuine paranormal ability. In fact, you’re the first person who isn’t a charlatan, a fake, or totally deluded.”

“That’s nice.”

“I can’t fathom how you do it, though, or what the physics behind it is. Certainly merits further investigation. Problem is, I can’t see how it might be applied to national security, whether in intelligence work or in a military capacity. So, this is as far as I can go. Sorry.”

I was sorry, too, I think. It would have been nice to use my power for King and Country. To fight enemy agents of hostile nations. Still, at my age, probably best not to get involved.

On the plus side, I’d had a free lunch and would be getting paid.

“If we think of something, we’ll be in touch,” he said, handing me another feedback form, and shaking my hand.

And that was that. There was no car ride this time. I had to find my own way to Vauxhall Underground Station and get home by Tube.

I felt rather let down by King and Country.

*

A couple of weeks later, Beryl and I were heading home on the Tube.

As soon as we'd taken our seats, I noticed to my horror that, sitting opposite me, was the same scruffy-looking, tattooed, facially pierced youth I'd encountered when I'd first discovered my superpower. As before, the lad was wearing his AirPods. This time, however, he was neither singing aloud nor dancing in his seat, nor indeed consuming any malodorous foodstuffs. I wondered whether that was down to me. Had my intervention cured the youth of his annoying behaviour?

But then he spotted me, and I quickly looked away, tensing up because I could feel his eyes boring into me. Beryl was reading her book, so I fixed my eyes to the train's floor.

The youth cleared his throat. "Excuse me," he said.

I pretended not to hear.

"Excuse me," he repeated louder, leaning forward towards me. "Aren't you the AirPod guy? I recognize you from the BBC News website. It's you, isn't it?"

I blinked and looked up. The guy's demeanour wasn't as menacing as I'd feared. In fact, he appeared to have a smile of admiration on his metal-perforated face.

To my left I sensed Beryl perk up. She closed her book. "Yes, that's right. He is."

Thanks a bunch, dear.

"So, is it really true you can make AirPods fall out of people's ears?" continued the lad, now quite animated. He was speaking so loudly, the rest of the carriage had turned and were listening in. "Can you do mine?"

I gulped, wondering whether I was being set up. "Are

you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah, go on, mate. I won't mind." The youth adjusted his head to be straight on to me, as though presenting me with an easier target.

Still unsure where this was leading, I cast my power at the AirPods and, sure enough, they popped out.

The carriage erupted with applause.

"Do it again," insisted the youth as he collected his earbuds and rammed them back in.

I sighed. The lad was becoming annoying.

"Can you film it this time?" he asked. He passed his mobile phone, set to video mode, to Beryl, and she willingly took it.

Three times the trick was performed, and three times Beryl videoed it, continuing to film to ensure she caught the carriage's applause and cheers. Each time, my irritation mounted.

"That's so cool," said the youth as he reviewed the footage. "Cheers, man. That's going straight on TikTok for my millions of followers." He pointed to the word 'KryptoManiac' printed on his T-shirt. "That's my online moniker. Check it out tonight. On TikTok." He repeated this message to the other people in the carriage, and a few of them tapped something on their mobiles – maybe making a note of the name, or something.

The rest of the train journey was one of awkward glances, false smiles, and checks of watches – just like any London Underground journey where one's made inadvertent contact with a total stranger. I prayed for the train to speed up and end my misery.

Then, just as the torment was nearly over, the youth leaned forward and said with a wink, "Go on, mate, do it

again.”

I felt like punching him, but of course didn't, for I would have lacerated my hand on all that stainless steel in his face.

*

The next few days were the worst. My daily walks, in which I aim to achieve 10,000 steps, were marred by an endless stream of TikTok-inspired Gen Zers accosting me and asking me to dislodge their earbuds while filming it on their phones for their social media feeds. Thanks to KryptoManiac, I'd gone viral. The rat must have revealed where Beryl and I had got off the Tube, making it simple for these hordes to track me down.

Ah, the trappings of Fame.

My superpower, which had once seemed such a modest force for good, had turned me into a freak show for the Instagram generation.

Happily, things have quietened down recently. People have largely forgotten about me – which is a relief.

I do sometimes wish that, one day, MI6 might contact me with some application for my ability. Perhaps I could dislodge the earpieces of United Nations interpreters at critical junctures in the discussions. Or disrupt foreign spies in their surveillance work. Or, if not MI6, maybe the Famous Four will ask me to join them after all. Or possibly Batman will recruit me when Gotham City gets a new supervillain whose henchmen all wear AirPods.

I know they're all fictional, but one can dream.