

We Could Be Heroes

by

David MacGregor

dmacgregor77@gmail.com

Setting

A bathroom.

Time

Now and then.

Cast

PAM - A woman with a broken toilet in her 20s-30s.

HANK - A plumber in his late 20s-40s.

At center stage is a toilet. There is nothing else, only darkness.

PAM (O.S.)

...it is so nice of you to come out here at this time of night.

HANK (O.S.)

No problem. It's what I do.

PAM (O.S.)

The bathroom is over here.

HANK and PAM enter and approach the toilet. PAM has on pyjamas, a robe, and slippers. HANK wears work clothes. He carries a large toolbox. PAM points to the toilet.

PAM

That's it.

HANK

Yeah, I figured.

PAM

I'm sorry, of course that's...it's late. I'm still half-asleep.

HANK

So, what's going on?

PAM

I don't know. I got up to use it and when I went to flush there was this loud cracking sound, like something broke.

HANK

Well, let's take a look.

PAM

I should have waited to the morning. I think I kind of panicked a little.

HANK

Hey, like my ad says, 24/7. No point in putting that in there if I don't mean it.

PAM

It's great that you're available like that.

HANK

I'm not big on sleeping anyway.

PAM

God, I shouldn't have called.

HANK

Relax, will you? It's no problem. And if you have a cracked tank, believe me, you'll be glad you called.

PAM

Why would the tank crack?

HANK

They do. Usually because somebody's messing with them, but sometimes all on their own. I'll tell you what, if that happens and there's nobody home...big mess. But I don't see any water on the floor. That's a good sign.

HANK pulls the lid off the tank and peers inside.

PAM

I usually call my brother when stuff like this happens...

HANK

But he's probably sleeping like a normal person.

PAM

No, he's not around anymore...he just enlisted in the Marines.

HANK pulls a flashlight from his toolbox, turns it on, and peers into the tank again.

PAM

But he's great at fixing stuff...cars, plumbing, anything mechanical...not that he hasn't had his issues. School wasn't really his thing...I think the Marines are going to be really good for him. You know, just the structure. The discipline.

HANK stops looking in the tank and turns the flashlight off.

HANK

Well, the tank's fine, but your ball cock's fried.

PAM

Is that bad?

HANK

It's not good, but it's an easy fix. And the cracking sound you heard was the plastic piece that holds the lift rod in place.

PAM

So, do you need to come back?

HANK

Nah, I have the parts. It's a quick job. Your brother could have done it if he was around.

HANK searches his toolbox.

PAM

Well, he's in South Carolina for basic training. I'm really proud of him. So are our nephews. He's like a hero to them now, with his uniform and everything.

HANK

I'll bet.

PAM

You never wanted to join the Marines and be a hero?

HANK stands up with a wrench.

HANK

Lady, it's three in the morning and I'm here to fix your toilet. I don't think it gets any more heroic than that.

HANK starts working on the toilet.

PAM

Maybe you're right. So, do plumbers get medals for answering emergency calls at three in the morning?

HANK

(immersed in his work)

I don't need a shiny star to tell me I'm doing good. That's for kindergartners and soldiers.

PAM

What's that supposed to mean? You think giving a soldier a medal is like giving a kindergartner a star?

(beat as she watches him work)

That's a terrible thing to say.

HANK

You're right. I'm sorry I opened my mouth, okay? It's been a long day.

PAM

Our soldiers are protecting your freedom.

With one hand holding something inside the tank, HANK points.

HANK

Could you hand me that wrench?

PAM picks up the wrench, but doesn't hand it over.

PAM

You know that, right?

HANK

I just need the wrench, okay?

PAM

What is your problem?

HANK

Lady--

PAM

Why don't you think our soldiers are protecting your freedom?

HANK

Because they're not. Can they? Yes. Have they? Sure. These days? Not so much. Wrench.

PAM hands him the wrench and he gets to work.

PAM

I don't...okay, look, I'm glad you're fixing my toilet, but there is something wrong with you.

HANK

No argument from me.

PAM

(invading his space)

Because you know you're wrong!

HANK

I'm just here to fix the damned toilet, all right? Will you let me do that?

PAM backs up, crosses her arms, and shakes her head. HANK looks up at her, knows he's being judged, and...

HANK

Yeah, I'm a horrible person, okay? With plumbers who come out at three a.m., you take your chances. But--

HANK manages to bite his tongue.

PAM

But what?

HANK

Nothing.

PAM

No, not nothing! You were going to say something! But what?

HANK

You want to know what's really horrible? It's how proud you are.

PAM

What are you talking about?

HANK

That's what you said. That you're proud of your brother. That he's a hero to your nephews. You think that's just you? It's the same thing around the world. Proud families sending their kids off to be soldiers. Russian kids, Chinese kids, Muslim kids...

PAM

What about it?

HANK

They're all heroes. Every single one of them. Because when it comes to war, nobody thinks they're the bad guy. So their heroes kill our heroes and our heroes kill their heroes. That's the game. Only that's somebody's son...somebody's daughter. Somebody who was loved who's never coming home. And for what? An oil field? A rice paddy? The promise of heaven?

PAM

You don't think we need soldiers? Is that it? You think my brother's an idiot for joining the Marines? For being patriotic?

HANK

It's not the kids who are the idiots. It's us. The proud friends and families. We're the ones buying the same bullshit story over and over. You see those people across the ocean? See those people who dress and talk different? They're not like us. They're the enemy. And so we take our children, slap guns in their hands, and tell them to go kill other people's children.

PAM

That's a pretty sick way of looking at it.

HANK

And it's not sick the way we turn every other sporting event into a commercial for the military? The way they trot out some poor legless son-of-a-bitch at halftime so people can put down their ten dollar beers and clap for thirty seconds? That's more than sick. That's fucking pathological.

HANK goes back to work inside the tank with both wrenches. PAM watches him, reassessing...

PAM

Were you in the service?
 (off his silence)
 Or did you know someone?

HANK

Doesn't everyone know someone?
 (pulls the broken parts from
 the toilet tank)
 There's your problem. Broken ball cock.

As HANK puts the broken parts in a plastic bag, PAM sees the repair parts still boxed up. She uses a screwdriver to slice the sealed tape on the box, opens it up, and gives HANK a part. She continues to hand him parts as he works.

PAM

My brother is trying to do a good thing...he's a good kid.

HANK

I'm sure he is. And he's what, eighteen, nineteen? There's kids like him all over the planet and they get sold the same hero, warrior, martyr bullshit that's been sold for centuries. Like Napoleon Bonaparte once said, it's amazing how long and hard a man will fight for a colored piece of ribbon.

PAM

And that's all war is to you? Deluded teenagers fighting for pieces of ribbon?

HANK

Pretty much. It's worth more to the guys calling the shots, of course. They have their own agendas. But the biggest one is convincing the families that those body bags are full of heroes. Whatever it takes to keep the machine going.

(beat)

Your parents still alive?

(off her nod)

(MORE)

HANK (cont'd)

And I'm sure they're proud of your brother too...I just hope they stay that way.

PAM

Because he could get wounded or killed.

HANK

Maybe. Or maybe he's just standing by the side of the road watching a buddy of his trying to stuff his guts back inside his body. But there's no medal or shiny star for that...

HANK flushes the toilet, watching the mechanism inside the tank.

HANK

You're good to go...so to speak. Sorry, that's the only plumbing joke I know.

HANK puts the lid back on the tank, then kneels by his toolbox, putting his tools away as PAM watches him.

PAM

My brother didn't enlist to get a shiny star. He wants to help people. To defend people who can't defend themselves. I'm not saying all soldiers are heroes. But they can be. I really, truly believe they can be.

HANK closes his toolbox.

HANK

Don't you think I do?

HANK stays kneeling, motionless. PAM approaches and crouches next to him, holding out the screwdriver.

PAM

Can I give you a piece of advice? You should probably stay out of conversations in bars.

HANK looks at her, managing a smile. He takes the screwdriver and slips it into his shirt pocket.

HANK

I generally stay out of conversations everywhere.

HANK stands up and picks up his toolbox, ready to leave. PAM pulls a checkbook from the pocket of her robe.

PAM

How much do I owe you?

HANK

Let's call it a hundred. Does that work for you?

PAM

That works for me.

HANK watches her write the check.

HANK

What do you do for a living?

PAM

I teach.

HANK

Teach what?

PAM

Science. To seventh graders.

HANK

Now see, that's heroic.

PAM

Right.

HANK

I'm not kidding.

PAM

How is standing in front of a Smart Board talking about osmosis and cellular functions heroic?

HANK

Because you could make a whole lot more money doing something else, but you're trying to help those kids and make the world a better place. That's what real heroes do. And most of them don't get medals or wear uniforms.

PAM

(handing HANK the check)

So maybe it's plumbers and science teachers they need to start honoring at halftime during football games?

HANK

That'd be a step in the right direction.

(turns to go, then pauses)

Good night...

(he reads the name on the check)

...Pamela.

PAM

Good night...I never did get your name.

HANK

It's Hank.

(he holds out his hand)

Thank you for your service, Pamela.

They shake hands.

PAM

Thank you, Hank.

HANK

Call me if you have any problems.

PAM

I will. 24/7.

HANK

You got it.

PAM

It's what you do.

HANK

It's what I do.

*HANK disappears into the darkness,
leaving PAM alone. Lights fade.*

END OF PLAY.