

Fortunately, she has not opted to call the company to confirm his visit, in which case he would have been forced to resort to his rehearsed script about confusion over a scheduling misunderstanding, following which he would have been obliged to beat a hasty retreat. Having successfully gained access to the home, only one additional thing now needs to happen in order for this to have been a truly successful service call. The woman needs to be trusting enough to leave him alone with the cable box for at least three minutes. This she readily does, pointing in the general direction of the living room television, next to which sits the Pathways converter box—a device the repairman has not the slightest interest in, nor, for that matter, even the most basic knowledge of how to operate, much less repair.

“I’ll give you a shout once I’m finished,” the repairman calls after her. There is no response.

Once the woman has left, the man makes a quick survey of the living room. He reaches into his bag and extracts a tiny black plastic device about the size of a matchbook. He works a fingernail against the bottom of the device and peels away a protective film, revealing an adhesive layer. He lifts the cable box slightly and presses the device against its bottom, taking care to ensure that the dark transparent surface points outward into the room. There is a tiny sliding switch on the bottom of the device, which he now shifts from one position to the other. He returns the cable box to its original spot next to the television and reaches again into the parts bag, producing this time a device about the size of a thin paperback book. This device contains a display that the man stares at for a moment. He waves a hand before the cable box, then quietly snaps his fingers a couple of times while looking at the display. Satisfied, he places the larger device back into his bag, glances about to ensure that all is as he found it, then closes the bag and steps to the foyer of the house.

“Everything is fine here, ma’am. I’ll just let myself out,” he says. “You’ll get a call from our office when the new signal goes live, just to make sure everything is still okay.”

There comes a grunting noise from the direction of the kitchen, and the man turns the doorknob, exits the house, and walks nonchalantly to his car. It’s a miracle, he thinks, that more of this sort of thing doesn’t happen. People these days trust anyone in a uniform who acts like he knows what he’s doing.

With a cigarette burnt nearly two-thirds of the way down, most men would just say enough is enough and stub it out—on the ground or a shoe bottom—or perhaps flick it insouciantly out a car window. But Phineas J. Talbot isn’t most men and he isn’t about to waste a perfectly serviceable third of a cigarette, what with butts up to near eight bucks a pack and he less than certain as to the source of his next meal, much less his next smoke. Which is not to say that Phineas is an impoverished man. He maintains regular if unremarkably compensated employment and earns enough to keep a small apartment. That said, he is, statistically speaking, poor, at least by any objective governmental definition of the word. And he is—partly as a consequence of his economic status and partly due to certain aspects of his upbringing—less tolerant of waste than most people, particularly when it comes to consumables, be they mandatory like food, or discretionary like tobacco.

Other less conventional instances of Phineas’ parsimony abound, notable among them his washing, drying, and reuse of paper towels, and the fact that he has been using the same dispos-

able razor for about a year and a half. His abject horror over the wasting of food is a trait ingrained in him since early youth when, accompanied by three younger sisters, he made his way weekly to “collect the welfare” at the town office. This assortment of foodstuffs was so heinous it was remarkable the government got away with merely giving it out rather than feeling in some way obligated to pay the poor to take the stuff off its hands. Particularly notable for its scant resemblance to actual food were the powdered eggs and powdered milk, the latter of which yielded a translucent blue-white liquid that looked less like something you’d be inclined to put on your morning cereal and more like the very ghost of the once living milk. As a consequence of a youth spent eating—and more often than not looking for ways to avoid eating—such swill, Phineas will now eat borderline rotten food from his refrigerator rather than throw it out.

None of which background is directly germane to the story soon to unfold, except perhaps to provide a broad foundational sense of why Phineas behaves in certain ways in response to certain stimuli, like, for example, seeing someone else waste food, or, for that matter, waste anything. He is given to bouts of proselytizing, not on the topic of faith, of which he has none (at least not in any traditional religious sense), but rather on matters of what he takes as honorable behavior, including not only the aforementioned parsimony, but also the eschewing of all foul language and a general sense of noblesse oblige—this latter a surprising characteristic in a man never himself much risen above the barest levels of self-sufficiency. Still, his deeply impoverished upbringing left him with the view that, despite his own hand-to-mouth existence, there now exist in the world plenty of folks less fortunate than himself, folks to whom he owes a debt of some sort.

Phineas—Phin to his friends, a spare but oddly loyal cadre of individuals—is a single man living a single life, which is not to say single in the libertine sense of frivolous dating, late sleeping, and a general lack of responsibility. The single life he leads is one of daily toil, punctuated by lengthy periods of crushing monotony and loneliness, time spent thinking more about the past than the future, yet another inexplicable thing, given that Phineas’ past is in no discernible way superior to whatever his future holds. Which brings up the perfectly reasonable question of why it would be important to bring up Phineas’ past life at all if it has been so truly lacking in import to this point. A fair question and one deserving of at least a serviceable answer. And that answer is that Phineas Talbot is a superhero.

Okay, a low-grade superhero, as we shall see directly, but a superhero nonetheless. He does not fly. Nor is he imbued with powers of invisibility, invincibility, or any other of the abilities that the world associates with the various and sundry Supermen, Batmen, and Spider-Men with which our movie screens are currently encumbered. His is a far more subtle, but no less noble, ability, and one that he practices with verve.

There is one additional bit of childhood history that needs to be expounded upon in order to fully grasp why Phineas behaves as he does. It is, if you like, the mortar that binds together all the elements of his upbringing and goes perhaps further than anything else to explain the genesis of the activity that now consumes so much of Phineas’ non-working time. From the earliest possible age that he can recall in any detail (which commences around age five), there was not one single day in which Phineas was not beaten by one or both of his parents—parents who subscribed enthusiastically to the philosophy that sparing the rod was