

THE MUTANTS MEN DON'T SEE

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James Alan Gardner has published seven novels and numerous short stories; his 2008 novelette "The Ray-Gun: A Love Story" won the *Asimov's Readers' Award* as well as the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. He has also been a finalist for both the Hugo and Nebula awards. Recently, he served as coeditor (with Spider Robinson) of the latest Tesseracts anthology. In his spare time, he studies geology and teaches kung fu. The author's latest reveals the identities of . . .

THE MUTANTS MEN DON'T SEE

At 10:04 A.M. on a Thursday in November, Jason Foote slipped something into Matthew Stein's beaker during Grade 10 chemistry. No one ever figured out what the substance was, but the result was an earsplitting bang.

At the next lab table, Julia Boudreau was startled enough to drop a test tube. It hit the floor and shattered, spreading glass and dilute acid over the tiles. Other students shrieked or swore, but the most extreme reaction came from Tamara-Lynn Eubanks: she grew nine feet tall, sprouted tree-bark all over her body, and smashed a hole through the wall of the classroom. She ran through the hole at the speed of a sports car and was not seen again until two years later, when she was caught on video fighting Blue Mechathons during the Rainbow Invasion.

Everyone in the class understood what had happened: Tamara-Lynn's DNA must have included the so-called "Spark gene." The shock of hearing the bang had pumped the girl full of fight-or-flight hormones. The adrenaline flood in Tamara-Lynn's bloodstream had combined with the glandular turmoil of being a teenager, and had "sparked" the gene out of dormancy. Every cell in the girl's body underwent spontaneous mutation; in the blink of an eye, Tamara-Lynn Eubanks joined the ranks of Earth's superhumans.

She was the fourth teen in Canada to transform so publicly. Many more were assumed to have "supered up" in private, but under similar circumstances—a girl or boy on the metabolic roller-coaster of adolescence got propelled even higher by a jolting moment of stress. Result: sometimes unmistakable traits like Tamara-Lynn's; sometimes a kid who looked completely normal but could juggle Buicks, read minds, or turn to steam.

Sparking up never happened in children—the gene couldn't activate until puberty established the basic biochemical conditions. And spontaneous transformation

had never been observed in anyone older than sixteen; after that, either you didn't have the Spark gene at all, or else your glands had settled down from Peak Crazy, thereby losing the chaotic strength to kick the gene awake. Conventional wisdom said that from age seventeen on, you could only acquire superpowers through supreme flukes of luck . . . like falling into a vat that contained exactly the right combination of weird chemicals, or getting hit by the right glowing meteor.

What were the chances of ridiculous things like that? One in a hundred million. But spontaneous Spark mutation happened to teens exactly like you.

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Liam Lee attended the same school as Tamara-Lynn Eubanks. He hadn't known her, except as a face in the crowd—Liam was in Grade 12 and his life didn't intersect with Grade 10s. As it happened, however, Liam was in the classroom next door when Tamara-Lynn crashed through the wall. He was sitting by the window, so he had a clear view of Tamara-Lynn's tree-like body as she raced into the distance.

Liam had never seen anything so beautiful.

And Liam was no stranger to Sparks. Like 90 percent of young males in the civilized world, he had that poster of Tigresse taped up in his bedroom. He watched the Spark channel . . . followed a dozen Spark-oriented tumblrs . . . befriended Facebook pages that tracked superbattles, superscandals, supertech. Once, he had stood on the beach near his house and watched as five superheroes fought a gigantic monster far off in Toronto harbor.

But Tamara-Lynn Eubanks was the first Spark he'd seen for real, up close. She was awesome. She was like magic. She was everything Liam wanted to be.

On the day Liam Lee saw Tamara-Lynn change, he was a week away from his seventeenth birthday.

Almost too late.

* * *

Like all mothers of teenage boys, Ellie Lee feared her son would do something stupid. He might drink and drive; he might plagiarize an essay; he might try one of the increasingly strange drugs that the Toronto *Sun* claimed were running rampant in city high schools. But more than anything else, Ellie feared that Liam would hurt himself trying to get superpowers.

He was almost seventeen: the magical cut-off date. Of course it wasn't magic at all—hormones didn't rigidly follow the calendar. Liam's metabolism had likely quieted down already . . . and of course, that was assuming he carried the Spark gene at all. What were the odds of that? Not high. But common sense arguments never seemed to dissuade kids from being idiots.

Every week, newspapers reported some teenager Sparking up during a crisis—like that boy in Argentina who was chased by a vicious dog and suddenly found he could leap huge distances and see radio waves. For weeks after that, the papers were full of dumb kids throwing themselves at Rottweilers in the hope of becoming super. It wasn't very different from tying a towel around your neck and jumping off the roof in the belief that you could fly . . . which was something Liam did when he was five (except luckily he couldn't figure out how to get to the roof, so he only jumped off the porch railing and landed in the junipers).

Getting scratched up had cured five-year-old Liam of trying crazy stunts; but Ellie was terrified this business with Tamara-Lynn Eubanks would send Liam back to the towel.

This time, Liam wouldn't just jump off the porch. More likely, he'd copy one of the many known "origins" that had turned teens into Sparks. You could find exhaustive descriptions on the Internet, and chatrooms where people discussed the pros and cons of stepping in front of cars or shouting insults at biker gangs.

Somehow, those discussions never mentioned the many many people who got injured or killed *without* gaining powers. Failure only happened to losers.

Sometimes, Ellie lay awake wondering which would be worse: Liam breaking his leg in a car crash, or Liam actually turning into a Spark. Sparks were constantly fighting, and being blown up, and turning evil, and going to other galaxies, and becoming radioactive, and having extravagant love affairs with totally the wrong kind of people. If instead Liam got a little bit hurt, it might not be so bad.

But Ellie knew her son: he never did things halfway. If he set his sights on Sparking up, he wouldn't try something only slightly dangerous. He'd go too far.

* * *

Ellie booked time off work: two weeks vacation, even though it was November. ("Going someplace warm, Ellie? Florida? Jamaica?") "No, I'm just going to lie on the couch and have hot flashes.") She bought a bicycle, over the protests of a man at the store. ("There'll be snow any day now; I really don't recommend riding around when there's ice.") The man didn't understand the lengths to which a mother would go when it came to stalking her son and trying to protect him.

The riding helmet she bought was more for motorcycles than bikes—it completely hid her face. She also bought a black tracksuit unlike anything she'd ever worn in her life. Ellie intended to follow Liam without being seen, but if he did occasionally spot her, she was confident he'd never recognize her from a quick glimpse.

(Ellie thought, "I'm a sitcom cliché." Then she thought, "I'm a mother.")

* * *

Liam rode the bus to school. Ellie followed a block behind, even though she didn't believe he'd try anything extravagant during school hours. Too many people were watching . . . and most of those were teens who'd be thinking, "If I stop some dude from dying, I might Spark up myself."

The danger-time was the weekend: likely Saturday night. Ellie briefly considered locking Liam in his room, but that would be counterproductive—he'd just climb out the window. He'd also be a hundred times more wary if he knew Ellie suspected what he might try. Better for Liam to think Ellie was oblivious; he'd be less likely to notice her trailing him.

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Ellie continued to follow her son, especially to see what he might be buying. If, for example, Liam entered a drugstore to purchase pills . . . but no, he wouldn't go the overdose route. Sparking up required a jolt of hormones and adrenaline; pills that you bought off the shelf might alter your blood's chemical balance and interfere with the Spark gene's activation. Supposedly certain street drugs could improve your chance of mutating, or even bestow superpowers whether or not you had the proper DNA . . . but even a rosy-eyed kid like Liam knew to mistrust such claims. If "Flamers" or "K-Juice" or "Wings" could make you super, why weren't the suburbs filled with people who could shoot lightning or punch through steel?

Liam never went near anyone who looked like a drug dealer. And Ellie didn't see him buy anything else too dangerous—he only bought junk food and coffee. Ellie had read about teens who tried to caffeinate themselves into mutating, but she was willing to take that chance.

* * *

Friday night, Liam went to the beach. It was only three blocks from the house: a strip of rocky sand on the edge of Lake Ontario, lined by guardrails and weather-beaten backyard fences. The lights of downtown Toronto blazed several miles away; far across the water, the U.S. side glowed faintly.

The air shivered with the cold night breeze, the sound of the waves, and the smell of the lake: weedy, fishy, pungent. Mostly, the water was clean enough for swimming,

but several days each summer, the bacteria count went too high, or else some flush of industrial spillage forced the city to put up signs until the danger passed. Besides, there were better beaches within driving distance: wide stretches of clean sand with lifeguards and ice cream carts. This neighborhood's beach wasn't a beach, it was just a shoreline.

Liam stood on the shore, throwing rocks and trying to skip them. He didn't have much luck—the water was far too choppy. Stones only bounced once, then got swallowed by the waves. No stars were visible overhead; just a uniform sheet of clouds, lit orange-gray by the city's lights.

Ellie lurked beneath a row of pine trees that had been planted as a windbreak. She wasn't the only one hiding in the shadows; dimly, she could see a couple to her left and hear another to her right, making use of the dark anonymity. Likely high school kids. She assumed Liam had used this beach himself whenever he had a girlfriend—bring a blanket and you could lie on soft sand with the scent of pine all around. . . .

Ellie shook herself. Even if she didn't think Liam would try anything tonight, this was no time for dreamy fantasies. Besides, hadn't everyone said that at her age, she'd become less interested in sex? Or was this one of those also-predicted mood swings?

Maybe all this fretting about Liam was just menopausal hysteria. Was he really going to do something drastic on the astronomically small chance he might be a Spark? And what was he doing here, really? Throwing stones and looking morose. What else would you expect from a boy who was alone on a Friday night?

Liam's previous girlfriend had dumped him a month ago. Of *course* he was feeling down. And Tamara-Lynn's change didn't help. But every teen had troubles. Liam wasn't any more flighty or neurotic than your average kid, so why should he be at greater risk than anyone else his age? And so far, no one else at Liam's school had done anything extreme.

Ellie watched as Liam bent over. She thought he was picking up more stones. By the time she realized that he'd untied his shoes, he had kicked them off and was running for the water.

No! This was supposed to happen *tomorrow* night. Stupid boy.

Ellie shouted, "Stop!" but Liam was already splashing into the shallows. Maybe he couldn't hear her over the splashes. Or maybe he didn't care—he was, after all, trying to maximize his emotional load, and the guilt of defying his mother could be an unexpected bonus.

Liam dived and started swimming, weighed down by his clothes. But speed didn't matter, did it? The stupid boy must intend to swim until his strength was exhausted. At that point, his body would have no choice but to Spark up . . . right?

"Liam!" Ellie shouted. She stopped herself from adding, "Get back here!" That would only drive him forward with more determination.

As Ellie fumbled to take her own shoes off, she yelled at the couples in the shadows, "Call 911!" One of them would surely do it; didn't every kid yearn to play a role in some big drama? Wasn't that precisely why Liam was heading away from shore?

Shoes off, Ellie ran into the water. It was not as bone-chillingly cold as she had feared—the lake retained some small part of the heat it had absorbed during the summer. But the water was still cool, and it soaked through Ellie's tracksuit in less than a second. By the time she was deep enough to begin swimming, she'd started to shiver.

It didn't stop her. Nothing would. Ellie was not an exceptional swimmer, but she wasn't too bad. Liam was the same: a so-so athlete, but not hopeless. Ellie did Dancercise four times a month; Liam had got a 72 in P.E. He was thirty-one years younger than she was, but Ellie was a mother. Remember that woman who had lifted a car to save her child? Ellie was certain she could do *anything* to rescue Liam.

At least he wasn't actually trying to kill himself—he hadn't just ducked underneath the water and filled his lungs. Nor was he swimming hard and fast. Ellie decided he didn't know she was chasing him; the sound of his own swimming would hide all the noise she made, and even if he stopped and looked behind him, he'd have trouble spotting her in the darkness.

Ellie couldn't see very well either—Liam was low in the water, with only his head and arms above the surface. The city lights that reflected off the cloud cover helped, but keeping on the right track still took effort. Ellie had to lift her head from time to time; Liam didn't. And whenever she looked to see where he was, he didn't seem any closer.

Ellie tried to swim faster. She fought the cold and the waterlogged weight of her clothes. A voice inside her screamed, "What do you think you can do when you reach him?" But she silently screamed back, "I'll save him. I'll save him."

Liam's head disappeared below the waves. Ellie's guts clenched. She dragged herself forward another few strokes, then dove into the cold dark water. Pitch-black beneath the surface—she couldn't even see her flailing hands, let alone any sign of Liam. Ellie reached out blindly, unable to believe she wouldn't save him anyway. Her lungs were bursting; she was hot and cold and exhausted and sinking and frantic.

* * *

Light erupted through the water, like floodlights turned on in a pool. Ellie saw Liam, limp and drifting weightlessly, just a short distance away. She wrapped her arms around him and shot toward the surface with all her remaining speed and strength.

When they broke above the waves, they kept going: up into the sky on a rocket trail of light.

* * *

Liam felt as light in Ellie's arms as he had when he was a baby. She radiated warmth into his body, upending him and lightly squeezing his chest to force out the water. After a moment, he coughed and started breathing again. Ellie filled him with heat and light as she flew him straight back home.

* * *

She debated taking him to a hospital. She decided against it—she could see he'd be okay . . . literally see it, like an aura surrounding him. And if she let doctors examine him, there'd be questions. Police. Compulsory psychiatric treatment. Liam might lose his entire school year, and the stigma would follow him forever.

But as it stood, nobody knew. If one of those couples had called 911, the police would search but find nothing. Okay, they'd find Ellie's bike, but they'd likely never trace it to her. If they did, she'd just say someone stole it. They'd also find two pairs of shoes, but so what? Nobody would ever make a connection. . . .

The doorbell rang. A dark-skinned woman stood on the porch; she was in her sixties, wearing an unflattering winter coat, but with an air of authority. Her aura shone as brightly as a laser—a vivid eye-watering green.

Ellie didn't want to answer the bell, but someone shining so fiercely on the doorstep would attract attention. Taking a moment to radiate enough heat to dry her clothes, Ellie opened the door a crack. "Yes?"

"Good evening," the woman said. "Consider me the Welcome Wagon."

"We've lived in this house for years," Ellie said.

"I'm welcoming you to something different," the woman answered. "May I come in?"

The woman's aura became even more intense. Ellie grimaced and opened the door all the way.

* * *

Once the woman was inside, Ellie closed the door and asked, "Who are you?"

"Someone like you." The woman levitated a short distance above the floor for a moment before settling down again. "We don't go in for dramatic names—*Firebolt* or

Crush-Master, that sort of thing. We prefer a lower profile.”

“Who’s ‘we?’” Ellie asked.

“A handful of us in the city. It happens that one of us can sense when somebody goes through the change. She suggested I come say hello . . . answer any questions . . . make sure you’re all right.” The woman looked at Ellie. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Ellie answered too quickly.

The woman gave her a look. “Are you sure? Because it’s the same for us as for teens: we only change if we go through some traumatic upheaval. Then because our hormones are all out of whack, abracadabra! The mother of all hot flashes.”

“Too bad we don’t take superhero names,” Ellie said. “*Hot Flash* would be a good one.”

The woman shook her head. “That would give away our secret. But hey, if you want to go a’heroing, feel free. Sparks always wear those flamboyant costumes: if you cover yourself from head to toe and invest in good support underwear, no one can tell whether you’re sixteen or sixty.” She patted her remarkably flat stomach. “Most of us burn calories at a hell of a clip, so we look just fine in Spandex. Get a mask to hide the crow’s feet and you’re set.” The woman laughed. “Actually, I’d recommend making a costume even if you don’t think you’ll ever use it. Once in a while, a crisis comes along, and suddenly you realize thousands of people will die unless you take action. Remember when the Fifth Reich attacked? They thought Toronto only had a tiny handful of heroes; then we came out of the woodwork and kicked their asses. Female empowerment, yo.”

Ellie found herself smiling. She forced the smile off her face. “I couldn’t possibly do anything like that. I have a son to look after.”

“We all have obligations,” the woman said. “After all, we’re not teenagers.” She handed Ellie a business card. “But there’s our group’s email address. Get in touch anytime. Support, conversation, whatever. If nothing else, we have an exercise class that’s way more fun than yoga.”

The woman smiled, then disappeared: poof, like that. Teleportation? Probably. After all, the woman had showed up at Ellie’s house so quickly, she must have some super method of travel.

Pensively, Ellie returned to Liam’s room. He was asleep; his aura looked calm. She had no idea what she would say to him when he awoke, but she’d get past it somehow.

And likely he’d never try such a stupid thing again. Ellie knew her son—Liam had taken his shot and lost. He’d sulk for a while, then he’d get a new girlfriend, or a pimple, or a tough assignment in math, and his mind would move on. Of course, she’d still keep an eye on him . . . and now she didn’t need a bike to do so.

She could fly. And see auras. She wondered what else she could do. And if she *did* toss caution to the wind and take a superhero name, what would it be?

She went to the kitchen, heated a cup of tea with her hands, then sat down to think.