

*Once you put your life onto the printed page,
it takes on a life of its own. – Susan Engel*

3. Flawed Crystal

Kansas: June 21, 10 A.S.

The dream was never exactly the same.

Like all dreams, it filled in the empty spaces of its tapestry with the loose threads of his day, all the stray impressions that impinged on his awareness without ever getting the attention they seemed to call for – conversations overheard from miles away, faces seen at the windows of airliners as they passed 30,000 feet over his head, the suggestively intricate (but never quite decipherable) patterns in the radio waves. There was so much to cram in, and the Dream was already so overloaded.

It always began with a feeling of wonder: A crystal world, clear as glass, each elaborate and detailed component glinting slightly in the sunlight, each reflecting the separate glints of all the others. It seemed to be full of stars, a crystal universe unto itself.

How could such a thing exist out here in space? he wondered. Wouldn't every stray meteor, every misdirected piece of dust in a comet's tail shatter it to atoms?

But it's not just a crystal, he realized. It's a mechanism.

Its pieces moved like the fragile springs and wheels of a 19th century watch, each protected from the motions of the others by nothing other than the precision of their placement.

"They say that the Heavens proclaim his glory," Pastor Harris commented from somewhere behind him, where the dead people were. "But that's only because they can't see the Earth. No one can appreciate it from the inside. Only an Outsider can see it the way it really is."

It's not just a mechanism, it's alive.

Alive and filled with life, each tiny being as precise and intricate and fragile as the whole. Bacteria, plants, insects, birds – all perfectly transparent, all formed from infinitesimally thin crystal sheets.

And people. Billions upon billions of them, all similar, all unique: Jimmy on a plane back to Metropolis. Lois on the phone to Bangkok. Laura lying on her bed in the transparent house, her back arched and chin propped on her fingers as she stared at the eastern horizon and wondered what it would be like to see all the way to Kansas City. Living crystal mechanisms, fractally complicated, all playing their roles in the great living crystal of the World.

"Don't just stand there staring like a cow, son," said his father's voice behind him. "You're not here to be a tourist."

How could he have let himself be mesmerized by the beauty of it? There were obstacles in its path: meteors that were not alive, not crystal, not part of the living mechanism. They were rock and cold metal. In his mind he could hear the sound that a collision would bring, the tinkling rain of thousands of trillions of sharp, broken crystal shards – a heavenly music inexpressibly beautiful in itself, but horrifying in its implications.

“Of course he won’t let it happen,” said young Brian Edgar. “He’s Superman.”

He flew into the crystal planet’s path, moving as fast as he could to push the threatening rocks aside. Some he tossed away like giant baseballs. Others broke apart at his touch, making thousands of new missiles where there had been only one. He vaporized the tiny ones with his heat vision, and swept up the others in a desperate panic, catching some only a few miles from the transparent surface.

Slowly he began to win the battle against all this inanimate matter. The cleared zone in front of the planet grew to ten miles, then a hundred, then several thousand. He could rest for a moment now, he thought. He could around again and look at the wonder of it, the wonder that was the Earth.

And then he saw the flaw.

It was microscopic, barely molecular. Deep within the core of the planet an infinitesimal bit of mechanism was out of time, missing its beats in the planetary rhythm.

Did I do that? he wondered. Did a stray particle get through? Did an inadvertent blast of heat vision fuse two pieces that should have stayed distinct? Or was it just built wrong from the beginning?

“It will tear itself apart now,” observed Mr. Petrofsky, his seventh grade science teacher.

“You have to fix it, Clark,” his father insisted.

“Jonathan, don’t tell the boy that,” his mother argued. “How can he fix something like that? He doesn’t even know how it works.”

“Well, he’s got to try, doesn’t he? He can’t just watch it destroy itself and not even try. Who’s going to fix it if he doesn’t?”

“Of course he’ll fix it,” Brian said confidently. “He’s Superman.”

Down on the surface, Laura looked up through the house’s transparent roof and saw him. He didn’t know how she could see him out here, but she could.

“Do it for me, Daddy,” she urged.

He had never noticed before how porous the surface was, how full of little mazelike holes and passages. Maybe he could get down into the core, he thought. If he got down there, he could at least see the flaw close up, and then maybe he’d see something to do before things got too bad.

He darted down the nearest hole in the crystal, moving quickly but knowing that he dare

not run into anything or let any of the mechanisms run into him. He kept the transparent flaw in view while he zigged and zagged through the passages, always heading down towards the core.

At the center, he found it. It had grown, but still it was barely an inch across. It was losing its transparency, turning milky and spreading slowly like a drop of white dye in clear water.

“You have to fix it, Clark,” Jonathan reiterated. “You have to try.”

“But I don’t know how,” he said.

It was the vibration of his voice that started it. The malformed milky crystal shattered, its pieces scattering like an explosion. Then came another sound of shattering, and another. They came in rhythm, like the failing beats of a crystal heart. A sphere around him shattered, and then, a beat later, another larger sphere around that one.

The dust of the shattered crystal spheres turned black and gathered around him like hard black armor, while the last, outermost layers of the dying mechanism focused the Sun’s rays to an intensity that burned even his invulnerable skin. Every inch of his body had burned by the time the last sphere shattered, the one with the plants and animals and Lois. Its dust sealed over his eyes, encasing him totally in black rock as he floated alone in space.

They were all behind him now. All of the voices were behind him.

“Sole survivor,” Lana observed.

“I knew you would survive,” said Jor-El. “That’s why I sent you, so that you would survive.”

“Of course there was a flaw,” said the Ecuadoran shaman. “There always is.”

“All created things have flaws,” Laura added.

“Only God is perfect,” said Pastor Harris.

The black armor continued to thicken until it was too hard to break, and too dense to see through. Eventually not even the voices of the dead could penetrate it.

A squeal of pain and panic woke Clark up with a start.

It took a second or two for his mind to collect itself, and another half second to replay the sound in his memory and identify it: a mouse in Lana’s garden. The squeal had suddenly cut off, and Clark could guess why. He heard wings flapping, and a quick glance confirmed that an owl was rising out of the garden with a limp mouse in its claws.

Nothing to worry about, he assured himself. *Just Nature, red in tooth and claw.*

It was still dark, both in the bedroom and in the world outside, but Clark decided it was time to get up. He was a light sleeper and he usually got up in the dark, even in high

summer. In some ways he preferred the predawn hours. The world was almost quiet then, almost undemanding.

How is everyone?

Beside him Lois was breathing softly with just a hint of congestion. Her heart beat steadily, blood sluiced through her arteries, and her stomach and intestines made gurgling noises no one else would have noticed. From the microscopic viruses in her bloodstream, he guessed that by noon she would be showing symptoms of the cold that was going around Smallville this month. Otherwise, nothing in her biological systems that was worthy of concern this morning. The normal aging processes continued apace, of course, but he tried not to notice them or think about them.

He levitated slowly off the bed and slid out from under the covers so as not to wake her. He dressed silently in less than a second and then glanced across the atrium. Jon was sprawled across his bed in one of those impossible postures that teens frequently roll into by morning. He continued to be fit and perfectly healthy; his immune system had identified and eradicated the cold virus three days ago. Something in the boy's chest shimmered on a wavelength Clark was unable to identify. He could almost convince himself that he was imagining it, but if so he had been imagining it more and more distinctly for a couple years now. He had come to associate it with his son's erratically developing Kryptonian powers, but he wasn't sure. Whatever it was, mirrors didn't reflect it and he was unable to get the right angle to see it directly in himself. Hamilton hadn't come up with a device yet that could see it either, though he dearly wanted to – it might prove his theory about stored solar energy catalyzing an influx of power from some extra-dimensional source.

Laura's lead shutters and curtains were drawn, which probably would have been enough to keep Jon's eyes out, but to Clark the room simply looked dim. She was sound asleep – lying on her back, snoring gently, twitching, and occasionally making noises as if she were trying to talk. Her temperature, which he could see on the infrared spectrum, was over 100 again. She was having another one of her fever dreams. They had started during the winter, and though it bothered Clark that he could find no organic cause for them, they seemed harmless. She would wake up with a normal temperature and remember nothing. Maybe thousands of girls had this condition and no one noticed. Or maybe intense dreams just ran in the family.

Laura did not shimmer. He had never told her this, and in all honesty he didn't know what to make of it. He hadn't seen it in Jon at this age, but he hadn't been looking for it. More and more, he was coming to believe that his daughter wouldn't have powers, that she would be a normal human like her mother. The subtle signs of humanity were all there: she bruised, sniffled, got headaches – all things that hadn't happened to Jon since the second or third grade.

He knew how much she wanted powers – more than Jon, who was having second thoughts now that his abilities had surpassed the bounds of normal human excellence.

And to an extent he wanted them for her, the way that any father wants his daughter to escape disappointment. And certainly, he imagined, it would be a load off his mind to believe that someday soon she would be as indestructible as Jon (though he hadn't noticed himself ceasing to worry about Jon).

But ...

Was it really so bad to be human? he wondered. Would it really be so bad to give the world another Lois? Or Laura in all her uniqueness, as she was now, as she could be if she just grew up and matured in the natural human way? He had seen and heard enough to know that human life was hard, that pain and death were awesome challenges. But humans (some of them, at least; the better ones) seemed to be up to it. They faced their mortality with wisdom and humor and a kind of courage that went far beyond what an invulnerable super-hero might display. Something in their very fragility made them noble and priceless and rare.

Once outside the bedroom, he could have flown down to the atrium floor or raced down the stairs in a heartbeat, but Clark had trained himself to keep up the appearances of humanity, even when no one was looking. He levitated just enough of his weight to move silently down the stairs. Outside the house, a new termite colony had begun gnawing noisily at his father's old barn. The Paxson's dog was barking at nothing again. And little Cindy Stuart was crying in her sleep, an event that he thought was probably related to the loud argument between her parents the night before. Over in his parents' old house, Lana was hunched next to a desk lamp, working on a poem. He didn't know whether she had stayed up this late or gotten up this early. A glance at her brain chemistry would have told him, but he was content to leave her this much privacy.

At the beginning of his Superman career his extended senses had required effort, and even with concentration he couldn't see much below the cellular level. Now, after his return from the Sun, even microscopic information sometimes exploded into his mind like the flashbulbs of paparazzi. Occasionally he even saw things beneath the wavelength of the available light, which shouldn't be possible according to any version of physics he knew.

In the center of Smallville a car screeched to a stop at the new light. Three farms over, Earl Bowen's tools clinked together as he got an early start working on his combine. Current hummed through the transmission lines two miles to the north, and outdoor security lights buzzed by the hundreds all over the county.

Maintaining his discipline, Clark opened the door on the floor of the atrium, then walked casually down the steps. Only after he had opened the door to his sanctuary, walked through it at a human pace, and sealed it behind him, did he allow himself to acknowledge what a relief it was to be back in relative silence.

Looking over to the desk and its computer, Clark shook his head and turned instead to the meditation cushion on the floor. He folded himself into a lotus position in the air, then descended softly on to the cushion. Strictly speaking, he knew, the cushion wasn't

necessary, given that he could levitate in any posture he chose. But meditation was a human art, and he tried to practice it as humanly as possibly. He hoped, someday, to achieve the kind of mental control that would allow him to ignore all the sights and noises and tastes and smells. So far it hadn't worked.

As he closed his eyes and attempted to focus on his breath (a couple of difficulties right there, given that he could see through his eyelids and breathed mostly out of habit), Clark found himself thinking about his plans to improve this room, to bring it back to a condition of near-total silence. His powers continued to increase (in spite of his best efforts to avoid sunlight), and by now he could notice most common household sounds even here – conversations, coughs, televisions, timer bells in the kitchen. Only during this predawn period was it truly quiet.

Lois would probably object to this particular home improvement. She hated this room, and only entered it when she had to. At first he had tried to convince her that it should be their bedroom, so that he could fall asleep without listening to every belch and whisper for miles around. But she had been adamant. “You know where that path leads,” she said. “We'll end up moving to the Fortress, and then you'll have to build something in orbit or on the dark side of the Moon. I'm willing to live out here in the country, but this is as far as I go.” She had been equally adamant about continuing to sleep together, even after the dreams had started. Clark worried that someday he might thrash or cut loose with a blast of heat vision in his sleep. Even a fraction of his power would kill her instantly. But Lois insisted that if sleeping with her husband was a dangerous mission, at least it was a mission she had signed up for. This was one more aspect of normal human life she was unwilling to surrender, in spite of the risks.

Lois is a brave woman.

He wondered at times if he still needed to sleep at all. Certainly his other physical needs – food, water, air – had all diminished as his powers increased. Even kryptonite was only a nuisance now, at least in small quantities. But the fact that he continued to dream gave him pause. He hated the dreams, but his intuition told him that they wouldn't happen if they weren't necessary. Some aspects of his mind were as super as his body – the parts that controlled perception and motion, certainly, and even his memory and rate of comprehension – but psychologically he seemed to be no different from anyone else. Meditation was no easier for him, as he proved every morning. Probably his body could survive without sleep. But could his mind maintain itself without dreaming? He wasn't willing to risk that again.

Back in the early days in Metropolis he had gone for a week without sleep once. (There had been so much to do, how could he sleep if it wasn't absolutely necessary?) But though his body did not get tired, by the end of the week he was hallucinating, dreaming while awake. He hadn't hurt anyone that time, but the experience had scared him. The possibility that he might take action against imaginary threats had been horrifying even then, but with the level of power he had now ... losing a few hours a day to sleep just seemed like good insurance.

When the half hour was up, he left the cushion, walked over to the desk, and turned on the computer. There were 53 email messages for Kent Steele, all from fans who had no idea who he really was. Clark dealt with them in under three minutes, sending each one a personal reply.

His Clark Kent account had only three messages.

1	yesterday	3:38p.m.	Jim Olsen	what's up?
2	yesterday	5:35p.m.	Stan LaPointe	good deal!
3	today	3:21a.m.	Hridl34%3l	##\$#LInkdi##d

k

“Bruce,” he said, looking at the encrypted message sent in the wee hours of the morning. He decided to take the messages in order.

From: Jim Olsen <jolsen322@lexnet.com>

Subject: what's up?

CK, How has your first week of work on the book gone? Is it quiet enough for you out there in Kansas? You could always come stay on my sofa if you want to get away from that fast-paced country life. ;)

I'm really looking forward to reading what you write. I hope Galaxy is cutting you a good deal. They seemed happy enough when I told them you wanted to do it.

I just wanted to say again how much I appreciate you doing this, and how much I appreciate you and Lois and Jon trusting me the way you have. I won't let you down. Jim

p.s. Happy Kryptonist New Year. I still remember where I was when Superman saved the space plane. I think everyone does.

Clark shook his head. “Jimmy,” he sighed, realizing that anyone who found this message in Jimmy's files would know both that Clark had a secret and that Jimmy knew what it was. But try as he might to be annoyed, Clark couldn't manage it. Instead his annoyance focused on himself: Clark had done virtually nothing on the Superman biography. Right after Jimmy left for the airport, Clark had opened a file and made an outline in a few minutes. That had been easy, just a simple chronology of his alter ego's public career:

1. Introduction. The questions, the paradoxes. Why didn't the world become a better place?

2. Origins: The Krypton Myth. Maintain journalistic skepticism: Superman is the only source, and may have had reason to mislead us. But it's the only origin story we have.

3. Upbringing on Earth. Bring in the speculation about the Smallville UFO and the Kansas Angel. (As Lois says, it's out there and we can't deny it. Avoiding it would look even more suspicious than including it.) Take the speculation to a dead end.

4. Hero. The first summer in Metropolis, from the Constitution to

the official Superman Day.

5. Alien. Skip ahead to 4 S. The plot to discredit Superman. The revelation that he's an alien. Van Buren's fall. The Krypton Charter and why he didn't like it.

6. Demon/Demigod. From Brian's suicide to the Superman Riot. Kryptonite. Church of the Kryptonian. Human Defense League. The problem of increasing power.

7. Sacrifice. The *Icarus* mission. Reaction to his death. Refute any speculation that he may have survived or that he might have left super-powered children.

8. Assessment/Conclusions. Answer the questions posed in the Introduction. What did he do wrong? How could he have done it better?

That outline had been open on his computer desktop ever since. Every morning he looked at it, thought about starting to write it, then let himself get diverted into reading old news stories or staring into space.

It's easy to write down questions. But what are your answers going to be?

But that was the whole point, wasn't it? That was why Lois and the kids had hatched that ridiculous story and maneuvered him into making his deal with Jimmy. They thought it was time he made sense of it all and moved on. And they were right.

But what if it doesn't make any sense?

He already knew the answer to that one, though, and it wasn't acceptable: *Then Jon and maybe Laura are in for a rough life.* If there was no good way to be a Kryptonian among humans, then what could he say to Jon? What could he offer him in exchange for giving up his high school football and all the other pieces of a normal adolescence? After ten years, Clark had reached the point where he could imagine sentencing himself to a lifetime in this basement – or even on the dark side of the Moon, like Lois had said. Maybe someday, after Lois and Lana and a few other people were dead, he would just push off into space and go into exile for good. Maybe that would be best for everyone.

But he couldn't wish a life like that on Jon or for Laura. They were just kids. They wanted to be a part of things, to fight the good fight, to do good things and make a difference in the world. They deserved better than any of the futures Clark could imagine for himself.

He looked again at Jimmy's message and pressed the Delete key.

From: stantheman@lapointeagency.com

Subject: Good deal!

Clark,

You should have told me the fix was in at Galaxy. I went to the meeting earlier this afternoon expecting to do some hard-nosed negotiating. I sat down at the table with their New Projects VP, looked her straight in the eye and laid down the most outrageous

conditions I could think of: advance, percentage, expense account, promotion budget, the whole nine yards. I figured it would take all week to hammer something out – but, hey, a little extra time is worth it if I get a good deal for my favorite client, right?

So anyway, what do you think she says? She says, "OK."

And I say, "What do you mean, OK? That's it? Just OK?"

And she says, "I'll email you the contracts."

That was the whole meeting. It's the best deal I've ever gotten you, and I go out of the room wishing I'd asked for three times as much. So what's the story? You have incriminating pictures of Morgan Edge or something?

Stan

p.s. The attachments are the contracts. Stick a digital signature on them and let's make this official before they change their minds.

Curious, Clark thought. They were indifferent to the book when Jimmy proposed it, but now that I'm involved money is no object.

Upstairs, Lois' alarm beeped three times before she stopped it. He heard the creak of bedsprings, a few sniffs and coughs, and then the sound of her footsteps. Soon the grinder would start, and then the gentle wheezing of the coffee machine. He looked up through the ceiling, squinting to penetrate its Kryptonian density. Jon had covered his head with pillows, for all the good it would do him. Laura was on her side now, her temperature back to normal.

Clark opened Stan's attachments and read them at super-speed. There was nothing strange about them. The contracts were the standard ones, and they specified only that the book was an biography of Superman to be accompanied by photographs. He typed in the password that allowed the computer to generate a digital signature, and attached the signed contracts to a reply.

When he closed the contracts' window, the book outline remained open. He looked at it again, then clicked a button to bring the email program back to the top of his desktop. There was still one more message to read, the one from Bruce. Clark thought about returning to the outline, but then, somewhat guiltily, he realized that his motivation was to dodge Bruce, not to work on the book.

Bruce Wayne had never accepted Clark's retirement from the hero business. As he got into his 50s, Bruce was being forced to take a more cerebral role in his war against crime in Gotham, and it was no secret that he didn't like it. The idea that Clark had walked away from his Superman identity in spite of being more powerful than ever – well, to say that it didn't sit well with Bruce was probably an understatement. The passage of nine years did not seem to have brought him any closer to acceptance.

When he was being completely honest with himself, though, Clark had to admit that his retirement had merely added friction to a relationship that had always been somewhat

abrasive. From their first meeting, Clark had suspected that Bruce knew (or thought he knew) *exactly* what he would do if he were given godlike powers. Something in Bruce's eyes had always made Clark feel that he was being measured against this unstated standard, and that he had been found wanting.

Probably, Clark thought in his more secure moments, Bruce's bitterness against him was mostly not personal. Reading between the lines of Gotham City Police reports and WayneTech press releases, Clark conjectured that both of Bruce's identities were becoming more and more difficult for anyone to deal with as he got older. But somehow that insight did not help Clark manage their relationship. In some ways it made things even more difficult. *He needs a friend now more than ever, Clark thought, or a colleague or a protege or anyone that can help him find a useful role as he gets older.* In a better world the two of them would meet for beers every Friday night at some super-hero version of a Veteran's Club, trade stories about the great things they did when they were young, and show pictures of their families. *Except that Bruce has no family. Except that I'm still young and he's not.*

Clark knew that it was within his power to delete the message unread, or just to leave it for this afternoon or tomorrow or next week. Instead he opened the decryption tool and gave it the key. In less than a minute it produced the message.

From: unknown <99239804902@anonymizer.com>

Subject: missing girls

C,

Just thought I'd drop you a line before going off to get a couple hours of sleep. I don't know whether you still pay attention to the news now that you're not on it every night, but little girls in Gotham have been vanishing on their way home from school. About one a week, though the rate may be starting to increase. The police are telling the parents that the kids may still be alive somewhere, but I bet against it after a day or two. Living girls are harder to hide than dead ones. I think I'd have the killer by now if kept more than one or two alive.

I wouldn't want to distract you from finding any fascinating new microorganisms in your belly-button lint, but a quick scan of the city might spot something. The attached files are recordings of the voices of the last four girls.

[Stacy] [Ally] [Jennifer] [Maria]

Maybe one of them is still crying in a cellar somewhere. You never know.

But what am I thinking? You wouldn't want to violate the civil rights of five million Gothamites just to overhear one desperate little girl, would you?

Don't sweat it, I've got some leads. (I may not be able to do a decent dismount from the Gotham Bank Building any more, but I'm still pretty good at some things.) I'll probably find this psycho in another week or two doing detective work the old-fashioned

human way. That's one or two more girls from now, but what are a couple little girls to a guy who saved the whole planet from destruction?

Speaking of the news, the world you saved is still going to hell in a hand basket. Check these stories; they're out of my scale. I'm just a guy with a bunch of expensive gadgets. I don't do planetary stuff.

[Ozone hole reaches Johannesburg]

[Nuclear stockpiles growing again]

[New evidence of genocide in Tanzania]

And what's your old friend up to now?

[Wall Street puzzled by LexCorp reorg, Luthor's absence]

I'd better go. I actually need my sleep these days, now that I'm getting older. Must be nice not to.

--B

Clark realized he had been staring at this screen for some while, and that he couldn't say just how long or where his thoughts had been. His hand rested on the mouse while the cursor hovered between links. *Don't listen to the girls' voices*, Clark told himself.

Outside, the Sun had come up, and Laura was awake now. She flicked on the ancient computer in her room as she passed it on her way to the bathroom. He heard its fan begin to whir and its disk drive grind. Clark clicked his mouse.

Complicated Reorganization of LexCorp Confuses Analysts

Luthor Misses Shareholder Meeting

METROPOLIS (AP): Shareholders of LexCorp [LEX] overwhelmingly approved a massive reorganization plan Tuesday, despite the fact that no one seemed to be able to explain the proposal they were voting on.

"That's really not so unusual in this era," a LexCorp spokesman commented during a break from the LexCorp Annual Meeting, held at the posh grand ballroom of the Metropolis Convention Center (a.k.a. The LexiCon). "The legal and financial considerations involved in running a global corporation have gotten to be enormously complex, and shareholders routinely delegate decisions about such matters to the corporate management. We made the complete reorganization plan available on the Web, but the stockholders of LexCorp - other than Mr. Luthor himself, of course - are mostly just ordinary people who don't want to be bothered with reading several hundred pages of legalese. They know that LexCorp has made a lot of money for them over the years, and they have learned to trust the management to do what is in their best interests."

What is unusual, however, is the number of investment bankers and Wall Street analysts who have also failed to grasp the complexities of the 978-page plan. "When I went through it," says

Gerald Holmes, a high-tech specialist at J. P. Morgan, "I counted 16 new classes of stock: tracking stocks for various components of the company, classes of common with different voting rights, preferred stocks with a variety of dividends and conversion options, and a few securities that don't fit into any of the standard equity categories.

"In the next few months we're going to have to guide our clients through a series of choices as they get the opportunity to trade their shares for one of the new classes of stock, and if I had to give that advice today, I don't know what I would tell them."

Spin-offs or Takeovers?

Speculation as to the purpose of the reorganization was divided almost as many ways as the stock itself. Some observers saw the tracking stocks as a prelude to splitting up the company, which has come to have construction, transportation, television, and publishing interests far removed from the new materials and crystalline computing divisions that constitute the original core of the LexCorp empire. Others took the opposite view, saying that some stock classes appeared to be designed as currency for use in takeovers that could expand the sway of the company even further.

Most mysterious of all is the high-voting-rights Class F stock, which is to be issued to a newly incorporated not-for-profit foundation whose purpose is not specified in the plan. "Sometimes you'll see a maneuver like this when a family-owned corporation is worried about losing control as the company is passed on to the next generation," Holmes explained. "But Lex Luthor has never been known as a family man. If there's a next generation of Luthors out there, it's the biggest secret since the atom bomb."

Gone Fishing

The man that everyone at the LexiCon wanted to hear, LexCorp founder Lex Luthor, was nowhere to be found. In any other year, the charismatic and visionary Luthor is the centerpiece of these meetings, as shareholders come from all over the world to hear his annual address. His only participation this year, however, was a short, almost content-free written message that was read from the podium.

Unofficial sources within LexCorp reported that the legendary inventor and businessman, who hasn't been seen in public in nearly three months, spent the week fishing near his remote South Pacific island. "The swordfish are extraordinary this year," said one anonymous source. "Lex has become quite a sportsman lately, and didn't want to miss the opportunity."

Rival media mogul Morgan Edge wasn't buying this fish-tale. "Luthor is like an enemy fighter plane," he commented. "When you can't see him, that's when you have to worry."

"Don't even try to guess what he's up to," cautioned one-time Luthor protege Emil Hamilton, now the head of STAR Labs. "The man plans on a scale that the rest of us can't grasp. Even the people who are trying to thwart him are probably doing exactly what he wants. It's always safest to assume that whatever happens was what

he intended."

Clark closed the browser window as was once again faced with Bruce's email.

Don't listen.

But he did listen. One by one he clicked the links to the 15-second audio clips of the girls' voices. Stacy seemed to be at a birthday party. Ally was in a school play. Jennifer was singing a song, and Maria explained to her Dad who the characters in a cartoon were. They all seemed to be between seven and nine.

Good morning, Daddy.

The instant message window popped onto his screen, covering the links to the audio files.

Good morning, Cupcake.

She was looking down at the floor, waving as if she could see him down here. He waved back, knowing that she couldn't. They did this every morning.

You saved your own little girl, a voice in his head accused, how can you turn your back on someone else's?

But it will start all over again, another voice answered. You know it will.

He knew exactly how it would go, if he did what Bruce wanted. He would stand next to the antenna on top of the Gotham Bank Building, or he would fly a search pattern over the city at night. He would extend his hearing to its fullest extent, and all the voices would pour in. Maybe one or two of them would be whimpering little girls chained in a basement or maybe none of them would. But several would be women being beaten by their husbands. Others would be drivers lying trapped in twisted automobiles, bleeding to death while the ambulances were stuck in traffic. He would hear the wheezing breathes of beggars with tuberculosis sleeping on damp sidewalks. Children would be pushing drugs to children. Teens sitting in their rooms with guns on their laps would be talking to no one, deciding whether to try to kill their enemies or themselves. That was normal. It was always happening. He had heard it thousands of times.

Some he would be able to help and some he wouldn't, and while he was trying there would be others, always others, always more. And when he stopped, whenever he stopped, whenever he decided to let the rest fend for themselves and die if they had to – Gotham would still be Gotham, just as Metropolis had always continued to be Metropolis. You could do it tonight and tomorrow and again and again forever. The only thing that changed was that after a while you started to see your own fingerprints on the problems. Yesterday's solution was today's crisis, and today's solution – whatever it turned out to be – would be tomorrow's crisis. And now it was your fault, your responsibility.

"Don't start," he said out loud.

But you've already started. You saved Laura.

“That’s different,” he said.

Is it? Is that what heroes do? Do they save the people they like and let the others die?

“I’m not a hero,” he said. “Not any more.”

He clicked the email window closed. Underneath it the book outline sat, staring at him like an accuser. Clark began to type as fast as the titanium keyboard would allow.

Chapter One. Introduction

Few historical figures have ever had a career as public as Superman’s. For nearly twelve years - from the moment he leaped out of the crowd at the Metropolis Air Show to save the space plane *Constitution* to his last communication before the *Icarus* vanished into the Sun - his every move was the center of public attention. He was photographed, televised, recorded on tape, and described in print by newspapermen like myself almost every day of those twelve years.

Why then, write his biography? There is no point in simply recapitulating those well-covered events. A reader who wants to know what Superman did can easily satisfy his curiosity in the online archives of any good news organization.¹ If a biography of Superman is to have any value, that value must derive from a holistic perspective. Is there more to know about Superman, more to understand, than just the long parade of daily headlines? Are there questions that we can only answer (or even pose) if we step back from the day-to-day? I believe that there are.

The Paradox

On the first official Superman Day - August 2, 1 S - Metropolis Mayor Daniel Van Buren proclaimed “With the arrival of Superman, the balance of power between Good and Evil has shifted decisively in favor of Good.” And yet within three years the Mayor himself would become the mastermind of a plot to discredit and encumber Superman, and by the summer of 11 S popular opinion on Superman was so diverse and polarized that militant supporters and detractors clashed on the streets in the infamous Superman Riot. Superman himself witnessed that riot, his every attempt to intervene creating more havoc than it resolved. Van Buren’s successor, Mayor Carol LaFleur, issued a statement requesting that Superman stay out of public view until tensions could abate. As Superman left on the fateful *Icarus* mission, even he had become profoundly pessimistic about his ability to improve the world in any substantial and lasting way.

The challenge in considering Superman’s life is to reconcile the day-to-day record of accomplishment - lives saved, disasters averted, crimes interrupted - with the overall ineffectiveness of his career. In the final analysis, the heroic deeds recorded by twelve years worth of headlines seem to be like the endless row of waves that progress landward from the ocean without making any long-term change in the waterline. The question that cries out to be answered is: What went wrong? What dark undertow pulled the water back out to sea as fast as

¹ My own articles and columns are in the archives Galaxy Communications maintains at Metropolis.com.

the waves could bring it in? Was it some fundamental flaw in Superman himself? Or in us? Or was it perhaps naïve from the outset to believe that a being of incalculable power and selfless intent could make the world a better place?

Clark closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. *Breathe*, he told himself, *just breathe*. He sat silently for several minutes, listening to his breath, listening to his heart, listening to Lois unload the dishwasher. *I can't believe I wrote that last sentence*, thought part of his mind, while another part said: *Keep going*.

Didn't He Save the World?

Many of Superman's admirers are exasperated that anyone even raises the kind of questions I want to examine. As former *Daily Planet* editor Perry White once said at a staff meeting, "Jesus Christ, people, the guy died saving the whole damn planet! What do you want?"

White was referring, of course, to the *Icarus* mission in 12 S and its influence on the solar events that led to the creation of Kal-El's Comet. The original calculations made at STAR Labs (and later verified by NASA) projected that the comet would be thrust directly into the path of the Earth, possibly resulting in the extinction of life on this planet. Deflecting or destroying the comet after its creation was quickly ruled out as impossible, but eventually an impromptu all-star team of scientists and engineers devised a scheme to speed up the solar process so that the comet would clear the Earth by a safe margin. Given the time constraints, no human-piloted craft could have been constructed to deploy the equipment safely, but it was believed that Superman could fly the *Icarus* close enough to the Sun to fulfill the mission and still return to Earth. This proved not to be possible; although the comet's creation was accelerated and no collision occurred, the mission required Superman to approach much closer to the Sun than had been originally projected. The *Icarus* is believed to have fallen into the Sun, and Superman never returned.²

Polls show that as much as 1/3 of the population believes either that these events never actually happened, or that the published accounts of them have been so distorted that the truth will never be fully known.³ Some of this disbelief is undoubtedly due to the secret nature of the *Icarus* mission, which was revealed to the public only after Kal-El's Comet had been sighted by amateur astronomers and Superman's absence had been widely noted in the popular press. In an interview with Lois Lane, Tribune D. J. Taylor of the Human Defense League expressed the rationale for disbelief as follows:

Lane: So you don't think that he [i.e., Superman] died during the *Icarus* mission.

Taylor: I don't think there ever was an *Icarus* mission. I mean, who's word do we have on that? Just the usual alien collaborators: You, NASA, Hamilton --

Lane: Lex Luthor.

Taylor: You're damn right, Lex Luthor. Who did they think they

² These events are related in much greater detail in Chapter 7.

³ See "Do You Believe in Icarus?" *Journal of Public Opinion*, September, 3 A. S.

were fooling, him and Superman, with that phony hostility all those years? Luthor was a collaborator from Day One. LexCorp was built with alien technology. ... I mean, do they think we're all stupid or something? It's just too pat: You've got this one-of-a-kind hero who zaps in from nowhere, and then just when things are starting to get hot, just when the HDL is making people see what a threat he is, BANG! there's some one-of-a-kind disaster that only he can save us from. And he dies. Except that nobody saw him die and the body burns up in the Sun where nobody can go look for it.

Lane: So you think the comet and Superman are too much of a coincidence.

Taylor: Dead on. Why doesn't a comet like this come out of the Sun a billion years ago when there aren't any people at all? Or even fifty years ago, when we don't have any aliens to save us? Or fifty years from now? Why does it only happen when we've got this "Superman" here to do the hero thing?

Lane: Eric Randall says it's the divine plan, that Superman was sent here because God knew the comet was coming.

Taylor: [swears] Randall thinks he's going to be the Head Collaborator when Kal-El comes back with his alien army. Well, I can promise you that the HDL's got some surprises planned for him and his whole church.⁴

The Human Defense League has probably never had more than a few thousand active members, but many mainstream voices have expressed similar skepticism. And indeed, Taylor makes a good point: Something in the modern mind rebels against the kind of coincidence that Kal-El's Comet represents. It feels like a B-movie plot device, or, perhaps more accurately, like the *deus ex machina* ending of a Greek tragedy. The issues raised by Superman's career do not go away just because an unlikely crisis allowed him to go out in a blaze of glory.

Clark stopped and took three deep breaths. The sentences and paragraphs had been rolling past like the cars of a freight train, as if he had nothing to do with putting them there on his computer screen, but need only watch them and wait for them to conclude. And yet, he also felt exhausted, as if simply sitting here moving his fingers was more effort than racing out to Saturn and back.

"What can I say about this?" Clark said, addressing the computer as if it were a person. "I don't know."

And then he almost laughed at himself. He was complaining, he realized, because at this point in the narrative he was exactly what he appeared to be: a reporter who did not know the facts, but had to try to piece them together from the fragments of evidence. The truth about *Icarus* was as much a mystery to him as to his potential readers.

Once again he tried to remember, but it was always the same: He remembered the launch,

⁴ From "Anti-Superman Leader Adjusts to Loss of Enemy" *The Daily Planet*, 22 May, 1 A. S.

and talking to Hamilton with longer and longer gaps as he got further from the Earth. He remembered the Sun getting closer, the potency of its rays feeling like a stimulating drug in his system. He remembered deducing that the original plan was not going to work, and that there was no time to wait for the scientists Earthside to figure it out. And then there was a gap. Lois had found him unconscious in their bed in Metropolis when she came home from work three days later. Apparently he had broken the window coming in. The remnants of his costume lay in a heap on the floor, its cape completely burned away. He was sunburned from head to toe and when he woke up a day and a half later he had only the vaguest memories of flying through airless space. Was he a hero? Did he save the world? Lois thought so. Maybe she was right.

Personally, I accept the official explanation of the *Icarus* mission and Superman's role in it. At the very least, I know of no hard evidence that calls it into question. If this story is true, it certainly speaks well for Superman's personal character. Whatever mistakes he may have made, in the end he was willing to sacrifice himself for others. And that, I believe, is the true measure of heroism.

However, this final heroic episode says nothing about the overall wisdom of Superman's career. It should not stop us from asking the hard questions about his life and influence. Is the world that Superman may have saved a better world than the one that cheered his arrival on the public scene twelve years before? And if not, why not?

Three Faces

An article in the Sports section of my morning newspaper refers to the same person as "Ed Maxwell," "the Regents' catcher," and "the American League's Most Valuable Player." But these are three very different concepts that only happen to coincide for a period of time. Perhaps as soon as next year someone else will be the AL-MVP, and a few years after that the Regents will have a catcher who is not named Ed Maxwell.

In a similar way, people who talk about Superman often refer interchangeably to three very different concepts that happened to coincide for twelve years. Most of the time I will give in to the popular usage and say "Superman" for all three, but from time to time it will be useful to give each its own name.

Kal-El was a Kryptonian who escaped the destruction of his planet in infancy and arrived on Earth.⁵ The long-term influence of Earth's yellow sunlight catalyzed a gradual change in Kal-El's cellular structure which allowed him to channel extraordinary power from an unknown source.⁶ By adulthood he possessed powers of flight, speed, strength, durability, and hyperacute sensation. In addition, he could project energy beams from his eyes, a power which became known as *heat vision*.

If Kal-El aged in a normal human manner, he was in his early 20s in 1 S when his existence (though not his alien origin) became public. He revealed the story of his origin in 4 S, after the publication of

5 If, that is, we believe the story that Superman told about his origin. For reasons why we might or might not regard Superman as a reliable source in this matter, see Chapter 2.

6 See *Kryptonian Physiology* by Dr. Emil Hamilton, the only scientist who had an opportunity to examine Superman under laboratory conditions.

unauthorized tests showing that he was not human. He died in the Sun in 12 S.

Already during his lifetime, Kal-El had become an object of veneration by the Church of the Kryptonian, a small religious movement centered in Metropolis. There is no evidence that he sought or encouraged this worship. After his death the Church splintered and many of the splinter groups grew rapidly. Collectively they are known as *Kryptonists*.⁷

Pseudoman is my name for the human that Kal-El pretended to be while growing up on Earth, and indeed, may even have believed he was. From his mastery of American language, values, and culture, I judge that Kal-El was raised by humans in America, probably in the heartland.⁸ Dr. Hamilton's studies of his Kryptonian physiology indicate that his powers developed slowly, and that he may have been indistinguishable from a normal human child for many years.⁹ He may well, then, have been raised as a human foundling by people who knew nothing (and therefore taught him nothing) about his true ancestry.

Pseudoman, then, may have had a complete identity: parents, a home town, childhood friends, high school diploma, a career, a home, and even a family.¹⁰ It is possible that Pseudoman continued to live his life even after Kal-El took on the role of Superman. Or Kal-El may have arranged an accidental "death" for Pseudoman, something that would have been quite simple for a being of Kal-El's power.

Pseudoman, if he continued to exist after 1 S, was undoubtedly quite different from our popular image of Superman. Superman, for example, professed a very simple moral code. Giving him some benefit of the doubt, it is possible to claim that Superman never broke a promise or was caught in a lie of any sort. Pseudoman, however, must have been a master of deception. The fact that his secret never became public indicates that few people ever knew it, given how hard it would be for a large group to keep such a secret even with the best of intentions. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, either that Pseudoman was a virtual hermit, or that the great majority of his human acquaintances did not know that he was also Superman. And yet, recalling how reliably Superman appeared at unscheduled emergencies around the clock, Pseudoman's life (to the extent that it was anything other than a hermitage) must have been an endless sequence of missed appointments, broken promises, and elaborate excuses.

Much ink has been spilled in the attempt to identify Pseudoman, the most obvious clue being that he would have disappeared at the beginning of the *Icarus* mission. To date, none of these speculations has gained wide acceptance, and I personally am not impressed with any of them. Pseudoman appears to have covered his tracks quite well.

7 A certain amount of Kryptonist theology will be covered in Chapter 7, where I discuss speculations about Kal-El's possible survival and/or return.

8 For speculations about Superman's childhood see Chapter 3.

9 See *Kryptonian Physiology*.

10 It seems unlikely that Kal-El would have been able to impregnate a human female, a possibility I will discuss in Chapter 7.

Superman is a character, a role created and played by Kal-El. He did not invent the character out of whole cloth, however. It might be more accurate to say that Superman is the result of a collaboration between Kal-El and the mythological imagination of human culture.

The word *superman* entered the English language late in the 19th century as a translation of Nietzsche's German term *übermensch*, which means literally "the over-man" or "the man above." It was used in this sense by George Bernard Shaw in his early 20th-century play *Man and Superman*.¹¹ Nietzsche's writings are open to numerous interpretations,¹² but we can say at the minimum that the *übermensch* is some kind of biological/moral/spiritual goal toward which humanity can hope to evolve.

From this philosophical notion, Depression-era comic book writers developed the *super-hero*, a series of costumed beings who possessed semi-magical or ultra-technological powers and used them to fight criminals and/or Nazi secret agents. The 1930s super-hero is an exceedingly simple character: He has every conceivable virtue, and is good almost to a fault.¹³ He is, in essence, the fantastic creation of people in the grip of social and economic forces beyond their comprehension. The super-hero is as powerful as they were powerless, and as simple as the forces that oppressed them were complex.

The young Kryptonian who appeared in Metropolis in 1938 was, I believe, as surprised and baffled by his strange powers as anyone else. Like so many other confused young men, he looked for some cultural role that he could claim as his identity. But while other young men may find themselves as soldiers or teachers or even criminals, none of these roles captured Kal-El's unique nature. When Lois Lane's story of the *Constitution* rescue¹⁴ called him "Superman," he found the only role that seemed to fit: super-hero.

By wearing a costume and adopting the name that Lane had given him, Kal-El took on the weight of decades of human fantasy. Throughout his career, the people who dealt with Superman dealt primarily with a costume and their own projections. To many he was an Orwellian Big Brother, while others saw him as Tin Pan Alley's "someone to watch over me." People made of him whatever they needed him to be, wanted him to be, or feared that he was. To a certain extent this was inevitable, as anyone can attest who is more famous or wealthy or powerful than his

11 Shaw undoubtedly would have anticipated the failure of Superman's mission. In *Man and Superman* he wrote: "God himself cannot raise a people above its own level."

12 And at least one tragic misinterpretation as a justification for the Nazi doctrine of the Teutonic master race.

13 In this he (they were almost always male) differs from classical heroes like Hercules (who had a temper), David (who stole the wife of one of his soldiers), and Odysseus (who was a skillful liar). Even turn-of-the-century heroes like Sherlock Holmes (a drug addict) had their flaws. Captain America, by comparison, is humanity perfected.

The closest ancestor of the super-hero is probably Sir Galahad from the King Arthur cycle. In *Angels: an endangered species* Malcolm Godwin interprets the super-hero as the continuation of angel mythology into a secular age. Godwin explains the super-hero's otherwise useless cape as a surviving vestige of the angelic wings. Others have related the super-hero to the medieval Jewish myth of the golem.

14 "Mysterious 'Superman' Saves Space Plane" *The Daily Planet*, 22 June, 1 S.

neighbors. But it was also the natural result of his own decisions.

Losing Control

From the very beginning the existence of Superman had an impact on the public imagination that was independent of Superman's actions. To a certain extent he anticipated this effect and even intended to use it for positive purposes. As he said to me in the interview that introduced him to the public: "I don't think I'll be able to avoid becoming a symbol. Celebrities always become symbols, whether they want to or not. The best you can hope for is to have some control over what you symbolize."¹⁵

He claimed in that interview that he wanted his public image to promote the idea of service to others. He wanted to establish in the public mind "that someone who has the power to live any way he wants might choose to devote his life to helping others, not for any ulterior motive, but just because it is a good and satisfying way to live." Many people did indeed respond to this idealistic message. There is no way to measure how many did so privately, but in 2 S President Copley established the so-called "Hero Corps" to channel the public's enthusiasm. In its first six months the Corps received twenty times the expected number of applications, predominantly from teen-agers and young adults.¹⁶

Superman also no doubt intended for his public presence to have a deterrent effect on antisocial behavior. And indeed, violent crime in Metropolis did fall every year from 1 S until 6 S, when it began a slow but steady rise that spiked in the aftermath of the Superman Riot, when the city's super-hero was known to be in seclusion.

The unintended consequences of Superman's presence, however, were as striking as they were predictable. For every person who was inspired to action by his example, several others were lulled into complacency, confident that the welfare of the community was in capable hands. The high-tech renaissance that had remade Metropolis in the decade before Superman's arrival¹⁷ continued throughout his career, creating a billionaire oligarchy that set a national standard for self-indulgent excess. Funding for police and other emergency services was a tempting target for budget-cutters year after year - another reason why the city was virtually prostrate in the Riot aftermath. As Captain Maggie Sawyer of the Special Crimes Unit put it, "Eventually we had to recognize that he wasn't just our friend. He was our competition."

And there is no way of knowing how many accidents were caused by the increased carelessness of Metropolitans who trusted Superman to save them from serious harm. Some even intentionally put themselves in danger in order to meet the Man of Steel.¹⁸

Superman intended his public image to inspire emulation, but he plainly did not foresee that it would inspire such a degree of worship and paranoia. Both the Church of the Kryptonian and the militant Human

15 "Superman Speaks to Planet Reporter" *The Daily Planet*, 30 June, 1 S.

16 The Corps was disbanded in 2 A. S., having never recovered from the scandals that resulted in its original Corps Leader, the handsome and charismatic Jason Patrick, being sentenced to prison in 10 S for a variety of financial and sexual improprieties. The Hero Corps name was revived in 8 A. S. as a Kryptonist alternative to the Boy Scouts.

17 The founding of LexCorp in 10 P. S. is usually identified as the symbolic beginning of the boom.

18 See the examples of Lois Lane in Chapter 4 and Brian Edgar in Chapter 6.

Defense League seemed to puzzle and embarrass him. Even at the end of his career he would change the subject or fly away to some "emergency" whenever asked about either group.¹⁹

Finally, there is no way to measure the degree to which the existence of Superman demoralized ordinary people, making them feel small and inconsequential. As Shaw warned more than a century ago: "Beware of the pursuit of the Superhuman: it leads to an indiscriminate contempt for the Human." There is no evidence that Superman himself felt this contempt, but he undeniably inspired self-contempt in others.²⁰ For many common people he came to symbolize Metropolis' unreachable aristocracy of celebrity and power - a headline-grabbing class in which many certainly did feel (and express) contempt for those below them. If the fantasy of a super-hero once helped victims of the Depression feel powerful, the reality of a super-hero was one more reason for those left behind by the boom to feel inadequate.

Clark slumped back in his chair and exhaled a long unsteady breath, the kind that people sometimes release when they are done with crying now and want to return to their usual composure. His heartbeat was louder and faster than usual and his forehead felt cool from the evaporation of sweat.

Somehow hours had passed. He could hear Lois and the children bustling and talking in the house above him. "It isn't fair!" Laura was complaining. Outside there were cars on the roads and tractors in the fields. A cat prowled through the Lana's garden, but the field mice were safe in their holes.

He breathed again, steadier this time, and reached out to save the file. He felt exposed and vulnerable. A little time in outer space seemed like a good idea now, as long as he could stay in night, stay in the Earth's shadow.

"This is going to be even harder than I thought," he said to himself. But he felt better in some strange undefinable way. Cleansed, perhaps. He knew it wouldn't last, but he tried to enjoy it while it did.

Hermit Isle: June 23, 10 A. S.

He sat beneath a crystal dome as clear as glass. It was made of CrystaLex-6, the most impervious material in the LexCorp catalog. Artillery would not penetrate it, but the rays of the South Pacific sun passed through without tint or refraction.

His view was unimpeded in all directions. His 360-degree desk lay directly beneath the apex of the dome, on the top floor of the house. The house, in turn, occupied the highest point on the island. The horizon, interfacing between sky and sea, made a perfect circle

¹⁹ There are remarkable similarities between these two opposing movements. Both hold as a matter of faith that Superman will eventually attempt to take over the world, and both refuse to this day to believe in his death. They differ mainly in their reactions to these core beliefs.

²⁰ As the Kinks sang in *Wish I Could Fly Like Superman*:

I'd really like to change the world,
And save it from the mess it's in.
I'm too weak. I'm so thin.
I'd like to fly, but I can't even swim.

around him. No ships were visible on the sea, nor planes in the sky. Clouds were permitted, and the whitecaps of waves.

The desk itself came from LexCorp's Crystalline Computing Division. Its surface, which appeared to be black plastic, could display high-resolution images of whatever size and shape might be desired. At the moment it was displaying several sheets of paper. Someone unfamiliar with the desk might have been forgiven for assuming that the sheets lay on top of the desk, rather than being virtual artifacts constructed within it. A satellite uplink and the power of his name allowed him to access any known fact or talk to even the most inaccessible individuals in seconds. No matter how remote it might seem to some, this chair, when he occupied it, was the center of the world.

He heard her boots striking the steps of the spiral stairwell before he saw her head and then the rest of her body emerge from the floor below. Her black uniform was another triumph of the Materials Division, combining the appearance of tight leather with the resilience of Kevlar body armor. If it was uncomfortably hot in the South Pacific climate, she gave no indication.

"What is it, Hope?" he said in a tone of mild annoyance.

"The information you have been expecting has arrived."

"I am aware of it."

"Yes, Mr. Luthor." She turned expressionlessly and descended the stairs.

Hope and her counterpart Faith were currently his only companions on the island. Their rigorous training, together with the island's incomparable automation, allowed them to fill all necessary roles: bodyguard, secretary, servant, nurse, chief of staff.

Other powerful men might not have allowed themselves to depend on two employees to this extent, and might have worried about their loyalty. Lex Luthor, however, considered the two women to be the most reliable mechanisms on the entire island. He had recruited them as children from the slums of Metropolis, and had designed the process by which their psyches had been torn down and rebuilt according to his specifications. They had been chosen because of their intelligence and physical dexterity, their inordinate native capacity to feel loyalty and pride, and because at the moment of their selection they had no stake in the world as it was then constituted. Luthor had given them an object upon which to exercise that capacity for loyalty: himself. And he had provided them with numerous sources of pride: their abilities, their training, their importance to himself and to his empire, their distaste for the comforts and luxuries that enslaved the rest of humanity, the secrets that they knew, the trust that he had placed in them. They were indispensable cogs in the Machine of the World, and they knew it. Their lives made a kind of sense that countless others strive for and never achieve.

"But are they happy?" a famous philosopher had once asked him over wine. Luthor had requested a definition of happiness, which the philosopher had been unable to provide. But had he given any reasonable attempt at a definition, Luthor was confident he could

have argued that Hope and Faith were far happier than the philosopher himself, who was, after all, a rather dismal and depressing sort of fellow.

“But people are not machines that you can design and build for your own purposes,” the philosopher had continued.

Luthor had only smiled and proceeded to his next appointment, allowing the philosopher to maintain this naïve and romantic view. Luthor himself was well satisfied with his model of people (and of the World itself) as complex and intricate mechanisms. If his success had confirmed anything, it was his original belief that systems of interacting mechanisms were far deeper – and people far more shallow – than was generally appreciated.

“Hope?”

She turned and ascended the steps again. “Yes, Mr. Luthor.”

“Please familiarize yourself with this new information, and instruct Faith to do the same. Examine my files on Mr. Kent and read as many of his writings as you can. You will find this to be a formidable task; he is rather prolific.”

“Yes, Mr. Luthor.”

“If my plan is to succeed, you must come to understand Mr. Kent almost as well as I do myself. Ultimately, it will prove necessary for you to be able to anticipate his every intention.”

“Yes, Mr. Luthor.”

“That is all.”

Luthor’s eyes returned to one of the virtual papers on his desk, confident that Hope’s exit did not require his further attention. He read:

The Thesis of This Book

Most readers have probably already guessed the point that I am trying to make, the thesis that the rest of this biography will flesh out. Superman’s actual deeds were only a part of his impact, and by the end of his career they had become a relatively small part. More and more each year, the effects of his actions were being dwarfed by humanity’s reaction to the fact of his existence. And that reaction was conditioned more by the projection of humanity’s hopes and fears than by any rational response to Superman’s deeds.

In short, by taking the super-hero – a character that previously had existed only in popular mythology – and bringing it into reality, Superman catalyzed a process in the cultural psyche whose effects gradually went further and further out of his control. The Superman Riot was, I believe, only the overture for a series of disasters which might have ensued had he not sacrificed himself in the Sun.

I fully recognize that this will be looked on as an extremely ungrateful portrayal of a being who not only may have saved the world from a fiery destruction, but who also played a significant role in my own life. I

can only guess where my career might have gone (or not gone) if Superman had not given me my first big break, or if I had not worked in a city with such a conspicuous newsmaker. My wife (the previously mentioned Lois Lane) was personally rescued by Superman on numerous occasions, and (like me) built a large portion of her career around covering his exploits. But while I continue to be personally grateful to Superman and to honor his memory in my own life, my duty as a journalist is to put my personal feelings aside and interpret the story of Superman's life in as objective a manner as I can.

Point of View

Given the thesis I have put forward, this book is as much about the human reaction to Superman as about Superman himself. For this reason, I will attempt to tell the story from the human point of view, and not from the point of view of Superman himself. This technique avoids a number of traps, some which are inherent in the nature of biography, and others which are unique to a biography of Superman.

First, looking at Superman from the outside forces me to depend on living sources, rather than to speculate about the point of view of a being who is dead and cannot be asked to elaborate.

Second, I avoid (and encourage the reader to avoid) the problem of anthropomorphism. Humans have a tendency to imagine that other species resemble them and share their traits. And so fairy tale foxes are wily, sheep are content, lions are brave, ants are diligent, and so on. Even when we observe other species in a more serious way, we tend to see them as thinking, planning, intending, and feeling much as we ourselves do.

Kal-El was so human in appearance that we must constantly remind ourselves of his strangeness to us. He belonged to another species from another world. We know that he learned to interact in human society, but we should never imagine that we can accurately reproduce his inner experience. In this introduction I have allowed myself to slip into anthropomorphism from time to time in order to present my views succinctly. But in the chapters that follow I will attempt to study Superman in the way that a physicist studies an invisible particle, by watching its effects on visible ones. The best way to understand Superman, I believe, is to study the humans he affected.

When he had finished, Lex Luthor scrolled back to the beginning of the chapter and began to read again, looking for nuances beyond the immediately obvious.

“And what a fascinating mechanism you are proving to be, Clark Kent,” he said to himself.