

*Even secrets are not what they seem;  
even that which is hidden, conceals. – Jacob Needleman*

## 2. House of Secrets

June 13, 9 A.S.

“May I help you?”

Jim snapped back from whatever daydream he had been lost in and realized that he had at long last reached the front of the line. He handed his ticket to the pretty young flight attendant. She was blond and tall and had a nose that turned up in a way that Jim thought was cute. She reminded him of an intern he had known back at *The Daily Planet*. They had gone out once. Or was it twice? He couldn't remember.

“James Olsen,” she read, and then she looked up and asked: “Aren't you, like, famous or something?”

Jim brushed a hand across his receding hairline and smiled. “Well, it's been a while, but back when Superman – ”

“No, wait,” she interrupted. “I was thinking of Jerry Olsen, the guitar player from that oldies group. Sorry.”

“Never mind,” Jim said. “It's an easy mistake.”

Near the x-ray machines Jim passed a Kryptonist preaching to a handful of bored air-commuters and curious Asian tourists. He wore a bronze S-shield on a chain around his neck. “Look up! Look up! What have we done with the second chance he gave us?” he railed. “Who will stand when he comes again in wrath?”

On the plane he was seated on the aisle next to an 8-year-old boy and his mother, who had the window. The boy plugged a video cube into his vuscreen and was watching a cartoon in which Superman battled hordes of insectoid aliens. His laser vision was mowing the aliens down, creating a frighteningly graphic carnage until the insect queen turned his eye-powers off with a blinding flash of purple kryptonite radiation.

“You know,” Jim said to the boy, “nothing like that ever happened. Superman never fought any insectoid aliens, and there isn't any purple kryptonite.”

The boy looked up at him skeptically. “Like Superman is supposed to be real or something.”

“But he was real,” Jim said with some exasperation. “I knew him myself.”

The boy rolled his eyes. “Whatever,” he said.

“Bobby,” his mother interrupted, “why don't we switch so that you can look out the window?”

*How soon they forget*, Jim thought. It hadn't even been ten years since Superman had

flown a ship full of equipment too close to the Sun and disappeared for good. He had redirected a catastrophic solar eruption and probably saved the world. *But that was before this kid was born and he doesn't care. Only the lunatics care.*

Jim remained in a funk for the rest of the flight. Unlike Metropolis Central, O'Hare had no Kryptonists, but there was a stand selling Superman t-shirts and other fan items. Jim noticed that everything was the wrong shade of blue, the color the movie people had decided was more photogenic. The posters were of Jay Rheems, the actor from the most recent Superman television series. Jim thought about saying something, maybe asking if they had any posters of the real Superman. But he decided against it. The girl behind the counter probably didn't choose the merchandise. And besides, she looked barely twenty – she might not know what he was talking about.

The plane to Wichita was mostly empty. Jim tried to read, but instead found himself thinking of things that he should have said to the 8-year-old. Strangely, none of them worked, not even in fantasy. Showing the photos in his portfolio wouldn't have helped, he knew. The kids these days were too sophisticated to be convinced by photos. They knew that computers could generate any photo you wanted, right down to the smallest pixel. There were photos of Narnia now, and Middle Earth and Hogwarts Academy. Why would any self-respecting 8-year-old be impressed by photos of Superman?

Down below, the farmland looked like a patchwork quilt until just before they landed, when the perfect grid of Wichita appeared. Jim wondered how they decided where to build cities out here where every plot of land looked like every other plot of land. Billboards in the passageway from the plane to the gate advertised central Kansas tourist attractions, such as they were: ALIENS WALK AMONG US: SEE THE SMALLVILLE UFO MUSEUM.

Jim's mood didn't change until he saw Lois waving to him. She looked a little older, of course, but who didn't these days? She was still recognizably Lois, and she looked glad to see him. Standing next to her was a tall, gangly, teen-aged version of Clark, right down to the black plastic frames on his glasses. "Uncle Jimmy!" the boy called excitedly.

"Jon?" Jim mouthed from a distance. Lois nodded.

Lois was aging unapologetically – which, Jim realized, was about what he should have expected. Her black hair was now streaked with grey, and she had the beginnings of crow's feet at the corners of her violet eyes – all stuff that was fixable with dye or surgery if you considered it a problem, which she apparently didn't. Her belted blue slacks showed that motherhood hadn't damaged her waistline, and the short-sleeved white blouse displayed her taunt, athletic arms. The years had turned Lois into a good-looking middle-aged woman, not a middle-aged woman who resembled a good-looking teen-ager.

"Jimmy," she said as she hugged him, "it's so good to see you. You're looking wonderful."

"Well," he said, "I've got a little less hair and a little more waist than I did the last time

we saw each other, but I'm doing OK. Where's Clark?"

"Back at the house. He doesn't get out much any more. He's got a skin condition."

Jim looked concerned. Clark had always seemed so rocklike, so steady. It was hard to imagine anything being wrong with him. "Bad?"

She shook her head, and they started wandering in the direction of baggage claim. "No. You won't even know it to look at him. He hasn't changed a bit physically – no grey hair, nothing. It drives me nuts, really. But he likes to stay out of the sun now."

"And crowds," Jon added. "Dad hates crowds."

Jon had been six the last time Jim had seen him. Jim remembered him as one of those good-natured boys who just has way too much energy and curiosity to stay out of trouble. Losing sight of Jon for more than a minute usually meant finding him under a pile of debris after a loud crash. He never got hurt, but Jim had chalked that up to luck and the perpetual vigilance of his parents. Now Jim had to look up to talk to him. He made a joke about that, which embarrassed Jon, and then he recalled a mishap from the last time Jim had babysat him, which embarrassed him even more.

"That was before he was a big brother," Lois commented. "Now he's the responsible one. It's Laura we have to worry about."

Laura was their second child. She had been a toddler when the Kents had left Metropolis, so Jim calculated that she must be about 11 now. He asked where Laura was, and Lois answered that she had stayed home with Clark.

"She's a Daddy's girl," Jon explained.

"Just like her mother was," Lois added. "Can you imagine me with a daughter like myself? Half the time we don't know whether to hug or scratch each other's eyes out."

Truthfully, Jim could not imagine Lois with a daughter like herself, but he decided it would not be tactful to say so. At baggage claim Jim pointed out his bag, which Jon hefted like a styrofoam prop. "Be careful with that," Lois warned. "It's heavy." The boy looked chagrined and nearly dropped the bag, then started pulling it on its rollers.

They easily found Lois' SUV in the parking lot. Jim was a bit surprised to note that although it was a recent model, it was not one of the more expensive ones. "Don't you love small airports?" she said cheerfully. "At Met Central we wouldn't have made it out of the gate area yet."

Jim sat in the front and Lois drove. Jon sat diagonally in the back seat, his head behind Lois but his feet behind Jim. It was a 90-minute drive from the airport to the farm Clark had inherited from his parents. They filled the time with small talk. Jim deflected questions about Barbara, the last woman in his life that Lois had heard about, and shifted the conversation's focus to Jon, who was reading a space adventure novel and pretending not to listen. Lois reported that they had home-schooled both their children until recently,

when Jon had wanted to participate in athletics. “And of course Laura had to go to school then too. She’s a gymnast and Jon is a football player – he broke Clark’s freshman rushing record this year. I’m not sure whether Clark was happy about that or not.”

“The season’s a game longer now,” Jon commented from the back seat without looking up from his book.

Lois exited the interstate and took a two-lane U.S. highway. “Clark will be really glad to see you,” she said. “And it will be good for him to see someone from the old days. He’s gotten kind of distant from people these last few years. He doesn’t get out much.”

“The skin condition?”

“And other things.”

“What’s he doing with himself? Does he stay busy? He’s not farming or something now, is he?” Jim didn’t have to ask what Lois was doing. She was still as good a reporter as ever, but she wrote books now instead of newspaper articles. Her latest was the definitive account of the fall of Metropolis’ old mayor, Daniel Van Buren, and his connections to Jason Earl and Intergang. Jim imagined she must get out quite a bit to research all the things she wrote about, not to mention doing the talk show circuit after the book came out. But Clark – Jim couldn’t think of anything in the last decade with Clark’s name on it. It had never occurred to him before to wonder if something might be wrong.

“Oh, he’s plenty busy,” Lois said. Jim couldn’t imagine Lois using a phrase like “plenty busy” nine years ago, but now it rolled off her tongue as if she were a native. “Busier than I am in a lot of ways. He writes those spy adventure novels, the David Guthrie series.”

“*Clark is Kent Steele?*”

“All seventeen volumes of him, all the way back to *Under a Yellow Sun*. Most people think that Kent Steele is a whole stable of writers. But no, it’s Clark. I don’t know how he churns them out so fast.”

Jim stared out the window and tried to absorb this new information. Now that he knew it, he felt stupid for not having guessed – which was exactly the way he had felt at the end of each of the five Kent Steele novels he had read. The name – it was obvious now. And Guthrie himself: Steele’s (or rather Clark’s) hero was so ... Jim couldn’t remember the word, but he knew there was some fancy psychologists’ term for a hero who was like all heroes rolled into one. David Guthrie was like that. He was like Superman, only human.

And that was why Jim felt like he should have guessed. It was so obvious. All those years of sitting in front of a word processor, writing about the great deeds of Superman – how could Clark not have been filled with envy and have generated fantasies of his own great deeds? Of course he would make up a hero halfway between himself and Superman. A human Superman – how could Clark’s fantasy be anything else? “Kent Steele,” Jim repeated out loud.

The countryside was even flatter than Jim had remembered. The sky was clear but for a

few wisps of cloud, and looked like an upturned blue bowl. He had never been able to figure out what gave it the illusion of curvature – which wasn't an illusion at all, Jim realized, now that he thought about it. It was the low-hanging ceiling of Metropolis that was an illusion, with its apparent flatness and its dirty-orange starless nights.

“I know Clark grew up out here,” he asked, “but what's it like for you after all those years in Metropolis?”

“Strange,” Lois admitted with a chuckle. “I don't think I ever saw myself doing the wife-and-mother thing out in the country. But it's a good kind of strange, mostly. My Dad was in the Air Force, so I never had a hometown to speak of. And Dad and Mom, they broke up when I was about ten, so that was the extent of my exposure to 'wholesome family life'. The first time Clark brought me home for Christmas, back when we were first going out, I looked at Jonathan and Martha and the farm and the little town and I said, 'This is not real. Somebody built this whole place from one of those old TV shows, and all these people are actors who will go off duty the minute you turn your back.' That's really what I thought. It took me the whole weekend to realize that these were just nice, well-adjusted people who had raised a nice, well-adjusted son. And they acted laid back and relaxed because that was just how their lives were. They couldn't understand why they shouldn't be laid back and relaxed. And there was no explaining it to them. I remember the night before we went back to Metropolis. I was up there in the guest bedroom at the top of the stairs, and I couldn't remember the last time I had been anyplace so dark. My apartment in those days, they didn't make shades or blinds thick enough to keep the streetlights out. And it was quiet. I couldn't hear anything but the wind and the house creaking – no neighbors, no car alarms, no sirens, no airplanes. I was just lying there thinking about the last couple days, and I think that was the first time in my life that it dawned on me that there were people who were actually happy, and that it was possible that I could be one of them someday.”

Jim didn't remember ever hearing this story before, though he had his own memories of a winter night in the guest room on the Kent farm. It had been Clark's first year in Metropolis, and Jim's holiday plans had fallen through when a girl friend dumped him unexpectedly. Getting out of town had sounded like a good idea, and Clark had talked about his mother's cooking, and how much his parents enjoyed meeting his friends. At night the prairie wind had rattled the windows, and that dark room had seemed like a lonely outpost on a distant planet. “So that must have been just before you got engaged, then?”

“Oh heavens no!” Lois laughed. “As soon as I was back at my desk at *The Planet*, it was like all that middle-of-the-night thinking in Smallville never happened. Years went by before I took it seriously.”

After about forty-five minutes on the U. S. highway Lois turned left onto a blacktop road, bypassing the center of Smallville and its two stoplights. Jim hadn't noticed her slowing down to less than 80 at any point during the trip for any reason other than a red light, and as Lois passed a tractor on what appeared to Jim to be a blind curve, he wondered how

she would be driving if she had not been living the laid-back-and-happy country life for these last nine years. Jon appeared to have total confidence in his mother, as well as a perfect immunity to motion sickness. He never looked up, and every thirty seconds or so he would turn another page in his book. Finally Lois turned down a gravel road and slowed to about twenty. Small pieces of white rock dinged as the wheels threw them up into the car's body. Jim started to recognize where he was. The Kents' two-story white farm house sat just off the side of the road, about half a mile from the blacktop. It had a shaded L-shaped porch with a two-person swing and a large willow about twenty feet away.

"You've hardly changed a thing," Jim commented.

"Yeah," Lois agreed. "We left Jonathan and Martha's house pretty much the way it always has been."

"We don't live there, though," Jon added, not looking up. "Aunt Lana does."

"We built our own place," Lois continued. "You'll see."

What used to be the Kents' driveway continued on and connected to what used to be a tractor path between fields. Lois was down to five miles an hour, which was about all the SUV's shocks could take. Jim bounced up and down, counting on his seat belt to keep his head from hitting the ceiling. Jon continued reading, the car's bouncing affecting him about as much as the sea's gentle roll affects a veteran sailor.

The house sat behind what passed for a hill in this part of the world. The hill was capped by a row of poplars that stood thirty feet tall, blocking all view of the house from the public road. It took a moment for Jim to grasp what he was looking at: the house was huge, square, flat-roofed, and not the least bit traditional. Its steel skeleton supported walls of amber glass or plastic that might have been translucent, but at this moment were too busy reflecting the summer sunlight.

Jim stood in the driveway and gawked. "It's like a UFO landed here," he said.

"No," Lois responded, pointing over the hill, "the UFO was about half a mile that way. About forty-four years ago." It was a joke, Jim realized after a beat, a reference to the legendary Smallville UFO. "It turned out that after all those years in apartments, we both had a house fantasy," Lois continued. "Once we decided to move out here, well, we already owned the land, and labor is a lot cheaper than in Metropolis. Plus, Clark did a lot of it himself."

"And I helped," Jon added. "With the last few things. A little."

"Clark?" Jim repeated in amazement. "Clark can build a house?"

"Well, not the whole house, of course. But that's the thing that it took me years to appreciate about Clark. Every time you think you've got him pegged, he turns out to have some other skill you never expected."

Once inside, Jim could see that the outer walls really were translucent. The fields outside were perfectly visible, as if the house were open on all sides. From the inside, the house was both bigger and smaller than it appeared from the driveway. The rooms on each floor were not significantly deeper than rooms in an ordinary ranch house, but they were arranged in a ring around a central atrium, in the ancient Roman fashion. Each room had only half a wall in back, allowing a view out into the atrium or across it to the rest of the house. In back, a spiral staircase connected the mezzanines of each floor.

“It’s so open,” Jim commented. They had entered into a kitchen/dining room area. The walls were given over to tall cabinets, and three food preparation islands made a diamond with a fourth island, the dining-room table.

“It goes back to a fantasy I had back when I wanted to marry Superman,” Lois explained. “If he could see through the walls, I wanted to be able to see through them too. So I always imagined an open house.”

Something was going on in the atrium. Jim could hear the creak of hinges and occasionally saw a pair of feet or some black hair fly up above the half wall. He walked over to the wall expecting to see Laura on a swing, or perhaps a trampoline. “Oh my God,” he gasped, jumping back from the edge.

“I should have warned you,” Lois apologized. “Most of the house is underground. Two floors above ground, three below.”

Jim went back to the wall and peered over at a three-story drop. The atrium floor was set up like a gymnasium. The ceiling above was an enormous skylight, bathing the house’s interior in natural light. A number of rings and trapezes hung at various heights from the steel girders that supported the skylight. Just below them a dark-haired girl was working out, swinging from one perch to another with what appeared to be effortless grace.

“It’s like she can fly,” Jim said in amazement.

“She can’t,” Lois said flatly. “That’s the problem.” Then she yelled down to the girl. “Laura! Get up here right now!”

“OK Mom,” the girl’s high voice called back. She did not slow her routine at all, but instead went away from them, grabbing ever-higher devices. Finally she swooped back, and in three swings she flipped herself up over the halfwall to land four feet from Lois, who was wearing a stern, authoritarian expression Jim could not remember seeing before.

“You know you’re supposed to put the net up before you practice,” Lois scolded.

“Jon doesn’t,” the girl protested. Her expression was so familiar Jim almost laughed – it was exactly the way Lois had looked whenever Perry tried to pull her off a hot story. The tight-set jaw, the violet laserlike eyes, the mouth tensed to make her full lips look thin – it was too perfect to be a mere imitation. Laura was not yet five feet tall with ivory-smooth prepubescent skin and birdlike legs, but otherwise she was the faultless copy of her mother. Her long black hair was pulled back into a pony tail and her face was sweaty

from the workout. She wore a too-big white t-shirt over lavender tights.

“Don’t talk to me about Jon,” Lois said quickly, as if this were an old argument she wanted to get through as fast as possible. “You’re not Jon.”

“Leave me out of this,” Jon called from a distance, pulling his head out of the refrigerator. “I’m not here. I’m taking Uncle Jimmy’s suitcase up to his room.”

“I thought Jon was the football player and Laura was the gymnast,” Jim said in confusion, and then immediately wished that he, like Jon, had been wise enough to retreat.

“Oh, Jon does *everything*,” Laura said biting. “Jon is *perfect*.”

“That’s enough of that,” Lois said, raising the volume a notch. “I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“How am I going to get hurt when Daddy’s here?”

Jim couldn’t restrain himself from speaking again, “What’s Clark going to do if you fall and break your neck?”

Lois and Laura both looked at him and fell silent. Lois opened her mouth as if to speak, but Laura was quicker. She bounded forward and hugged Jim around his neck. “Uncle Jimmy!” she squealed as if noticing him for the first time. Her body was thin and hard, but her cheek pressed up against his was soft and a bit damp from the workout. She seemed to weigh almost nothing. “You’ve got to come look at my room! I’ve got your Superman pictures all over the walls! I want you to tell me all about them!”

Before Jim had a chance to answer he was moving towards a stairwell, only partially under his own power. He looked back at Lois with a happy-but-helpless expression, and she waved him on. “You’re caught in the cyclone,” she called after him. “We’ll talk later.” Then she turned back to the kitchen and started making herself a cup of tea. Under her breath she repeated something she’d heard her father say many times: “Only the Lanes think fast enough to survive all the mistakes we make.”

Laura’s room resembled a very cluttered shrine. Jim’s Superman pictures covered the room’s vertical faces, with the horizontal ones disappearing under the detritus of 11-year-old life. Bounding in ahead of Jim, Laura quickly swept the largest and most embarrassing piles of clothes and stuffed animals and papers under the bed without noticeably altering the overall level of disorder. Stacks of unevenly sized magazines, paperbacks, and computer disks teetered perilously on the desk and the bedside table. Jeans, shorts, and several kinds of tops and blouses covered the surface of the ruffled bed, suggesting that they all must have landed there since this morning. The shelves were filled with a variety of nicknacks, ranging from carnival prizes to the what-did-you-bring-me gifts available at airports.

Metal shutters the color of old lead covered the gap between the half wall and the ceiling,



cutting the room off from the atrium and giving it a close, dusty feel. Jim tapped on one, and thought about the crisscrossing metal gates that Metropolis merchants pulled in front of their display windows at night. “Keeping out the burglars?” he asked.

“This house is such a fishbowl,” Laura said in a low voice, as if she were confiding in her best girlfriend. “I can cover the outside too, if I want.” And she demonstrated, straining to pull similarly heavy and unsightly shutters in front of the translucent amber outer wall. The room briefly darkened, and then she pulled the shutters open again. “But usually there’s no need because nobody’s out there. That’s the advantage of living in the middle of nowhere. I guess there had to be one.”

“Wouldn’t blinds or a shade have been enough?”

Laura looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “That’s what Mom said.” Without waiting for his reaction, she leaped up to stand on the bed and pointed to the large framed photo on the wall above it. “You took this, didn’t you? And that’s Lafayette Street in Metropolis, right? Where were you? What was happening?”

Jim remembered perfectly, leaning out the window of *The Daily Planet* building on Superman Day, at the end of that first summer, the summer of 1 S. Superman had cruised over the parade route like a balloon, the first time he had ever moved slowly enough for a high-quality portrait shot. He looked so young in the picture, and Jim remembered the excitement he had felt shooting it and seeing it in the next morning’s *Planet*. He had seemed so perfect and indestructible that day. How could he possibly be dead?

“And this one,” Laura was saying, having dashed across the room to another shot. “What about this one?”

Jim told the story of that picture, how he and Lois had raced across town when they heard about the factory fire, and how he had slipped past the police line and gotten so close that the heat had made his camera feel like a branding iron. But he had gotten lucky on the timing and the exposure, and Superman had flown right out of the fire, carrying an injured fireman directly into his line of sight.

She asked about another picture and another one, and Jim started thinking what good practice this was for the book. And then they sat on the bed and he told her about his idea: to bundle all his Superman photos into a ten-years-after special. Laura thought that was a wonderful idea, and she couldn’t imagine why anyone wouldn’t want to buy a book like that, with all the Superman pictures and the stories behind them. Jim confessed that the book project was one of the big reasons why he had come, that the publishers had wanted a book that was both text and photographs, and that they wanted him to team up with some well-known writer who had a name that could sell books about Superman.

“Like Dad or Mom!” Laura squealed, getting right to the point. “That’s great! I’m sure they’ll want to do it. They know so many Superman stories and I can hardly ever get them to talk about him, but I’m sure they’d want to if it was for a book. They’re always working on books.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said. “About that and about people still being interested in Superman.”

“Of course they’ll be interested,” she said with the kind of conviction that only children can muster. “How could anybody not be interested in Superman?”

“You certainly are,” Jim observed. “And you never even met him, did you?”

Laura appeared to think carefully about her answer. “They claim I did, but I don’t remember. I was only a baby then. I wish I could remember though. He must have been so wonderful then. He was out there in the world where everybody could see him, helping people he didn’t even know. I would have been so proud of him. So proud that ... well, that I had met him and stuff like that. You know. The way you must be proud.”

*Is that what I feel?* Jim wondered. He introspected enough to realize that some part of him was still lecturing the boy on the plane to Chicago. He felt like one of those crusty white-haired men who rail against anything new and tell boring stories about the good old days. *Whatever pride feels like, he thought, that can’t be it.*

“It’s strange,” he said. “Sometimes I think it all never happened, that I just dreamed it or something, or maybe I’ll wake up in a home where they put people who imagine things.”

“Don’t say that!” Laura ordered, doing an unintentionally accurate imitation of Lois’ scolding voice. “He was real and you knew him and you should tell everybody. You should get Daddy to help you and publish your book and go on TV and get everybody talking about him again. Wherever he is he should know that people miss him.”

Jim nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “He deserves that. He was one of a kind. Nine years have gone by, and there still hasn’t been anybody like him. Maybe there never will be.”

He was still speaking when Laura jumped off the bed towards the half-open door, where Jon was standing. “Jon! Don’t you knock? How long have you been listening?”

“Like I have nothing better to do than spy on you. Your life is *so* interesting,” he said. “I just got here. I thought I’d make sure you were treating your prisoner well. Dad hasn’t even seen him yet, you know.”

Laura pulled her lips together into an angry pout and directed her expression at Jon. “He’s not a prisoner. He wanted to come up here. And we were having a very nice time, weren’t we Uncle Jimmy?”

Jim smiled diplomatically and looked back and forth from one child to the other. “Your sister is very charming,” he said to Jon. “We were having a wonderful conversation about Superman.”

“See!” Laura said in a tone that a couple years earlier probably would have been followed by sticking out her tongue.

“All Laura’s conversations are about Superman,” Jon teased. “I think she wants to marry him.”

*"I do not!"* Laura shouted. She hopped up onto the bed so that she could look straight at Jon's eyes, and she bounced two or three times with pent-up energy. "And I wasn't just talking about Superman. I was a good hostess, and I let Uncle Jimmy talk about the book of pictures he's going to publish." She swept her arms to encompass the room. "And it's going to have all these pictures in it, and everyone's going to buy it and look at them like I do."

Jon ignored her and turned to Jim. "You're doing a book of Superman photos?" Jim nodded. "I guess that's OK," he said noncommittally.

"You aren't interested in Superman?" Jim asked.

Jon shrugged with the full apathy of a 15-year-old. "I don't know," he said. "I like the TV show. Everything seems so simple on the TV show."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Stuff. Being a superhero. It's just, you know, there are people in trouble and you help them and that's all there is to it."

Jim looked over Jon's shoulder to the picture of the young man floating over Lafayette Street. "That's about the only thing the TV show got right, I think," Jim said. "I wish you could have spent time with him like I did. Superman was a simple kind of guy. He had powers. People needed help. So he helped them. It really wasn't that complicated."

Jon slouched down closer to Jim's height, and Laura continued bobbing on the bed. "That's not what Dad says," Jon answered. "He says that it looks easy, but when you really have powers there's a lot to think about."

Jim smiled and shook his head. "I don't want to tell you your father is wrong. But sometimes I think he didn't really understand Superman the way that Lois and I did. Clark was always coming in a little late, after all the action was over. I think ..." He looked from child to child and decided that he had gone a little bit too far. "Well, who can say? The only person who would know was Superman, and he's not here."

There was a dead spot in the conversation. Laura stopped bouncing. Jon looked down at the floor, then over at the metal shutters. "Ummm," he said. "Your bag is in the room right over this one. Mom said to tell you that dinner should be ready in fifteen minutes or so. Dad's done meditating now, so you can talk to him downstairs."

Jim thanked him, then bowed to Laura and backed out the room.

Dinner was a simple but tasty chicken-and-rice dish. In the old days Jim used to joke that what Lois made best was a call to the Chinese take-out place, but years of country life had apparently made her more self-reliant in the kitchen. Outside the sun had set behind the poplar-covered mini-ridge that hid the house from the road. Jim couldn't tell how much of the sunset color was real and how much came from the amber outer walls.

The dining area continued the house's theme of transparency. The oval tabletop was made of glass and supported by a skeleton of some hard, clear plastic. The plates and bowls were the same translucent amber as the walls, and the flatware was stainless steel of mirrorlike brightness. The oval's long axis lay parallel to the inner halfwall. Clark and Laura sat with their backs to the atrium, the ropes and cables of the acrobatic equipment visible behind them. Jon and Lois sat opposite them, with Jim at the table's head between Lois and Laura.

The meal began with salad and smalltalk. Clark asked about Jim's flight, and Jim replied that it had been smooth and on time, saying nothing of the annoying interaction with the eight-year-old. Jim praised the house and noted how tall Jon had grown, a comment that caused the teen-ager to study his salad intently.

Jim couldn't get over how good Clark looked. He could easily have passed for thirty: no incipient wrinkles, no middle-aged spread, no receding hairline. And just as Lois had said, not even a single grey hair. And his voice – Jim had never before considered the possibility that middle-aged voices might be different from young adult voices, but he couldn't help noticing that Clark sounded like a man in his twenties, melodious in a way that Lois (and Jim himself, he feared) was not. Listening to Clark made Jim realize that everyone else from his generation had already started down the path to a raspy old age.

As for Clark's mysterious skin condition, Jim hoped it might be contagious. Whatever it was, it gave Clark a deep copper tan – not a suntan, apparently, since Clark rarely went outside. But (if he would just lose the square haircut and black, plastic-framed glasses) he would have fit in perfectly at a beachfront bar in Fort Lauderdale or Honolulu. One of the customers at Jim's camera shop was a fifty-something nature photographer who had spent most of her life in the sun; her skin was as dark as Clark's, but freckled and dry like old leather about to crack. Clark's skin looked too smooth and supple to be human. Jim had to resist the temptation to reach over and touch his arm or cheek.

But if the years had not touched Clark physically, his manner was very different from what Jim remembered. The simple Midwestern friendliness was gone. Clark had smiled and proclaimed a hearty welcome when he shook Jim's hand, but he seemed self-conscious and unsure of himself. Jim wondered how often he got into town or saw anyone other than his wife and children. At times Clark seemed distracted, as if a million other things were competing for his attention. Occasionally he would look up and stare as if he were examining something a thousand miles away.

The smalltalk died out, and after a few seconds of silence Jim said, "On the drive out, Lois told me your secret identity. Boy, was I surprised."

Clark looked up sharply at Lois, who said "Kent Steele."

"Oh, that," Clark said with a laugh. "I didn't realize that was still a secret."

"Well, I didn't know it. Anyway, here I am thinking that you're living the lazy life out here in the countryside, and it turns out that you've been churning out a new book every

few months.”

Clark shrugged. “I always did type fast. And the rest isn’t that hard once you get the formula right. The great thing about living out here is the lack of distraction.”

“Some of us don’t think that’s so great,” Laura injected, and Jon laughed. “You know,” she continued, “Uncle Jimmy is working on a book too. We talked about it up in my room.”

“You are?” Lois asked. “I didn’t know you were interested in writing.”

“It’s a book of pictures,” Laura continued before Jim could get a word in. “He’s going to publish his Superman pictures, like the ones I have in my room. But the publisher wants the book to have some word sections to go along with the pictures, so he came out here to ask if you or Daddy would write something about Superman for his book. Isn’t that brilliant?”

No one spoke for several seconds as Jim looked from Laura to Lois to Clark. “This isn’t exactly how I wanted to ask,” he said.

Lois broke the tension by starting to laugh, and then Clark and Jim joined in. Laura looked confused and asked, “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, honey,” Clark reassured her, still laughing as he spoke. “You just got to the point a little quicker than adults usually do.”

“I didn’t mean to say anything wrong. I didn’t think it was a secret or anything.”

“It’s OK,” Jim said. “It wasn’t a secret. You did fine.” He looked around the table and then continued. “I mean, she basically got it right. I want to publish a book of my old *Daily Planet* photos of Superman. It could be a ten-years-after thing and come out on the *Icarus* anniversary. The copyrights I don’t still own myself belong to Galaxy now, and they’d be the ones publishing the book, so there’s no legal problem. It’s just that ...”

“They want more than just pictures,” Lois said.

“Right. They said that books of real photographs haven’t sold well for them. They think that when people buy books of pictures, they want something striking they can leave on their coffee tables, and the computer-generated photos always win in that contest. Real photos only matter when you’re doing history.”

“So they want a history of Superman,” Lois deduced, “a biography.”

Clark had steepled his fingers and rested his chin on them. He looked upward, at no one in particular. “Do you think anybody still cares?”

“Of course they do, Daddy!” Laura answered. “Superman was everybody’s hero. He was the greatest hero ever.”

Clark patted her hand without looking down. “Right after his death they published several of those cheap, sensational paperbacks about him, and there was the made-for-TV movie,

but after about a year that kind of stuff went away. Now –”

“Now is the time for a serious biographer to weigh in,” Lois interrupted. “We’ve got almost ten years of perspective. I think you should do it, Clark. You’ve been looking for something different to do. You could give David Guthrie a rest for a few months.”

“Lord knows he deserves one, after all he’s been through,” Jim joked.

“Why me?” Clark asked Lois. “Why not you?”

Jim had a theory about married couples. He had known a bunch who broke up and a few who had been married for a decade or more, and over the years he had noticed that the conversations of the doomed couples were much easier to follow. After a number of confusing conversations he had begun to imagine that the couples who stay together communicate on two separate channels: the one that everyone hears, and some secret telepathic one that no one else can tap into. As Clark and Lois looked at each other silently, Jim wished he could hear the other channel.

“I just think it would be good for you,” Lois said out loud after several seconds. “It would give you an excuse to go out and talk to a lot of the people that Superman affected. You could look back and reassess those years.”

“I do too much looking back now,” Clark said.

“But you don’t come to any conclusions.”

“Maybe there aren’t any conclusions,” he responded. “Maybe those days are just over, and that’s all there is to say about them.”

“I just think that Superman deserves better than what’s happening to his memory,” Jim said, and then noticed that his voice was wavering with unexpected emotion. “With all the movies and TV shows and cartoons, nobody remembers what is real any more. Nobody remembers who he really was and what he really did. I want something better for him.”

“It’s too late to want something better for him,” Clark said coldly. “He’s dead.”

Jim closed his eyes and tried very hard not to cry. It surprised him, how deeply he felt, how much it still hurt after all these years. He felt a hand in his hair, and opened his eyes to find that Laura had gotten out of her chair and stood next to him. She set her chin on the bald spot on the back of his head and hugged him. “It’s OK, Uncle Jimmy,” she whispered. “You were his friend and it’s good that you miss him. I don’t think he had many friends like you.”

When he was sure that he wasn’t going to cry, Jim took a deep breath and Laura let go. He realized that everyone was looking at him. “It’s just that it’s still so hard to believe,” he explained weakly. “Even after all these years. Back then, no matter what happened, even after kryptonite and everything else, I never really believed that anything could happen to him. Even after the *Icarus*, I was tense, but I didn’t really believe it. I was sure

that in a day or two he'd come swooping back out of the sky and everybody would cheer and everything would be fine again. That must have happened a hundred times."

Clark spoke more softly this time. "He went into the Sun, Jimmy. You don't survive something like that. I don't care who you are or what planet you're from."

"But that's just it," Jim protested. "Superman's power *comes* from the Sun. Isn't that what Professor Hamilton said? How could the Sun kill him? He should have just come back a hundred times more powerful or something."

Everyone fell silent for a moment. Clark looked down at his plate.

"I don't think it works like that," Lois said understandingly. "I asked Professor Hamilton about it a few days after. He said Superman was like a solar battery. And going into the Sun, that was like trying to charge a D-cell by hitting it with a lightning bolt. The battery runs on electricity, but the lightning fries it all the same."

"Whoever writes your book," Clark added, still not looking up, "they need to be clear about that. He's not coming back. You don't want to encourage those nuts at the Church of the Kryptonian."

Just mentioning the Kryptonists brought Jim back from the self-pitying state he had gotten into. They had never accepted Superman's death, and Clark had good reason not to want to encourage them. Hadn't some splinter group tried to kidnap Jon once, back when he was still a little boy living in Metropolis? Jim had never been able to figure out what their point had been, other than trying to force Superman to re-appear and save him. Through a combination of luck and bad planning, the kidnap attempt had taken place in Metropolis while Jon was visiting his grandparents here in Kansas. Clark and Lois were held hostage for more than two days before Lois had been able to escape and bring help. The kidnapers had refused to explain their actions at the trial, but Lois' account of her ordeal had won her a fourth Metropolis Press Guild award. Jim remembered that Clark and Lois had already moved by the time of the banquet; she flew back from Kansas to accept.

"If you did it," Jon said, "then you'd know it was being done right. Somebody else might make it all sensational or something, like they did before."

Clark did not respond, and there was an uncomfortable silence. Lois announced dessert, which was vanilla ice cream with fresh strawberries. Laura described the plot of a television show she had seen. Jon (who had either seen the same show or heard her describe it before) looked bored, but couldn't stop himself from interrupting whenever he thought she had gotten something wrong.

When dessert was finished, Clark got up and said, "Jimmy, there's something I want to show you in another room."

"Oh, don't take him down into that hole of yours," Lois urged.

"I have something down there he should see."

“And that the rest of us shouldn’t see,” Laura guessed.

Clark frowned at her. “Our children are too intelligent,” he said to Lois. “We’ll have to schedule those operations after all.”

“Daddy!” Laura squealed.

Jim got up. “Well,” he said, “if there’s something down there nobody else should see, I’m all for it. Lead on.”

Clark led Jim back to the spiral staircase, and then down three levels to the atrium floor. Jim looked up at the four levels above and the darkened skylight.

“When the house lights are out,” Clark commented, “you can see the stars from here.”

Near the bottom of the stairs was a rope connected to a safety net. The net was bunched against the halfwall that separated the second underground level from the atrium, but rollers on the net fit into tracks that ran along the side walls. Walking across the floor while holding the rope would deploy the net. It looked simple enough, and Jim wondered why it was so hard to get Laura to do it.

The exercise equipment hung down at a variety of heights and distances from the walls. From this angle it reminded him of something he had seen before. “Didn’t Superman use a set-up like this to do a flying demonstration once? The different shapes hung down like an obstacle course and he flew through them in complicated patterns. I can’t remember where I saw it now.”

“It was a benefit circus about a year after he became publicly known. I talked to him about it in an interview. It turns out that his act wasn’t developed for the show. He learned to control his flying by practicing on a similar set of hoops and swings long before he came to Metropolis. I remembered it and rigged this up after Jon started getting interested in acrobatics.”

Clark walked to the center of the atrium and reached down to open a trapdoor in the floor. Under the door a set of stairs went down another twenty feet.

“This is like one of those bomb shelters in the Cold War movies,” Jim said.

“It reminds Lois of the Poe story where somebody gets bricked into the dungeon.” At the bottom of the stairs was another door. Clark opened it easily, but Jim thought it looked unusually thick and heavy, almost vaultlike. He turned on a light switch and led Jim inside. When the door was closed Clark sighed, as if by shutting the door he had put down a great burden. “This is my lair,” he said. “It’s where I do all my writing and thinking.”

The room was square and about the size of a motel room. It contained a preternaturally neat oak desk with a newish computer on it, an oak desk chair on rollers that looked as if it had been stolen brand new from the 1920s by time travelers, a few bookshelves, and a single meditation cushion sitting on an ornate oriental rug. The desk chair and the



meditation cushion were the only places to sit. The entire room contained not a single transparent or translucent object. Clark began to speak, but Jim cut him off by holding up his hand. He stood like that for several seconds, then announced, “This is the quietest place I’ve ever been.”

“It is quiet, isn’t it,” Clark agreed, and then he smiled. It was the old Clark smile, the one that radiated genuine warmth and good humor. Jim wondered where it had been and why it had taken so long to resurface.

Jim paced up and down between the desk and the meditation cushion. The walls were cream-colored and blank; Jim had no theory about what they were made of. He couldn’t imagine what there was to do down here other than work with the computer – which was the point, he supposed, but he couldn’t imagine getting any work done here himself. “So this is where all the Kent Steele stories got written,” he said, making conversation.

Clark opened a desk drawer and started rooting around. “I brought you down here to show you something and to ask you about your watch.”

“My watch?” Jim asked, looking at the cheap Timex on his wrist. And then he remembered. “Oh. You mean *my watch*, the one Superman gave me.”

Years ago, after a local TV station did a story that identified Jim as Superman’s friend, Superman had given him a special watch. It looked like an ordinary watch, but it had a button that set off a hypersonic alarm. If Superman was anywhere in the city, he could hear that alarm and track it to its source. It had been Superman’s way of insuring that Jimmy wouldn’t be endangered by his public connection to an invulnerable hero with a lot of enemies.

“Oh, I keep it in a safe deposit box now,” Jim said. “You know, it’s a valuable collector’s item these days. I can’t just wear it any old place.”

Clark looked uncomfortable and tossed something to Jim, who caught it: the signal watch. Jim blanched, turned the watch over, and then asked “He gave you one too?”

Clark raised an eyebrow in that minimalist way he had of communicating that his expectations were not being exceeded. “I wasn’t trying to trap you,” he said. “I just wanted to know the story. I keep track of the collectors’ auctions on the net. This showed up about a year ago. I got a good price on it. Superman memorabilia doesn’t bring what it used to, at least not the original stuff. Now, if it had been the watch that Ethan Frank used in the movie, that would have cost me a lot more. But this one ... I don’t think the other bidders believed it was authentic. But it is, isn’t it?”

Jim stared at the watch for a few seconds while he composed his response. “I thought I’d never see this again. I was so embarrassed about letting it get stolen that I never told ... “

Jim had never known anybody as hard to lie to as Clark. It was something about his eyes, the way they seemed to see right through your skin, as if he was watching your throat muscles clench up and your heart beat faster. Clark didn’t sigh or gesture or do anything,

he just watched like a patient editor waiting for Jim to finish the piece of fiction he was working on.

“I sold it,” he said simply. Clark nodded, and then the real story came out.

“You know,” Jim began, “I was never really that good a photographer.” It was true. Sticking close to Clark and Lois had let him take advantage of their uncanny knack of finding the action, especially action that involved Superman. But then Superman vanished and the Kents moved to Kansas to start their separate book-writing careers. Suddenly the wire services weren’t picking up Jim’s pictures, and even *The Daily Planet* ran them less and less often. “I think I saw the handwriting on the wall.”

“So you opened a camera shop,” Clark said.

The camera business had not been good to Jim, which maybe was just another way of saying that he wasn’t good at it. He had started his shop just as the digital cameras were achieving parity with the old film-based ones, the ones Jim had been working with all his life. And from there Moore’s Law took over, forcing the prices relentlessly downwards. The kind of store Jim wanted to run – a store that always had exactly the right camera for whoever walked in – was a disaster in an era where anything that stayed on the shelf for more than a month had to be sold at a loss. And then VR imaging started to take off. The markups were huge, but Jim never really understood the technology. He didn’t have confidence in the advice he was giving his customers, and he kept getting stuck with expensive equipment that wasn’t so expensive any more after the upgrades came out. It wasn’t like the shop was going under; it just didn’t make any money. At least not enough to support the lifestyle Jim wanted to have.

In the early days he had been able to make up the difference by doing the convention circuit. Superman conventions were all the rage during the so-called rumor years, when everyone seemed to know someone whose friend had seen Superman alive again. Fans without a hero clustered together at conventions like cavemen around a nighttime fire, reassuring each other that the nocturnal predators weren’t really that tough, and besides the sun would be up again soon anyway.

“The money was unbelievable in those days. All I had to do was show up and tell some stories, or show off my watch, or autograph prints of my Superman shots. And people would ask me if Superman was coming back, and I’d say ‘Sure he is. I’ve seen him get out of worse situations lots of times. And he couldn’t die in the Sun, the Sun is where his power comes from.’ They loved it, and I loved it, and I could make thousands for doing nothing. It was almost too easy.”

But of course he hadn’t saved any of it. It never seems necessary to save what comes easily. You might as well save air or summer sweat or the sight of your own face in the mirror. The convention circuit was a money tree, and he could just reach out and harvest some more of it whenever he ran out. The more he made, the more he needed.

And then it was over. Just like that, as if someone had blown a whistle that everyone but

Jim had heard.

The conventions became less frequent, the conventioners less serious, and then came the competition from the unreal. “One time I went and it was almost all kids, and they wanted to see the movie stars. And then came the TV show and a new set of stars, and they were all younger and better looking than I was. And then I wasn’t a headliner any more.”

Finally one day he went to see Abe Zachary, the promoter who organized the few conventions that still happened. Abe hadn’t been returning Jim’s calls – and Jim knew perfectly well what that meant – but he went to see Abe anyway. And waited in his outer office for almost two hours. When he finally got in, he tried to pretend it was no big deal, that he just dropped by on a whim, thinking it might be fun to do another convention soon. And Abe claimed that he was all booked, that he was already over budget and looking to cut back, not add anybody new. And then Jim dropped all his pride and pretense, and begged for work, and confessed that he needed the money.

“And that’s when he made an offer for your watch?” Clark asked.

Jim nodded. “I never thought about you or Lois or Perry finding out. I thought he wanted it for himself. I didn’t think he’d sell it.”

“Jimmy,” Clark sighed, shaking his head, “why didn’t you come to us years ago? We’re doing well. We could have found some way to help get you back on your feet. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Tell you what? That I have no talent? That I leech off of Superman for my whole career, and now that he’s gone I need to leech off of somebody else? I couldn’t tell you that. You were my friends. You respected me. I couldn’t come out here and tell you what a loser I am.”

Clark paced away from Jim and looked down at the computer screen as if it would tell him what to say next.

“And now I *have* come to you, Clark,” Jim continued weakly. “I have this project that could start my career going again, and I need your help to make sure it happens.”

Clark put his hands on his desk and did not turn around. He looked up to the ceiling and shook his head. “I want to help you, Jimmy, but I can’t,” he said. “Not like this. We’ll find some other way. You don’t know what you’re asking.”

Jim couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He felt exasperation rising in his chest. “What am I asking?” he demanded in a louder voice than he intended. “I’m asking you to save Superman’s reputation, to save his image. It’s all that’s left of him and it’s getting lost under a bunch of weird religious beliefs and Saturday morning cartoons and movie stars. I was on the plane this morning next to a kid who didn’t believe Superman was real. That’s what I’m asking. I’m asking you to be a journalist, Clark. It’s what you do, what you used to do. You were good at it. People have forgotten him, and the ones who haven’t forgotten remember a bunch of stuff that never happened. Somebody needs to go back

through it all and figure out what's real and what isn't and write it all down. Remember how we used to say that something-or-other was a job for Superman? Well, this is a job for Clark Kent. Don't just do it for me. Do it for him. That's what I'm asking. He was your friend, Clark. He must have saved both of our lives a hundred times. And Lois. Think of all he did for Lois. She wouldn't be here raising your children if not for him. Doesn't that mean anything?"

When Jim was done speaking the room once again became the quietest place he had ever been. But now that experience of silence did not seem so wonderful as it had a few minutes before.

"I don't know what it means any more," Clark answered, still looking at the wall. "I ... I need to be alone now, Jimmy. I need to think. Take the watch, and keep it this time. I know he wanted you to have it."

Jim looked down at the watch, which he had already slipped onto his wrist next to the Timex. He remembered how safe it had always made him feel, back in the old days. He had almost never used it, but just the idea of it had seen him through a lot of difficult times. Knowing that he could push a button and be protected by the most powerful being in the Universe – it changed everything. For a while. He fingered the button and wished to God that it still worked. He clicked it down, but, as always, he heard nothing.

Clark wore a pained expression as he turned. "I need to be alone," he said. "It's getting late. We'll talk more in the morning."

Jon had cleared the dishes in no time and retired to his room. Lois moved to the study across the atrium from the kitchen. She turned on the computer and opened the files she was supposed to be researching, but her eyes glazed and instead she looked away from the bright screen and out at the prairie night. After dark, any bright interior lights turned the house's outer walls into amber mirrors, an effect Lois found she disliked. Instead she had learned to keep the rooms dark and use small lights to illuminate a book or other small project, and to the computers illuminate themselves. Interior darkness made the walls invisible, as if she were camped out on the plain. In Metropolis she would have hated that kind of openness, but out here it seemed natural. The moon had just come up, and by its light she watched the wind ripple through the poplars.

"You're thinking, aren't you?" Laura asked from behind.

Lois turned away from the prairie and looked at her daughter, who was wearing the same jeans and t-shirt she had on at dinner, rather than something to sleep in. "If you know I'm thinking, then why are you interrupting me?"

"I'm thinking too."

Lois studied Laura's face and posture. A year or two ago she would have found Laura's serious expression cute and hurried her off to bed, but lately she had been learning not to

sell the 11-year-old short. Laura had all the inconsistency of any pre-teen, but at certain moments she could be frighteningly perceptive. *Was I like that?* she wondered. Or maybe some supergene for emotional intelligence had come down from the female side of Clark's family tree.

"If you're thinking what I'm thinking," Lois said, "we shouldn't talk about it."

"He's down in his room now with Uncle Jimmy," Laura said very softly. "I don't think he can hear us if we whisper."

"You don't know what he hears," Lois whispered back. "He gets more powerful all the time. In spite of himself."

Laura's eyes said that she didn't agree, but she rolled a chair up next to Lois and sat down. She took the keyboard out of Lois' lap and typed:

OK, then. We can talk like this.

Lois thought for a moment, then shrugged and nodded. There was no hiding things from Clark if he was determined to know, but he didn't spy on them intentionally. He might overhear without intending to, but he wouldn't go out of his way to read their computer screen.

I want Dad to write Uncle Jimmy's book. Is that what you're thinking?

*More or less.*

Why don't you tell him that?

*He knows.*

Can't you make him do it?

*You know your father. No force on Earth can move him if he doesn't want to be moved. Have you told him why you want him to do it?*

I did at dinner, sort of. It would be a neat book.

Lois reached for the keyboard, but Laura didn't give it back.

I guess that's not really it.

Laura stared at the screen. Looking at her made Lois smile in recognition. All her life people had told Lois that she gritted her teeth when she was searching for words, but she had never seen the expression herself until now, when it was on her daughter's face.

I want him to be a hero again. I don't understand why he isn't.

*There are reasons. It's complicated.*

I thought maybe if he helped Uncle Jimmy, then he'd remember what it was like and he'd want to do it again. Help people, I mean.

*He never stopped wanting to help people. Your father is the best man I've ever known. I still believe that.*

Then why do you want him to write the book?

Now it was Lois' turn to sit with the keyboard on her lap. She felt her jaw clench – it was so easy to notice, now that she had seen it in Laura.

*When he came back from the Sun he needed time. But now I think he's gotten stuck. Whatever he could learn by sitting in his room writing David Guthrie stories, I think he must have learned it a long time ago. I want him to go back to Metropolis and talk to people and think it all through. This book would force him to take a look at Superman's career from the outside, as an objective journalist/historian. Maybe he'd figure out what went wrong.*

He was happy in the beginning, wasn't he?

Yes.

I could see it in his pictures.

An instant messaging window opened on the computer screen.

Jon> I think we all agree. The real question is how we're going to convince Dad.

Jon, you snoop! Where are you watching us from?

Jon> My room. Don't start. I'm not really in control of this vision stuff yet.

Lois yanked the keyboard away before Laura could type anything else.

*It's OK, dear. It was time we brought you into this conversation anyway.*

“But Mom,” Laura whined. “He's been watching us. I keep telling him to stop watching me.”

“And he just heard what you said, too,” Lois added. “We can talk about your privacy some other time.”

“It's always some other time,” Laura began, but Lois ignored her and went back to typing.

*You asked the right question. I don't know how we can convince him. We could go to him as a group and tell him what we think, but I think he already knows.*

Maybe CONVINCED isn't the right word. Maybe we need to DO something.

Jon> That's what I think, too. We need to change the situation somehow. Any ideas?

Don't you have some?

Jon> Nada. Mom?

*I haven't raised children. I've raised conspirators.*

Jon> You've raised children with secrets.

*I don't know what to do. Maybe we'll get lucky and Jimmy will convince him without us doing anything.*

Jon> Not likely.

*I know. But I think we'll just have to see what the situation offers and improvise. Think you can do that?*

Jon> Sure. We're not just Kents, we're Lanes too.

Something will come up.

*So that's the plan: Everybody stay alert, look for an opportunity, and follow each other's lead.*

Jon> That's not much of a plan.

*Someday I'll tell you how many times that plan has worked for me.*

Jon> But you were plotting WITH Dad in those days.

We're not plotting against Dad. We're just not telling him.

The house was dark and quiet when Jim re-emerged from the trap door. A few small lights were on here and there, and he could hear a faint tapping somewhere. He looked up and noticed that Clark had been correct: the stars were clearly visible through the skylight.

Jim took a deep breath, and as he exhaled it seemed as if his whole body had been full of air. The breath went on and on; he imagined that it might continue until he was nothing but a flattened balloon lying on the atrium floor. When it eventually stopped, he didn't inhale again right away. Instead he took a quiet, airless moment to appreciate just how depressed he was.

He couldn't believe how badly he had screwed up the conversation about the watch. Clark had just wanted to give it back without embarrassing him in front of Lois and the kids, but Jim couldn't just take it and say "thank you", he had to try to bluff it out. And then, when he did tell the story, he sounded so pitiful. It was no wonder that Clark didn't want to work with him on the book. Who would want to work with a loser who tries to hide what a screw-up he is?

The whole evening hadn't gone the way he wanted. He had hoped that he could be just an old friend visiting, catching up on old times and marvelling about how much the kids have grown. Maybe later, in a day or two, he could bring up the subject of the book. If he handled it right, Clark and Lois might even have thought of the biography themselves. One or the other of them might have volunteered without him even asking. *Well*, he thought, *that didn't happen*.

The fantasies that ran through his head all shared a theme of escape: He could have his starship beam him back to his apartment in Metropolis. He could turn to vapor and let the wind carry him back to the Wichita airport before he reconstituted. He could be spirited away by a malicious sprite from the fifth dimension. He could wake up in a laboratory and discover that the last ten years had been simulated in his mind by one of Superman's enemies, who was trying to trick him into revealing ... something. What, exactly, he

wasn't sure, but there was bound to be something in his memories that could have been useful to one of Superman's enemies. Wasn't there? Surely Superman must have confided something vital at some time or other.

The only practical element in any of his thoughts was that he should get out of the house. A walk, that was what he needed. On the level above the atrium floor (the sub-basement? level minus two? Jim couldn't figure out what to call it.) he found a door to the garage. After checking to make sure it was unlocked, he closed it behind him, went past a station wagon, and down the driveway.

Outside, the full moon – risen from the horizon opposite where the Sun had gone down – was startlingly bright. Once he got past the poplars he could see a car or two moving along some distant highway, the lights from what must have been four or five farmhouses randomly scattered on the plain, and not a single streetlight of any kind. But the gravel on the road was the same white as the moon, and the only potholes not perfectly illuminated were the ones in his own moon-shadow or the shadows of the poplars.

The problem with this idea of taking a walk was that he had nowhere to go. The night air was refreshingly cool, and the background chorus of crickets (or frogs or whatever they were) provided a pleasant Nature-Channel ambiance. But it wasn't like he could wander down to Bibo's and play pool, or grab a pizza around the corner. Barring the second coming of the Smallville UFO, nothing out here was likely to distract Jim from the mood he was trying to get out of.

"You look lost," said a voice from the shadows.

Jim jumped, and had an inclination to bolt back to the house, but in the split-second before his feet touched ground he realized that the voice was pleasant and female. And then he realized that it was laughing and trying very hard not to.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I could see you so clearly I forgot you couldn't see me." A slim figure moved away from a tree trunk about ten feet from the road and walked towards Jim. When it entered the moonlight, he could see that his unexpected company was a woman with long hair of some indeterminate color. She was dressed in jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. "I was out enjoying the moonlight, and when I first heard your footsteps in the gravel I thought it must be one of the kids sneaking down to talk to me. But you were too big to be Laura and not tall enough to be Jon, so I got curious. Jimmy Olsen, right?"

"I'd rather people call me Jim these days, but yeah, that's who I am. Have we met?"

"In passing, a long time ago when you came home with Clark. Lana Lang," she said, extending her hand. Jim wasn't sure for a moment whether he was supposed to shake the hand or kiss it, but he shook it and was relieved that this seemed to be what she expected.

"Aunt Lana," he said in recognition, remembering Jon's comment on the drive from the airport.



“Oh no,” she said, still trying settle down from laughing. “There are only two people in the world who can get away with calling me ‘Aunt Lana’, and neither of them is you.”

“I can’t believe you recognized me out here in the dark after all these years.” Jim dimly remembered an attractive redhead who was an old friend of Clark’s, but he was pretty sure he couldn’t have picked her out in broad daylight, much less here under the moon.

“I didn’t. But Laura’s been talking for a week about you coming out to visit, so when I saw a stranger it wasn’t too hard to figure out who it had to be.”

“Laura’s been talking about me? She hasn’t even seen me since she was a baby.”

“She knows your pictures. You should ask to see hers. She’s quite a little photobug.” Jim took this in without comment. “So what brings you out onto the prairie at night? I like it, but I was born here. Most city people find it a little unsettling.”

Jim debated how much content to put into his answer. “I needed to get out and think,” he said. “This visit isn’t going quite the way I planned it.”

Lana nodded sympathetically. “Things almost never go the way I plan them,” she responded. “That used to bother me. Anyway, it sounds like there’s a story here. I don’t get a lot of visitors, and I love stories. I can offer you a cup of herb tea for yours.”

Jim smiled. “My therapist makes me pay to tell him my stories.”

“That’s the problem with the city. Too many stories, not enough ears.”

Somewhere a long way off a dog was howling. Another set of headlights had appeared on the distant highway. “I would love to have a cup of tea,” Jim said.

Jonathan and Martha’s old house was exactly the way Jim remembered it. The screen door in back was unhooked, and the same yellow-topped kitchen table sat in the same location where it had probably been since the 1950s. Lana filled a kettle with water and set it over a burner. In the light he could see that her thick, flowing hair was mostly gray now with just a memory of red in it, but her face was youthful and almost entirely unlined. Like Lois, she was still in good shape, but Lana was proportioned in a subtly different way that Jim found difficult to quantify. Lois looked like a woman who worked out, while Lana looked like a woman who worked. He could easily picture her pushing furniture around and carrying buckets of water.

On the walk back to the house Lana had filled in some of the details of her situation: She had never been married and had no children. She wrote poetry, gave music lessons, and did a variety of odd jobs. She had always been close to Clark’s parents, and had stayed in the house with Martha for two years after Jonathan died. After Martha’s death, Clark and Lois had decided to let her stay on for as long as she wanted.

“So,” she said as she got ancient white mugs out of the cupboard, “You were going to tell me what got you out wandering around in the dark. Or do you want to wait until you see if the tea is any good?”

“I’m sure your tea is wonderful,” Jim said. And then, to his own surprise, Jim began to tell the whole story. Several cups of tea were emptied and refilled as he went through it right from the beginning: the sense of emptiness he felt after Superman died and Clark and Lois left Metropolis; his own failures in the newspaper and camera businesses; his guilt about cashing in on Superman’s memory, which wasn’t stopping him from trying to do it one more time with this book of photographs; what he needed from Clark and Lois; and how the day had gone wrong. He was sure he must be boring her, but whenever he tried to skip ahead she asked questions to slow him down again. She watched every nuance of his expression and posture, and her ears seemed to be tuned to every subtle variation his tone of voice. When he was done, she was still looking at him and still listening. “So what do you think?” he asked.

By now she was sitting on the other side of Martha’s kitchen table, holding her mug in both hands and inhaling the tea’s vapor rather than drinking it. She didn’t answer right away, leaving a silence almost as deep as the one in Clark’s underground room. “I think the day didn’t go the way you planned, and you didn’t get what you wanted.”

“But?”

“But that isn’t necessarily bad. Clark and Lois had been out of your life for most of a decade, and today you brought them back into it. Plus you got to know Laura and Jon, who are super kids, if you’ll accept my biased opinion. That sounds like a good day.”

“But all I did was remind everyone what a jerk I am.”

Lana smiled as if to say that she would argue the point if she weren’t already trying to make another one. “Do you think that really matters?”

“How could it possibly not matter?”

She gave Jim an I-know-this-sounds-weird-but-bear-with-me look. “You know,” she said, “by the time you get to be our age, your life already has a story to it. You can change the story, you can even close the book and try to start it over. But you can’t start it over at twenty again. If you write those years off, they’re gone. Anyway, that story you’re living has some characters in it, and whether you love them or hate them, admire them or detest them, they’re the characters of your life. You’re stuck with them, and they’re stuck with you.”

“I’m not sure I see where you’re going with this.”

“You and Clark and Lois. If any of you is going to have a life story at all, the Superman years have to be part of it. And that means you’re stuck with each other. If you come out here and say the wrong thing or look like a failure, that doesn’t change anything. And if you plan something and Clark doesn’t want to go along with it, what does that really mean in the larger scheme of things? You’re part of each other’s story already. It’s too late to change that.”

“There’s the fact that I’m going broke, and my only plan to avoid it just went bust. That

must count for something in the larger scheme of things.”

Lana shrugged. “You’re bound to have more money than I do. I write poetry. I teach piano to a few of the local children. But I’ve got friends like Clark that I’ve known since I was five, and like Jon and Laura that I’ve known since they were babies. There’s always some way to keep a roof over your head and some bread on the table and have a little left to give away – even if it’s just an occasional cup of tea.”

Jim looked down at his cup, which was empty. What she was saying didn’t make a whole lot of sense to him, but he had to admit he was feeling quite a bit better than he had when he met her in the road. “You give more than just cups of tea,” he said.

They were both surprised to see how late it had gotten. Jim thanked her for listening, and Lana said that she needed to be up early for a piano student. By the time he was off the porch she was already turning off the lights inside.

The moon had moved to the center of the sky, as if the night were one big room with a light on the ceiling. The moon shadows were tiny now, and only the brightest stars were visible. Kal-El’s Comet was out there somewhere, he knew. He hadn’t seen it with his own eyes since that first month after Superman had died, but comets always came back eventually, didn’t they?

The talk with Lana hadn’t changed anything important, but at least he had lost that awful mood. He may not have saved his book or his lifestyle with this trip, but he had managed to talk with some old friends, meet two interesting kids, and see the brightest moon he could remember.

*I’ve had worse trips.*

When he came to the top of the ridge he could see an amber glow emanating from the house. Someone must have turned on the atrium lights; he was sure they hadn’t been on when he left. When he opened the kitchen door, he heard the creaking of cables and knew that someone was using the acrobatic equipment. He crept softly to the halfwall and peaked over to see Laura swinging and leaping from one apparatus to the next with grace and vigor, her pony-tailed hair the only part of her body not under perfect control. She looked so beautiful and un-self-conscious that he felt like a voyeur, but he didn’t want to do anything to call attention to himself for fear it would end the performance.

Then he noticed that the net wasn’t up.

*It’s OK*, he thought, *she does it all the time*. But then Jim remembered her cradling his head at the dinner table, and thought about her talking excitedly to Lana about his arrival. Walking softly to the staircase and down to the atrium floor, he found the rope that pulled the net across. All he would have to do was grab it and walk across the floor.

Overhead, Laura spun in the air to reverse her orientation and grabbed the rings at the opposite end of the atrium. Her momentum carried her back over the edge of the ground floor halfwall. Picking up speed in the backswing, she released the rings just as she began

to gain altitude, then tucked and spun and reached full extension a few feet below the skylight. For just a moment she hung horizontally in the air like some improbable Supergirl ready to zoom off into the stratosphere.

Jim began to pull the net, and Laura looked down. Later, when he tried to remember the scene in more detail, he could swear that she smiled at him.

And then she screamed.

The instant of slipped concentration had been just enough to throw her off her routine. Her fingertips reached the trapeze swinging up to meet her, but she could not get enough of her hands on it to grab with any strength. Girl and trapeze separated in the air, and Laura started falling.

“Daddy!” she yelled.

She seemed to take forever to fall. Jim dropped the rope and began to run toward the place where she would land, but his own motions seemed even slower as his mind raced ahead to picture the moment when she would hit the hard floor and bounce lifelessly in front of him.

Something struck Jim from behind, knocking him to the ground. A wind rushed over his back as he lay on the floor, eyes closed, waiting for the sound of impact.

But there was no impact.

After several seconds he rose to his knees and looked around. He was alone in the atrium. Above the ropes and swings swayed lazily. The trapeze Laura had failed to hold twisted as it swung. Otherwise, Jim could have imagined the entire event: the girl, the fall, the wind.

“Superman,” he said softly to himself. Then he jumped to his feet, ignoring the bump on his forehead and the bruise forming on his chest. “Superman!” he yelled as loud as he could. “Superman’s alive! Superman was here! He saved Laura!”

In a few seconds he heard the sound of doors overhead. Lois appeared at the top floor’s railing wearing a powder blue nightgown. “Jimmy, what’s going on? Why are you yelling?”

Clark rose out of the trap door to the sub-basement, looking disheveled as if woken out of a deep sleep.

“It was Superman!” Jim shouted up to Lois. “Laura was falling and I couldn’t get there in time, but Superman knocked me down and saved her.”

“Stay there,” Lois called. “I’ll come down.” She ran over to the stairwell and started down, her footsteps echoing in the quiet house. Jon and Laura emerged from their rooms on the opposite side of the ground floor. Jon was in a t-shirt and gym shorts. Laura was sweaty and still wore the purple tights.

“Did you *see* Superman?” Clark asked skeptically.

Jim took several deep breaths. Jon and Laura looked at each other questioningly and Laura nodded.

“Not directly,” Jim admitted. “I was right over here, and she was falling over there and I got knocked down from behind. And then when I looked up there was nobody here but me.”

“Then you *didn't* see Superman,” Clark said definitively.

Jim looked at Clark in puzzlement. Jim had just announced the best news in the world: Superman was alive. Why wasn't anyone else excited? Why did Clark look at him so disapprovingly?

“I ... I suppose not. But –“

“You're both right,” announced a loud male voice from above.

Jon was standing on the highest halfwall, carrying Laura in his arms. “Someone saved Laura,” he said firmly. “But you didn't see Superman. I saved her.”

“JON! NO!” Clark yelled in a voice louder than Jim had ever heard in his life. Lois had stopped at the second underground level, one story above the floor. She leaned out over the railing and looked first at Clark, then upward at her children. Jim inhaled sharply as Jon stepped out into the air.

And did not fall.

He hung there motionless for a moment, holding Laura as easily as a doll. Then he began moving unsteadily downward, like a boy walking down a rutted hill, until he landed softly on the floor.

“Jon,” Clark said sadly, “this isn't the way.”

“It's the only way,” Jon said. “He knows what he saw. He knows something happened.”

“He can't keep the secret if he doesn't know what it is,” Laura added. “If we have to trust him, then we have to *trust* him.”

“If we left it as a mystery, he would have to talk about it when he got home,” Jon explained.

Clark shook his head. “I don't approve of this,” he said.

“But it's done,” Jon said. His face was set and he looked like a 15-year-old of some ancient era, one who had already married and hunted and seen men die in battle. Days later, when Jim understood and reconstructed what must have been happening, he wondered if his own first moves towards self-determination had been anything like this, or if he had sounded whiny and petulant. His own father, he remembered, had seemed impossibly strong and powerful to him when he was 15. *But then*, Jim would reassure himself, *I was only human. What if I had been the son of Superman, and Dad was just Clark?*

In the moment, however, Jim had no space in his mind for reflection and analysis. “What are you all talking about?” he demanded.

Jon and Clark looked at each other. It was Lois who answered. She had descended the final flight of stairs and came across the floor to take Laura’s hand, then reached over to hold Jon’s. “There are things you don’t know,” she said. “Things we didn’t want to tell you for reasons I think you’ll understand. Years ago, not long after Clark and I were married, Superman was my lover. It only happened once, and I told Clark right away, and he forgave me. Jon was born nine months and three days later.”

“Lois, don’t do this,” Clark pleaded. Jim’s mouth fell open. He wanted to respond, but nothing came out. Laura and Jon looked at their mother supportively. Clark looked down at the ground and shook his head. Lois continued in a voice that was quick and factual, like the reporter she had always been.

“Jon is Superman’s son. He’s half-Kryptonian. His powers are emerging at about the same rate that ... that Superman’s did.”

“And Laura?” Jim asked. And then he realized what he was implying and felt embarrassed that he had asked.

“Laura is Clark’s,” Lois continued. “She’s human.”

Laura looked over at Lois and then back to Jon, then took two steps over to touch Clark’s arm. “You can imagine what it’s like,” she said. “I love my Dad. But I wish I could fly.”

“We all wish we could fly, sweetie,” Lois said reassuringly. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Clark was still looking down. Jim tried to imagine how he must feel. He knew what it was like to find out that a girlfriend had fooled around with someone else – someone bigger, more famous, more attractive. But a wife, he couldn’t quite picture that. And to raise another man’s son, and to have your daughter cover her room with his pictures ... even if he was your friend, even if he was dead. He thought about their conversation earlier in the evening. “You don’t know what you’re asking,” Clark had said.

“So it wasn’t Superman who saved her?”

“No,” Lois answered. “Superman died in the Sun.”

Jim closed his eyes and tried to absorb it all. First he thought he was watching Laura fall to her death. And then he thought Superman was alive after all these years. And then Superman was still dead, but he had a son and there would be another Superman someday. There was too much to feel, too much to react to. He just went blank and concentrated on standing up and breathing.

“Now you understand why we had to move out here,” Lois went on. “Dr. Hamilton tested Jon when he was a baby. We’ve known from the beginning what was possible. We couldn’t take the chance of having his powers emerge in Metropolis. The Kryptonists ...

they had a prophesy that some of them thought referred to Jon. We couldn't have kept his secret in the city, but here we could almost give him a normal childhood. And even here we're going to run into problems soon."

"I'm planning to have a career-ending injury next year in training camp," Jon said. "It's not fair any more for me to compete. It's not like it was when ... it's not like I don't know what I am."

Clark re-entered the conversation. "It sounds like you have this all worked out," he said with resignation. "What happens next?"

"It's like Laura said," Lois answered. "We have to trust him to keep our secret ... Jon's secret ... Superman's secret." She reached out to touch Jim's chin and guided his head so that their eyes met. "In all the years you knew Superman, you must have had to keep a lot of his secrets."

"Sure," Jim replied. "Lots of them."

"Well," she said, "this is one more. It's Superman's last secret, you might say. It's very important that you keep it. You can see that, can't you?"

"Sure," Jim said. "If you and Clark want me to keep it, hey, I won't tell anybody. But what are you going to do when Jon starts his public career? If the C of K people already suspect Jon, they're going to know for sure when a new Superman appears."

"Maybe he won't be a new Superman," Clark said. He spoke softly and very slowly. "He may not have a public career at all. It's a big decision. I don't even know if Superman himself would do it the same way again, if he had it to do over. And Jon isn't Superman, he's ... he's Superman's son. He needs to become his own man and make his own decisions. It would be a shame if that decision got taken out of his hands."

Jim looked over at the boy. How had he ever thought that Jon resembled Clark? It had to have been an illusion created by those tweeish, Clark-like glasses he wore. Now, without them, he looked perfectly godlike, standing straight and motionless as a statue next to his mother. Jim tried to imagine what it must be like, to be 15 years old and know that the mantle of Superman is waiting for you – the headlines, the cheering masses, the ability to fly high above the city and be looked up to by all. What was not to like about that? Why would he hesitate to claim it?

"Sure," Jim said. "I can see that."

Clark was looking at him again in that way of his, the way that said he doubted Jim's sincerity. *Or maybe he just doubts my ability to keep a secret. Maybe he thinks I'll blab it as soon as I think I need to impress someone. Maybe he thinks I'll sell it to Abe Zachary.* The room was so quiet he could hear the soft creaking of the bearings as the acrobatic equipment continued swaying overhead like a row of unsynchronized pendulums.

It was Laura who broke the tension. She walked up to Jimmy and took his hands in hers. He never thought about whether to offer them; she just held out her hands and his were

there waiting to be held. She looked up at him and for a moment her resemblance to Lois was uncanny – the same dark hair, the same violet eyes. In a year or two, he knew, she would look nothing like this. She would be taller and gangly and awkward; her face would elongate and break out in acne. But at this prepubescent moment she was the perfect image of the beautiful woman she was destined to become.

“It’s OK,” she said reassuringly, and Jim wasn’t sure whether she was talking to him or to the others. “Uncle Jimmy can keep a secret; he doesn’t want to do anything that would hurt Jon. He loved Superman, and he’s always loved Mom and Dad, and now us. He’s like one of the family.”

“That’s right,” Jim said, trying very hard to believe it.

Still holding Jim’s hands, Laura turned her head to face Clark. “But Daddy,” she added. “You should help him. You should write his book.”

Clark shook his head. “Honey, I really don’t think – “

“You should do it for Superman. And for kids like me who don’t remember what he was like.”

Clark looked from Laura to Lois, who nodded agreement. “It would be good for you, too,” she said.

“And me,” Laura repeated. “Do it for me, Daddy.”

Jon looked rocklike and determined, but said nothing.

“You’re all agreed on this,” Clark observed. He looked from Laura to Jon to Lois. Once again they shared that glance that Jim interpreted as married-couple telepathy. “All right, then. I’ll do the book.” Jim’s face brightened and Laura gave his hands a celebratory squeeze. “We’ll do the book. But we work from publicly available sources, and we don’t reveal any of Superman’s secrets.”

“Or ours,” Jon added.

“Or ours,” Clark repeated.

“You’ll have to acknowledge Kansas,” Lois amended. “Too many people have guessed it already.”

“All right,” Clark agreed. “That’s just good journalism. We’ll assemble the best speculation that’s already out there, but that’s as far as it goes. No big revelations.”

“Agreed,” Jon said.

Laura was bouncing up and down now. She was still holding Jim’s hands, and it was all he could do to keep from bouncing too. He was far from sorting out all that he had learned here this night, but this much he could understand: For the first time in nine years someone had answered his call for help.