What was silent in the father speaks in the son.

-- Friedrich Nietzsche

5. Sons

The Fortress of Solitude: August 21, 10 A.S.

The *aurora borealis* fluttered in front of Clark like a curtain in a soft breeze. An observer with merely human senses might have been awestruck by the *aurora*, but the embellishments added by colors beyond the human spectrum gave the phenomenon an indescribable magic. On a night without moonlight over a landscape without cities, the jeweled path of the Milky Way (similarly embellished by colors without names) was the only competing source of illumination. If a human could have endured the cold and wind, hanging here in midair several hundred feet above this arctic lake and its surrounding snow-covered forest might have seemed like the very essence of peace. But for Clark (who could hear the engines of two American warplanes and ten different airliners, not to mention the ceaseless worldwide buzzing of the HF band) the situation was full of disturbance and anxiety. He knew he was taking a chance by being here.

Not that anyone would *see* him. He was much faster than the airplanes, and with engines louder than rock concerts they could hardly sneak up on him. Even if his attention should wander and one should come within visual range, a mach-ten departure would turn the incident into just another UFO sighting that no one would take seriously.

No, the risk was that they would *need* him, and that he would know it. Clark wasn't sure what he would do if the engines of one of those planes should suddenly turn silent. It was beyond his imagination that he could watch a cabin full of passengers die. And yet, if he saved them it would start all over again, wouldn't it? There was no end to saving people, once you got started.

Jon had wanted to come with him on this trip to the Fortress. Moonless nights were the only times Clark allowed his son to have flying practice outdoors. They wore black body suits and stayed close to home over the sparsely populated prairie. Jon liked the idea of testing his endurance on a long flight, but Clark had given a number of reasons for vetoing it: Jon was improving, but his extended senses were erratic and he still couldn't do the mach-ten exit; long distance trips were best done outside the atmosphere where sonic booms weren't a problem, and Jon still needed to breathe; and Jon hated extreme cold, having still not assimilated the fact that it couldn't hurt him. In retrospect, however, Clark realized that he had another reason for taking this trip by himself: He didn't want Jon watching him if one of those airliners started going down.

So after a normal outdoor flying session, Clark had announced that it was bedtime and sent Jon home on his own. Then he popped up above the atmosphere and turned north. He flew on his back, looking outward to make sure that he avoided any satellite cameras, and also so that he wouldn't see any disasters in the making below. He navigated by the stars and turned downward only when he was over the lake that served as the entrance to

the Fortress.

Descending slowly once he hit the atmosphere, he found a hole in the ice and plunged in. At the bottom of the lake was a boulder that looked as if it could have been deposited there by a glacier thousands of years ago. He moved the boulder aside to uncover an underwater cave, entered, and then returned the boulder to its original location. He swam through about half a mile of frigid darkness before surfacing in a circular pool under the canopy of a hollowed-out mountain.

The Last Son of Krypton had returned to his Fortress of Solitude.

Next to the pool was a coffinlike container that he used to bring in visitors, on the few occasions when he had any. Jimmy had been here a couple of times, and so had Bruce. Lois hated the place. She said it was sterile and inhuman, which was true. Laura claimed to find it fascinating the last time she had come, but she may have only been trying to aggravate her mother. And though Jon hadn't visited the Fortress in several years, he was beginning to get curious about it again. Clark noticed a pang of guilt about not letting Jon come tonight. The Fortress was a little piece of Krypton, the only piece left. He hoped that someday both of his children would understand that being Kryptonian was more than just flying or melting things with your eyes. Krypton had been an entire world. Jor-El would have said that it was a better world than this one, and Clark supposed that it would have been hard to argue with him.

The name was a bit of childhood whimsy. The first Fortress of Solitude had been a treehouse that Jonathan had helped Clark build when he was eight. Clark had conceived it as his secret hideout, a place to be alone. He negotiated a deal with his parents: they would never go up if he would promise always to come down when they called him. Both sides honored that agreement, but Clark soon noticed that solitude wore a little thin after a while. Pete Ross suggested that the treehouse would make a good boys' club, but Lana thought that was a dumb idea and Clark had been forced to admit that she was right. Eventually the original Fortress became a grown-up-free zone for reading comic books and looking at trading cards and making impossible plans that the adults didn't need to know about. The structure was well-built; it lasted until he tore it down to build the new house.

He built this second Fortress because he needed a place to keep Jor-El's orb after he finally gained possession of it. He needed a place far from everyone where he could experiment with Kryptonian technology. And, unlike his experience with the first Fortress, he needed solitude. Discovering his alien heritage had been both exciting and devastating, and he had needed a place away from humanity where he could adjust.

The basic structure of the Fortress, including all its walls and floors, was made of a smart crystal that had been Krypton's most versatile building material. It was totally reconfigurable. By growing some crystals and shrinking others the entire floor plan could be changed. The crystals themselves were transparent in their natural state, but could be programmed to emit any wavelength of light in any direction. Any part of the Fortress

could be any color, any surface could become a video screen if necessary, or the walls could create three-dimensional scenes inside themselves. The crystal's light-emitting properties went down to the microscopic level, allowing any portion of the Fortress to function as an optical computer whose capabilities far exceeded those of any human-designed machine. And of course, the entire Fortress was lined with sound- and light-deadening materials even better than those he had used to construct his basement lair in Kansas. Sensors and antennae embedded in the surrounding mountain could give the Fortress the resources of a world-wide command post, or it could be totally cut off from the rest of the planet.

Every visitor to the Fortress had remarked on how little it contained. After the existence of an arctic stronghold had leaked out – Clark blamed Jimmy for that – the Fortress had become a staple of the Superman mythos. Popular fantasy had filled it with more wonderful devices than Willy Wonka's factory and furnished it with an equally impressive intergalactic botanical garden and zoo. But in fact Clark's public career as Superman had generated remarkably few souvenirs, and he chose not to display his trunkloads of plaques, ribbons, and medals. The Fortress could generate any number of virtual environments, growing whatever furniture or machinery it needed out of its basic crystal. But in its rest state it contained little other than the original Smallville UFO and its contents.

"Office. Ti-Gorbat background."

A desk, chair, and computer terminal grew out of the center of the floor. The walls, floor, and ceiling began to emit light and sound to create the illusion that the office floated just above the surface of Lake Ghan, under the mysterious and long-vanished red falls of Ti-Gorbat, which translated loosely from the Kryptonian as "River of Blood". Just as quickly, the Fortress computer fetched his files from Smallville through a wireless network. The underlying technology had little to do with any terrestrial science, so he did not worry about the possibility of interception or hacking. LexCorp may have figured out a way to imitate a number of Kryptonian materials, he reflected, but he hadn't seen any sign that it or any other Earth laboratory was pursuing Kryptonian communication techniques.

Clark was developing mixed feelings about Jimmy's Superman project. In the beginning he had resented being roped in. But writing about Krypton and the Smallville UFO had been strangely soothing. He knew he could not mention Jonathan or Martha by name or tell any specific stories about them, and he had continued to omit a great deal in his account of Jor-El and Krypton. But nonetheless, writing those chapters had given him a reason to think about all his dead parents and what he owed them. Living in the past was proving to be a bittersweet experience, and part of him was starting to feel grateful to Jimmy (and Laura and Jon and Lois) for forcing him to do it.

The bittersweet feeling, however, was accompanied by a growing sense of dread. He was reaching the end of what he could write purely from memory and the existing public record. Of course, Superman's public career had been so well documented that he could

make a passable account by piecing together clippings from newspapers and other books. But he knew that the world expected more from Clark Kent, and he was surprised to discover how stubborn he felt about defending that reputation. If he refused to take those expectations seriously, he would be acting as if his Clark Kent identity had been a mere disguise. Having already given up one of his public identities, Clark was unwilling to undermine the other.

Clark Kent, the reporter and columnist, winner of numerous awards, was famous for two things. The first was his luck, his uncanny ability to show up in the right place at the right time. Clark had always been a little embarrassed by that part of his reputation, because in essence he had been cheating: not only was he making use of his extended senses and (when he could do it without detection) super speed, but in many cases he had (as Superman) actually made the news he was covering.

But Clark Kent had also been famous for something else, and this he took pride in: He was a great interviewer. He asked the right question at the right time. He pressed his subjects hard when they were lying, and yet he showed great patience with people who were struggling to figure out how to tell the truth. To a large extent, this part of his ability as a reporter was also based on his Kryptonian powers: he could hear every nuance of his subject's voice, breathing, and heart rate. He could watch for involuntary twitches of muscles too small for anyone else to notice, and even (towards the end of his career) see adrenaline and other glandular secretions circulating in a person's blood. But interpreting all that data required something else: human empathy, an ability to put himself in the other person's shoes and to imagine the psychological struggle that was producing all these physiological effects. He was proud of that ability.

Clark Kent, then, would never be content to gather his information in a library or collect it from internet databases. Clark Kent would not even be content to talk to the surviving characters in Superman's saga over the telephone. He would go to Metropolis and walk the streets that Superman had flown over. He would sit in the same room with each person who had something to tell him about Superman's career, its meaning, and its legacy.

And Clark Kent – the real person sitting in the unreal environment of Krypton's River of Blood – dreaded that prospect very much. The concentrated exposure he had gotten in the Sun's corona (or however deep into the Sun he ultimately fell) had extended his senses to the point that even rural Kansas was almost intolerably loud. But from Victory Fountain, ten million people – with all their needs and problems and cries for help – would all be within earshot. He shook at the thought of it.

"But that can be September's problem," he said to himself.

Tonight's problem was considerably simpler. He had reached the point in his biography when he needed to cover Superman's childhood and adolescence, and he was having a great deal of trouble deciding what to say. Superman had never said anything publicly about his youth. There were, of course, many stories Clark could tell if he wanted to. But

where would he say that he had gotten them? Off-the-record conversations with Superman? That was a dangerous device and he wanted to save it for occasions when he really needed it. He didn't want historians asking him for copies of notes or tapes that had never existed.

Worse, the stories he could tell, the *true* stories, were all of the wrong type. He knew what his audience would be looking for. Superman (to most of them) was a hero, a character of myth who just happened to have really existed. And myths about heroes all went the same way at this point: the hero does something that displays all the signs of his future greatness. The infant Hercules strangles the serpents that Hera sent to kill him. Young Jesus astounds the scholars at the Temple. Toddling Hermes steals the cattle of Apollo and talks his way out of it. Teen-age Moses rescues a Hebrew slave from a cruel Egyptian slave-driver. He knew exactly what kind of story people expected: The Super-Child holds up the roof of a burning school building until the other children escape, then lets it fall on himself with a great crash, only to walk away unharmed. Or perhaps he tries to save the children but fails, and so spends the rest of his life ceaselessly atoning for that original failure.

But nothing like that was true. When he searched his memory honestly, the stories that stood out were not about saving people, but about being saved.

Like his first day of kindergarten. On the way to the bus after school, Paul Miller and two of his friends surrounded Clark and made fun of his shirt, which displayed the dump-truck who was the star of his favorite cartoon show. They told him that the dump truck was a hero for babies, and finally Paul pushed him down. Clark had no idea what to do. He wanted to cry and he wanted to fight, but he knew that crying would be a mistake, and all he knew about fighting was that his mother disapproved of it.

Lana came to his rescue. She was five-and-a-half and big for her age. She had fiery red hair that went halfway down her back and green eyes that almost seemed to glow when she was angry. Clark had met her when they sat at the same table during the morning snack. Lana had told him he was cute, which had made Clark blush crimson. Now she stepped into the ring of boys and pushed Paul the same way he had pushed Clark. He had the bad luck to fall into a puddle, and when Lana taunted, "Look, he wet his pants!" Paul began to cry. All three of Clark's attackers ran for the bus.

I don't think that's the story my readers are looking for.

When he was eight, Clark helped his Dad and some other men lay drainage pipe in the field south of the house. (Probably, he reflected now, he had been watching and getting in the way, but Jonathan had managed to invent a few tasks Clark could "help" with.) A man with a trencher had been hired to dig the trench for the pipe, and Clark was fascinated with the big machine. It had a base like a tractor, and a blade that cut into the ground like a giant chain saw. Jonathan told him to stay back from the trencher when it was running, so Clark obeyed in the minimum possible way. He stayed five feet away, but walked a path parallel to the trencher as it dug.

At some point the man running the trencher jumped off and ran away. And then Clark began to see purple dots flashing in front of his eyes – a lot of dots, moving very fast. Mostly they went left to right, but some moved diagonally up or down as well. Clark was fascinated by them, and turned to tell his Dad about the dots. The men were sitting eating lunch near the spot where the trench began, about a hundred feet back. For some reason his father seemed upset. He was standing up and waving at Clark, yelling "Get out of there! Get out of there!" Clark didn't understand what that was all about, but he wanted his Dad to notice the dots, so he pointed and said, "Look!"

Jonathan came running at him at top speed. Clark had never seen that before, and it scared him. He froze and stood there like a block of wood as his father picked up him on a dead run and kept running. When they were fifty yards away and the dots were gone, Jonathan sat down on the ground with Clark on his lap and caught his breath before he explained: the trencher had hit a hornets' nest. "It was like you were inside a cloud," Jonathan said. That night Martha examined both of them thoroughly. Neither had a single sting.

In the years that followed, Clark came back to that memory many times. He wondered what it would feel like to have no powers, to know that the stings could hurt you, and to go running into that cloud of hornets anyway. Jonathan Kent had had that kind of courage. Clark wondered if he did.

"You went into the Sun," he reminded himself out loud. "You must have known that would hurt." But he had no memory of it. He remembered waking up in the bed in his apartment, with the window broken and his skin covered with burns. He remembered hearing the tapes of his final transmissions from the Icarus, and watching the replays of the somber faces at ground control. He remembered Hamilton examining him after clearing an entire floor at STAR Labs. "If you want me to explain why you're not dead," Hamilton had said, "you've come to the wrong guy. I've never pretended to understand exactly how your powers work, but every theory I have says that you should have popped like a balloon after that kind of exposure."

Clark recognized that his trip into the Sun made a heroic story, but it seemed to have happened to someone else. The moment of heroism, the moment when he must have decided to sacrifice himself to save the Earth – he couldn't remember that at all.

He looked at the computer screen and knew that he couldn't provide the story that the myth called for. As best he could remember, he hadn't saved anyone until that day when his powers flickered on before mostly disappearing for another three years. What a strange day that had been, he reflected. Not just strange because of his powers, but strange all around, with the *aurora* and the heat and Lana. It was all much too quirky and personal to put into a biography of Superman.

Clark sighed and recalled a piece of advice Perry White had given him early in his career as a reporter: "If you can't write about what is," Perry had said, "then write about what isn't."

Chapter Three (continued): The Myth of Superboy

It would be easy to devote an entire book to the false-but-widely-known stories about Superman. The unbelievable nature of Superman's powers tends to break down the credulity of even the most hard-boiled observers, and true stories about Superman are easily lost inside the fog of myth that seems to envelope him on all sides.

For the most part I have tried to ignore obviously false stories and focus on facts and theories that stand up to normal journalistic standards of verification. However, one apocryphal element of the Superman mythos is so pervasive that it deserves special attention: Superboy.

The number of people who claim to have met Superman during his teen years is enormous. They regularly call in to radio talk shows, talk to tabloid reporters, and sometimes even convince a publisher to print their reminiscences about the Boy of Steel. There is an annual Superboy convention, so that Superman's alleged high school chums can get together once a year. The ordinary high school reunion process doesn't work for this community, because (strangely) no single high school can claim more than a handful of them. Apparently, Superboy was the classmate, neighbor, and close personal friend of people in Metropolis, in Illinois, in Montana, in Wyoming, in rural California, and several other places – all at the same time. The list of schools that Superboy is supposed to have attended simultaneously would exhaust even a Kryptonian. And that doesn't even count the people who met Superboy in more esoteric academies, such as a hidden monastery in Tibet or an alien finishing school on Saturn's moon Europa.[29]

Some elements of the story remain constant. For example, he went by the name "Superboy" and wore a smaller version of the blue, red, and yellow costume with the S shield -- even though Lois Lane wouldn't give Kal-El the name "Superman" for another six years or so. He had the same powers as Superman, and went to great lengths to keep his super-powers secret. (So why did he wear the bright costume?)

Even more outlandish are the tales of the Superbaby, who likewise had all of Superman's powers. It must have been convenient to have a baby who could warm his own bottle with heat vision, but as anyone with the slightest common sense or experience with real babies knows, no one could raise such a child, much less keep his existence a secret.

Fortunately, no one had to. According to both Superman himself and Dr. Hamilton's tests, Superman's powers increased with his exposure to our yellow sun, and did not reach superhuman proportions until his mid-to-late teen years. As an infant, Superman was probably indistinguishable from a human infant. According to Dr. Hamilton's estimates, Superman would have been near the top of almost any human scale during puberty, but not off the scale entirely – a remarkable boy to be sure, but not a Superboy. By high school he would have been superhuman in many areas, but still a far cry from the adult Superman who burst onto the scene in Metropolis during 1 S.

So if the young Superman was not a Superboy, what was he?

If we believe that Superman is the last survivor of his race, and we accept his claim that he did not know of his origins until adulthood,

29 See "Aliens Train on Saturn's Moon" *Weekly Midnight Star*, 15 November, 4 S.

then we get a very different picture of his adolescence. The gradual emergence of his powers must have come as a great surprise and a source of additional confusion during a period of life which is already confusing under the best of circumstances. Normal human adolescence is so often a war of doubts, as doubt in your own abilities alternates (and somehow even coexists) with doubt that you will ever live up to your awesome potential. Even the impossible, at times, seems just barely good enough.

I picture Superman's adolescence, then, as being just like everyone else's, only more so.

Kansas: August 22, 10 A. S.

Jon Kent was having trouble remembering to limp.

He had thought that the cast on his ankle would be reminder enough, but when his mind wandered he still had a tendency to carry his cane a couple of inches off the ground and walk like a person with one abnormally large shoe, instead of like a sophomore tailback who had suffered a season-ending injury over the summer.

"How long am I going to have to wear this?" he had asked last night while Dad was fashioning the cast.

"At least two weeks," Mom had answered. She used her you-got-off-lucky tone of voice, the one he knew not to challenge. "The story is that you've already been wearing it for a month. There's a splint you can wear for a month or so afterward."

"Are you sure that nobody from school saw you this summer when you were supposed to be injured?" Dad asked.

Jon shook his head. "I ... well ... I've kind of been laying low this summer." Dad had looked at him with that funny look of his, and Jon had wondered if he was checking some kind of truth-gland hidden under his skin to see if he was covering up anything, which he wasn't. Or maybe Dad was just worried about Jon being such a loner, which was a little weird when you thought about how much time he spent down in his room under the atrium floor. But he hadn't said anything more and Jon let it drop.

Jon wasn't laying low right now, though. He was leaning against a wire fence looking at the football practice field. On the other side of the field the guys were running around, playing catch and roughhousing while they waited for practice to start. The ones who were returning from last year's team were in their practice jersies and some had put their pads and helmets on in spite of the heat. As he watched the balls spiraling through the air, Jon wished he could be out there playing too. This year his vision could pick out every little nub on the football's pebbled surface, even at this distance. It seemed as if everyone else were running in slow motion, and he was sure that if he tried he could throw with near-perfect accuracy. No one would be able to catch him or knock him down.

And I could fly in front of the goal posts and block field goals. I'm sure nobody would think there was anything strange about that.

He shook his head and remembered that he had been through this many times. There was no way he could play, even if he weren't worried about hiding his powers. Either he could go all out and ruin the game for everyone – and maybe give would-be tacklers some serious injuries while he was at it. Or he could pretend to be normal and let his team lose games that he could have won for them. Some choice.

Out on the field some minor altercation was going on. Bill Maxwell had punted a ball high above Lenny Miller and yelled: "Lenny, look up! Look up!" -- which Jon guessed was some kind of joke about Lenny's sister the Kryptonist. He wasn't sure exactly what the story was, but Lenny didn't see the humor and had to be restrained from going after Bill.

Part of lying low this summer had been staying away from the new Kryptonist church, which Jon probably would have done even if there hadn't been any kryptonite there. Jon was creeped out by the whole idea of a church that worshiped his father (or at least the character that his father used to play), and he didn't much care for the notion that some special destiny had been prophesied for himself, either. The kryptonite actually made him curious. What would it feel like? Tingling? Burning? Stabbing? Dr. Hamilton said that kryptonite radiation followed the same inverse-square law that any other kind of radiation did. Jon wasn't a hundred percent sure what that meant, but at the very least it had to mean that if he approached it slowly he could get a low dose that would only hurt a little. Mom was against it, of course. "There are people in there who think you're the Son of God," she said. "And if they surprised you with a piece of kryptonite and you fainted dead away, they'd take that as proof."

More kids were arriving all the time. The Comets' first football practice was something of a social event at Smallville High. It happened two weeks before the start of school, at just about the time when everyone was starting to realize how bored they were. Nearly half the boys in the school tried out for either the freshman team, the JV, or the varsity. Most of the rest would show up for at least part of the time, to sit in the collapsible grandstand and yell for or at their friends. And of course a lot of the girls came out too. On a patch of grass behind the bleachers several girls who had been to summer cheerleading camp were showing off their new moves. Other girls were clumped around them, and many were sitting in the bleachers or standing by the fence in groups of three or four.

Jon was a little surprised that no one had noticed him yet, though he did have to remind himself that he was in a remote corner and that the other kids didn't have his distance vision. And besides, the guys were expecting to see him on the field in a jersey, not standing by the fence in a cast.

The previous school year had been a strange one for Jon, and he was still absorbing it. Jon had always been a quiet boy, well-behaved and studious in a quirky sort of way that didn't necessarily impress his teachers or earn him good grades. He did what he was told in a minimally acceptable manner, and then did what he was interested in. What interested him varied from year to year – sometimes week to week – and had left him

with an idiosyncratic pattern of knowledge and ignorance that didn't match up well with the state competence exams. Or with anything that anyone else was interested in. One spring he got into flying kites, and he picked up enough trigonometry to figure out a kite's altitude from the length and angle of its string. But he had never mastered long division and got C's in algebra. He knew virtually everything there was to know about Babe Ruth, but could never remember whether Mickey Mantle came before or after Joe DiMaggio. He knew the names and populations of the world's 25 largest cities, but was not always sure what countries they were in. He had taught himself how to read Spanish passably well, but could not reliably pronounce a word of it.

And he had never had a lot of friends.

It wasn't that Jon had been picked on or cast out, but the other kids had always had trouble knowing what to make of him. Jon's family situation – just the visible part of it, not counting the whole Krypton thing – was very different from the other kids in Smallville. Other kids' parents were farmers or shop keepers or truck drivers, with an occasional doctor or lawyer sprinkled in. They had lived in Smallville all of their lives, and seldom got very far away from it. Jon's parents were famous and wrote books. Jon had lived his first five years in Metropolis, and continued to go there (and many other places) as often as his Mom would let him tag along on a research trip. Jon lived in a bizarre house that few people had ever visited, with a father few people could recall seeing in the last ten years.

Aunt Lana was the only adult who seemed to understand. "You're unique," she'd say. "Go with it. Follow your heart and see where it takes you." But mostly his heart seemed to take him places nobody else wanted to go. Sometimes that was OK, but sometimes it wasn't.

Mom didn't get it at all. Or maybe he just wasn't good enough to make her advice work. "All you need to do is walk up to people and smile and start talking," she said. "Ask them questions, find out what they're interested in or what's interesting about them. Imagine that you're interviewing them." He had tried. Jon found that he was lousy at coming up with questions that made him seem interested but not snoopy. And when he got stuck, sometimes people started asking him questions in return, which he didn't like one bit. Because he knew that there were questions he wasn't supposed to answer, and that sometimes it was hard to figure out which ones they were.

Some people, he had come to believe, are specially gifted at keeping secrets. They always understand what can be deduced from what, and who can be allowed to know which things. They know where conversations are likely to go, and they have plausible stories planned for every fork in the road. Or they can make one up on the spot if they need to and be certain that the other person will never figure it out or mention it to somebody who can. His Mom was like that. More than once he had sat silently eating his lunch at some fancy restaurant in Metropolis, while Mom had bantered with some impressive person either live or on her cell phone. The blizzard of harmless truths, half truths, misleading truths, and outright lies had made his head spin. He was sure he could never learn to do

that. The only way he could keep a secret was not to tell anybody anything. And the easiest way to do that was not to start talking to them to begin with.

And then football happened.

Jon had always loved football. He had started watching the Chiefs' games when he was six. He used to play fantasy games in the yard, tossing a football high but not very far so that he could pretend to be the receiver as well as the quarterback. Most of his life he had been a little taller than average, if a bit thin, and he could always run pretty well. When he had decided to try out for the team the year before, Jon had figured he stood a chance of making the freshman squad as a second-string wideout or safety. That sounded like fun, if he could manage it.

And then he started getting faster and stronger. He didn't get much taller or more muscular, but suddenly he was hard to cover and hard to bring down. He was the freshman starting tailback by the time the season started, and after the first game he moved up to the varsity. By the end of the season he was a star. Coach Phillips and everyone else in town looked at him and saw three more seasons of the best Smallville football teams in a generation. The sports writer at *The Clarion* even gave him a nickname, because of the way that he could change directions and leave would-be tacklers grabbing empty air. He named Jon "the Smallville UFO".

So he was popular, in a way. He got lots of waves and smiles and back-pats wherever he went, to the extent that Laura was constantly complaining about the embarrassment of being out in public with him. And he could claim some of the trappings of high school status, if he wanted. He could sit with the team at lunch, for example. But the other guys on the varsity were juniors and seniors, and he always felt funny around them – especially Lenny, who had been the tailback before he got the job, and Lenny's best friend Josh Wilkens, who was still the team's quarterback, but not the star anymore. They had never done anything really nasty to him (other than set up a couple of practical jokes that he had easily avoided with his extended senses), but he didn't like the way they called him "hotshot" and made constant jokes about his inexperience with girls. On the field and in practice Jon felt entitled to a certain measure of respect from Josh and Lenny, but he figured that the team lunch table was their territory. The freshmen team had their own table, of course, but he had only been part of that team for one game, and didn't feel like he belonged there either.

Mostly he wound up eating quickly at a table by himself. Sometimes people came up to talk to him, but then slunk away when the conversation didn't go anywhere. His hearing had started to improve by then, and he knew that a lot of people were saying that he was stuck up. Some of the girls were saying he was gay.

And that was another thing to worry about. What if something he said made people realize that he had heard them talking from the other side of the gym, or had seen what they did behind a brick wall, or knew what was in their locker before they opened it? He knew exactly what would happen: They would look at him like he was some kind of

alien.

And they would be right. Or at least half-right.

Things had started to turn around for Jon the day when Darla had found him wolfing down a sandwich at what had become his personal lunch table. He had heard her telling her friends Judy and Dawn that she was going to go over and sit with him, but he hadn't believed she would. Darla was the prettiest girl in the freshman class. Everyone thought so. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and the smoothest skin Jon had ever seen. One of the first things he had done when his distance vision had emerged was to watch Darla at a school assembly when she was too far away to know that he was looking at her. (Jon learned early on not to abuse his vision powers by trying to see through clothes. He didn't have that kind of control. Most likely he would end up looking through a girl completely, or seeing the inside of her lungs or the contents of her stomach. Experience had given him a whole new appreciation for the saying that beauty is only skin deep.)

Jon had been petrified when Darla sat down, but talking to her had turned out to be one of the easiest things he had ever done. He barely needed to do anything at all. She could keep a conversation going quite well with only an occasional nod or smile or *uh-huh* from him. She could talk and he could watch her, and that was wonderful because she was so beautiful. Sometimes she even talked about him, but she managed to do it without asking questions, and without prying at all into who he was or what he thought or why he seemed so distant or tense or worried all the time.

Jon went very slowly with Darla, mostly because he just couldn't believe that she was really interested, and maybe partly because he could hear the other guys on the team making crude jokes whenever they were together. It was almost a month after that first lunch before he went to a movie with her, and then they were with two other freshman football players and their girlfriends. He walked her home afterward and they held hands and she kissed him at the door. (No one bothered to ask how Jon would get home – he ran ten miles across fields in the dark.) The next day he overheard Judy referring to him as Darla's boyfriend.

In the spring he had been on the track team, and Darla had been in the stands cheering for him. Already his powers were starting to cause problems. He could see that it wasn't fair anymore. Mom had agreed to let him compete, but only in a few events. And he was allowed to win, but not all the time and not by much. "If you go all out you'll set world records," she said. "And we can't afford that kind of attention."

Together with his Dad and Laura they started planning his summer injury. "Wouldn't it be easier just to quit the team?" Laura had asked. Dad shook his head and Mom spelled it out: "*All-State Freshman Loses Interest in Football*," she said in her headline voice. "That would be an even bigger story than few world records."

One day in the spring the school had sponsored a bus trip to the state capital. On the way home the sun had been going down while Darla talked about her day and gossiped about Dawn juggling two boyfriends and discussed her plans for the summer. And then she

asked, “What are you going to do this summer?” And he knew what she meant, that she was really asking where she fit into his plans and what would they do together. But still she had asked, she had said “What are you going to do this summer?”

And Jon almost told her.

He wanted to. He almost said, “My Dad is going to teach me to fly this summer. And I can already levitate a little now. I can, really. And if you want, when we get back to the school and it’s dark and nobody is looking, you can hold onto me and I’ll float us up into the air maybe twenty or thirty feet and you can look down on the school like we were in a hot air balloon together.”

He wanted to. Because then she would know, and there would be no reason to hide anything else from her either. And he would have somebody to talk to about all the things he never told anybody but Laura, about all the secrets he knew about the teachers and the other kids, about his future and how confused he was about it, about his Dad who was so depressed all the time, about his real grandfather, who had been the only one to know that his planet was doomed, about the bizarre Kryptonian language and how pretty it sounded, even as badly he pronounced it. All of it, it could all come out then.

But he hadn’t. He had told her that he was going to spend most of the summer out of town, because his Mom would be researching a book in the South Pacific, and he was going to go with her and maybe get in some skiing in New Zealand, where he’d try not to get hurt because he wasn’t that good a skier really.

And Darla had stopped talking, maybe for the first time since he’d known her. She just stared out the window and he was sure that he had done the wrong thing, that she knew somehow that he was lying to her, that he should have told her the truth. But he couldn’t.

“You’d better not,” Laura had told him that night when he woke her up to talk.

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll just make it worse.” She rubbed her eyes and yawned. She wasn’t even awake and it all seemed so clear to her. Jon had always been jealous of that. She was just a kid and she always seemed to understand certain kinds of things much better than he did.

“How?”

“Well, now you’ve got family secrets that you can’t tell her. But once you tell her, then that’s a new secret that you can’t tell us. It just gets deeper and deeper.”

“Maybe I won’t keep it a secret that I told her.”

Laura looked skeptical. “You’d tell Mom?” Jon nodded. “Then you won’t mind if I tell Mom that you’re thinking about it?”

“DON’T!”

“That’s what I thought you’d say.”

But the next day she told anyway. “I didn’t want you to make a big mistake,” Laura explained later, “And I knew you wouldn’t listen to me.”

But Mom was another story. It was hard not to listen to Mom when she was determined to be listened to. “That secret doesn’t belong to you,” she said. “It belongs to all of us. There’s no way you can tell someone about yourself without telling them about Clark and your sister. It’s something we would all have to decide.”

Mom had offered this: Darla should come over for dinner – not to tell her, but just to have everyone meet her so that there could be an intelligent discussion later. Instinct told Jon to skip the whole thing, but that would have meant giving in, and he didn’t want to give in. So he asked Darla, and she had thought that meeting his family was a wonderful idea.

The dinner wasn’t a disaster compared to, say, the Hindenberg or Pompeii. Everything stayed pleasant. But even Aunt Lana, who had clearly tried very hard to like Darla, couldn’t say anything very encouraging about her afterward. “She’s pretty,” Lana allowed, “but I can’t really see her as a Kent.”

Mom had been more direct. “Anything you tell that girl might as well go on the evening news. I think she’d be on the phone to her friends in five minutes.”

So he told Darla nothing, and spent the summer “out of town”. He had tried to write a couple times, but what was there to say? That he was flying for real now? That they had shipped an x-ray of his ankle to STAR Labs so that Dr. Hamilton could fake evidence of some nasty injury? That he wished his little sister would start developing powers of her own so that she’d have something better to do than get on his nerves? The paper stayed blank.

On the other side of the wire fence practice had officially started. The coaches divided the boys up by the positions they were trying out for, and ran them through a variety of drills. “Shouldn’t Jon be here by now?” somebody asked, and Coach Phillips had said, “He’ll be along later. He’s got something to tell the team about.”

Show time, he thought. *Time to announce that the Smallville UFO has been grounded.*

Kansas: October 9, 16 P. S.

Shaman wasn’t too sure what he was doing in America, or even what part of it he was in exactly. It was the flat part, the part where the shade of trees is so rare that the phrase *shade tree* is used as if it referred to some kind of special species. As in: “Let’s go sit down under the shade tree.” Back in the tribe (which he was starting to miss. It was strange, he got restless when he was there, but whenever he left he missed them. More and more he could let himself slide into the fantasy that he really was their shaman) he doubted that people even realized that individual trees make shade. You could see the sun directly from the river bank, and if you climbed high enough to get through the jungle canopy, but the idea that you would be in sunlight if not for *this* tree – he suspected that it never crossed their minds.

The urge to wander had come upon him two weeks before, and he had followed it the way Stavros always had, by hitchhiking. A kindly drug smuggler had flown him up to Texas, and from there he had relied on the generosity of motorists – three college girls who had clearly dared each other into picking him up and giggled a lot at their own fear and courage, a truck driver who wanted help staying awake, and an army corporal on leave who had done a lot of hitching himself before he joined the service. Shaman had told each of them a different destination: Gotham, Los Angeles, and finally Fargo, which was a place he had heard of but had no idea where it was. The corporal told him that Fargo was further north, and that he was about to turn west, and did he want to be dropped off at the interstate (where he could hope to get another ride) or the nearest town (where he had some chance of finding a room)? The idea of sleeping in an actual room with a bed and sheets and running water had slipped Shaman's mind until now, but it did seem like the sort of thing one ought to do at least once while in America.

And that was how he had wound up in this town, whatever its name was. The corporal had dropped him at a diner on Main Street, where Shaman had rediscovered for the twentieth time since beginning this journey that his reading glasses no longer worked. Or, more accurately, his eyes worked even more poorly than before, and his reading glasses were now insufficient to compensate. Such signs of mortality had been cropping up more and more often lately, and Shaman found it worrisome, which was why he had put it out of his mind the other nineteen times.

"I have got to find a successor before I'm too feeble to train him," he said to himself.

But that, he knew, was not fully in his power. The Powers provided successors – if anybody did, and if they were still watching, which at times he was beginning to doubt. He looked around the diner and hoped (without really having much hope) that he would see a flash of green like Stavros claimed to have seen in his own eyes so many years ago. But the diner's other clients were all, if not *older* than Shaman himself (he doubted anyone for hundreds of miles was actually older), then easily more decrepit. There was no flash of green, unless you counted a bit of neon from the bar across the street. He wondered if he ever would see that flash, and then he wondered (not for the first time) if Stavros had made the whole thing up.

Giving up on his glasses and the menu, Shaman ordered fried chicken, a dish that he remembered enjoying the last time he had been in the flat part of America, the Land of Shade Trees. The waitress seemed to approve, and as she appeared to be in a good mood and not too busy, he asked her recommendation about places to stay. This overture started a conversation, during which it occurred to Shaman that (in addition to rooms with running water) America was also an ideal place to find reading glasses.

"You're in luck on that," the waitress told him. "Green's is open late on Thursdays."

Green's turned out to be an optical shop further down Main Street, and "late" meant until seven o'clock. When he arrived, a fifty-something woman was at the counter making out a personal check and having a somewhat involved conversation about the weather with an

elderly gentleman (Mr. Green, presumably) who was waiting to receive the check. At the other end of the shop, oblivious to the meteorological speculations of his elders, a boy of about seven was standing in front of a mirror looking disconcerted. He was a handsome boy with dark hair, and he wore a pair of black plastic glasses that he was going to have to grow into.

"New glasses?" Shaman asked.

"I look dorky," the boy answered without turning around. He glanced over and caught Shaman's reflection in the mirror. He looked even more disconcerted for a moment, and then turned his head to look at the back of the woman, whose analysis of the season's rainfall patterns showed no signs of coming to an immediate conclusion.

Over the years Shaman had learned that although occasional flashes of telepathy came in handy, simple observation was sufficient most of the time. He read the boy's expression to mean that he wasn't supposed to talk to strangers when his mother wasn't around, and that now he was applying the fine legal mind possessed by all seven-year-olds to the question of whether *around* could be construed to mean "present but not paying attention".

"I see you've discovered the first-pair-of-glasses illusion," Shaman commented.

"What?" The boy turned, judicial review having resolved the situation in favor of talking. He had an innocent, honest expression, and for half a second Shaman let his wishful thinking run away enough to think that he saw the green flash. But it was just the reflection of yellow ceiling lights off the boy's new lenses.

"The first thing you look at when you get new glasses is yourself," Shaman explained, "and so of course you think you look funny. In reality, however, it's the entire world that looks funny, and you never noticed until now because you weren't seeing clearly."

"Really?"

"Try an experiment: Look at me without your glasses, then look at me with them." The boy did as he was told. "Now, do I look funnier with your glasses or without?"

The boy looked sheepish, as if he did not want to say. "With," he finally admitted.

"Well there you have it, then. You're the kind of boy who gives people the benefit of the doubt, and so when they looked fuzzy, you imagined that they looked good. Now that you see them clearly, it will take a week or two for you to get used to how funny-looking people really are. Humans are actually a very comical species. The other animals have been laughing at us for thousands of years."

The boy giggled. "And that's why I think I look funny?"

"Correct. The glasses actually *improve* the way you look, but it will take about a week for you to realize that."

The boy looked back at the mirror incredulously. "I look *better*?"

"Of course you do. The other children at school will kid you about it of course, but children are like that."

The boy nodded somewhat guiltily. "We made fun of Pete's red pants today because they were so bright. But really I kind of liked them."

"There you go," Shaman said approvingly. "If I were you I''d wear those glasses whenever I wanted to look good."

"You mean like in school pictures and things like that?"

"Exactly. If I were you I would never let anyone take a picture of me without those glasses."

The boy looked back into the mirror and Shaman could see the wheels turning in his head as he tried to bring this new image into alignment with the idea of looking good. By now the woman was done with her check and had presented it to Mr. Green. All the proper small-town leave-taking rituals had apparently been completed successfully. "Come along now, Clark," she said. "We have to get back in time for you to do your homework."

When they were gone Shaman went to the counter and handed Mr. Green his reading glasses. "So what brings you to town?" the optician asked.

Shaman had no idea, of course, and so he spun a story about looking for a place to drill an experimental oil well, starting a rumor that would take almost two years to die down. As he told his story, however, he realized that his urge to wander about in America (wherever it had come from) was gone now.

Maybe he had come up here to get reading glasses. Maybe it was time to head home.

<u>Nevada: May 1, 11 P.S.</u>

Every now and then the Principal Investigator (or just "the Principal" as he preferred the Project's staff to call him) allowed himself a moment or two of wonder, and perhaps even (though he would never have spoken of it this way, not even to himself) of awe. It was a weakness, he knew, and so he only indulged it when he was alone – preferably in the wee hours of the morning when he was already tired and starting to lose his sharpness. His time was not so valuable then, and perhaps it was no great loss to waste a few minutes of it on an indulgence.

He sat in the Control Room, in front of the four-inch-thick leaded glass, oblivious to the omnipresent noises of the automated equipment surrounding him. Down below, on the floor of the lab, sat the Object. Transportation module, deep space probe, galaxy-crossing intelligent being – whatever it was (and unlike the previous Principals, he was quite sure he had no idea) it was indeed an object of wonder. (But not awe. Awe was evolution's way of making sure the underlings stayed in line. As such, it was useful to the species as a whole, but not a capacity the Principal wished to develop in himself.)

He could see the Object quite plainly. Granted, its translucent, greenish-turquoise appearance took some getting used to. When he had first laid eyes on it (after reading

thousands of pages of reports that found increasingly elaborate ways of saying that we know nothing), he had been unable to look directly at it. His gaze kept scanning back and forth across it, fruitlessly looking for some familiar feature that his mind could use to categorize it. Only after about five minutes had he admitted that there were no familiar features, no way to break it down into mentally digestible parts. The Object would have to enter his mental space as a one indivisible entity, or not at all.

"We only see it," his predecessor had told him bitterly while handing over the security codes, "because it *wants* us to see it. That *thing* is in control here, not me and not you."

At the time he had disapproved of this outburst – silently, of course, as he had no reason to want to offend his predecessor. In general, he considered it a sign of sloppy thinking to endow inanimate objects with characters, to imagine them as having intentions, desires, or motives. But the more time he spent in the Object's presence, the more he found himself wondering why it should *not* have intelligence or a will of its own. Humans took such unreasonable pride in their intelligence. But in the cold light of reality, why should he assume that the Object's makers were incapable of granting it intelligence if they so desired? Was that possibility any more remarkable than what he could plainly see? Or not see?

The first and only thing that the Project had discovered about the Object – other than the obvious fact that it came in two parts: an egg-shaped section that appeared to be the payload and a base with fins that looked like a propulsion unit – was that it was visible only in the blue-green band of the spectrum. Any form of light or radiation of any other wavelength passed through it without disturbance. (Or possibly the rays were absorbed by one side of the object, instantaneously analyzed, and regenerated on the other.) In the blue-green spectrum it was entirely opaque, with just a faint glow. The strongest blue-green lasers did not penetrate it, while all other forms of radiation found it to be as invisible as space itself. Over time, the Project staff had learned not to put any light-emitting equipment behind the Object – it was disconcerting to look down from the Control Room and see a flickering screen or a red LED display through the Object's blue-green luminance.

The Principal preferred to watch the Object from the Control Room during his occasional moments of wonder. From here he could simultaneously observe the Object itself, and examine the read-outs of the many complex and costly sensors that told him it was not there.

The second principal investigator, during the fourth year after the Object had been recovered from the Kansas countryside, had grown weary of non-destructive testing, and (perhaps seeing his career in the Service vanishing before his eyes) had spared no effort or expense attempting to break the Object open. Diamond drills, invasive nanomachines, particle beams, superheated plasma, and even, finally, placing it at the site of a treaty-threatening nuclear test – all had failed to affect it in any measurable way.

The Principal had no intention of traveling down that road. By nature he was neither

modest nor pessimistic, but he was a realist. After thirteen years it was apparent to him that the Object was not going to reveal itself. And the idea that the Principal – or any other human – was going to crack the Object by either force or guile was patently absurd. Could an amoeba crack the secrets of a nanobot? The Object's makers, whoever or whatever they were, may as well be gods as far as the human race was concerned. The original documents that founded the Project had talked about learning to prepare ourselves in case we should ever meet this race, but the Principal could only laugh. Personally, he was prepared to either bow down or commit suicide. Until it was time to make good on one or the other of those plans, the Principal would assume that these technological gods would remain in their heaven, wherever it might be, leaving him nothing but human competition. He had no particular reason to believe that this assumption was true (and he knew it), but he preferred to focus his thinking and planning on scenarios in which thinking and planning made a difference.

The Principal also knew something else: His superiors in the Service were intelligent enough to realize the pointlessness of the Project. They surely did not send him here hoping that their rising star could do the impossible one more time. No, the Principal was quite certain that his superiors had sent him here to fail. He had anticipated this desire on their part, and had done a certain amount of Brer-Rabbit-style maneuvering to get himself thrown into this particular briar patch. From here he was confident that he could provide them with the failure they desired – when he was ready.

The Principal's career to date had followed the predictable path of any ambitious and talented young man in an organization of comfortable underachievers. His first supervisors had smiled knowingly and bemusedly at his drive. In their day, they also had been the best and brightest of their generation. They also had been chosen, and had come into the Service with idealism and a belly full of fire, ready either to save the world or take it over. And the Service had tamed them in time, as (they were certain) it would tame him as well. Eventually, they knew, this young firebrand would come to see what they had seen in their day: that the secret life was a good life. Budgets were high, accountability was low, and it was so marvelously sweet to have a fine brandy or two at lunch with your nameless colleagues and laugh about the many things that the public either did not know or thought it did. There was no reason to rock this finely appointed boat, and they had confidence that any intelligent young man (being immune to lawsuits, the Service hired very few women) would come to see this. In the meantime, it was convenient to have an energetic underling, someone who wanted to take on the difficult tasks and do things beyond his station. It made room for more days off and earlier tee times.

The Principal (who, of course, was not yet the principal investigator of anything) rose quickly those first few years. He began to take it for granted that his colleagues would hate him and his immediate supervisors would feel threatened by him. He found his allies further up in the organization, among those who valued quick results and were too far above him to take him seriously as a rival – yet. And as he rose he was somewhat

surprised to find more and more allies below him, among those who were overburdened with loyalty and longed to give it away. But as fast as the Principal rose, the resentment of him rose even faster. Eventually the Cities, those mysterious men at the top of the Service, who at first had looked on him as a useful and amusing tool, began to take a perverse satisfaction in his hardships. And then they began to root for him to fail. And then, at some point, they began taking steps to insure that he would fail spectacularly.

He had beaten them in his previous assignment. They had given him two months to decrypt a set of terrorist codes that had been mathematically proven to be good for three hundred years. He had guessed (correctly) that some nuclear or biological disaster rested in the outcome, something that would shake the Oversight Committee out of its perpetual slumber and send it looking for heads it could set rolling.

Technically his mission had been impossible, so he did not attack it technically. Instead he had maneuvered the CIA into launching an ill-fated field operation that had the fortunate result of causing the terrorist group to panic and send a flurry of messages in the same code. One of those hurried messages had broken protocol, and that had been all the Principal's team had needed. Six CIA field agents had died in the operation, but their demise was not traceable to the Service. And besides, the larger disaster had been averted. The Oversight Committee could continue punching its snooze alarm.

A lesser man might have let such a success go to his head. (And indeed, some of the Principal's subordinates now believed he could do anything.) But the Principal knew just how much luck had been required to escape that trap. He also knew that his superiors would not give up and would not underestimate him again. Ultimately they would succeed in discrediting him and depositing him back on the Outside without reference or resume or a single ounce of evidence to support any story he might tell about how he had spent these last ten years. (And if he did manage to smuggle out some evidence, he would be killed. The Cities prided themselves on being gentlemen and hated to dirty their hands with such matters – it was so bad for morale when ex-servicemen turned up dead, after all. But they had no tolerance for a relationship that was openly adversarial. His fellow servicemen would be so appalled at his bad form that the Service would be forgiven for executing him.)

A lesser man also would not have been able to assess the hopelessness of his position so dispassionately. (In fact, the repressed knowledge of that hopelessness would have been a prime motivating factor in the lesser man's delusions of invincibility.) And, failing at this dispassionate assessment, the lesser man would not have understood that it was time to apply the classic oriental strategy for dealing with conflicts one cannot hope to win: (1) Stall; and (2)Use the time gained to graft your own plans onto the irresistible plans of your opponents.

So his opponents wanted him to fail within the Service and be exiled to the Outside, did they? He would make it so. But the Principal would fail according to his own design and return to the Outside under his own terms.

The obvious strategy for reaching such a goal would be to steal some bit of Service technology and market it, thus returning to the Outside as a rich and powerful man. Unfortunately, this plan was so obvious that the Service was well defended against it. The Service would recognize any of its own technology that appeared on the market, and was very efficient at tracing such leaks back to their sources. If the Principal happened to become rich and powerful at the same time that Service technology appeared Outside, the connection would be only too obvious, no matter how well he had covered his tracks. He would be killed, and no one Inside would mourn for him.

No, the Principal's escape plan had to be more elaborate if it was to have any hope of success. He could not steal Service technology directly. But what if he misappropriated Service resources and used them to discover *new* technology, technology unrelated to any classified Service devices? What if he could hide that discovery from them, then *re*discover the technology when he reached the Outside? The Principal was, as they all knew, a brilliant man. Why should he not become a great inventor when he resurfaced Outside? (All servicemen believed – probably incorrectly – that they were smarter than the most successful technologists on the Outside. It would feed their own vanity to see him prove it.) The Cities would be suspicious, of course. They would undoubtedly investigate. But there would be nothing to find. They would have no record of ever knowing his new technology. And, after all, how could this be *his* plan when *they* had been the ones to trap him and throw him out?

In order make his plan work the Principal needed a project which had legitimate needs for the highest levels of technical equipment, but which would nonetheless not be expected to show any results for this formidable outlay of resources. He needed to display a frantic effort to produce those impossible results, culminating in a desperate breaking of the rules which would (on the one hand) fail anyway, and (on the other) get himself and perhaps a handful of his most loyal subordinates thrown out into the snow.

That scenario, he concluded, should satisfy just about everyone.

The Principal had first heard about the Object and the project that studied it during his second year in the Service. He didn't learn about it officially until many years later, but the elaborate procedures by which the Service kept its secrets from Outsiders were largely ignored when dealing with those on the Inside. (Officially, the Service pretended not to know that the servicemen gossiped among themselves like spinsters. But everyone knew that everyone did it, and if the practice had never been formally endorsed, still no one was ever punished for it.)

The Object had been collected three years before the Principal's recruitment, and had been in the Service's possession for a little less than four years by the time he found out about it. By then he had discovered that there was much to be learned by socializing, so he made a habit of inviting any new transfer out for a drink. The new man on his project was called Orange. (On that project, the Principal had been called Blue. The Principal found this name amusing, given that he had been called Red during his teen-age years on the street.) Orange had just come from the Project, and he had been glad to get out of it.

The Project had been a sexy assignment in the beginning, Orange explained. The Object was the Service's one and only alien artifact, and it seemed obvious that by studying its superior technology the Service could vault centuries ahead of any Outside research. Who would not want to be part of that effort? And so the Project's original roster had looked like a Service all-star team. Those lucky enough to be chosen considered themselves to be virtually a service-within-the-Service. In the same way that servicemen enjoyed their superiority over those on the Outside, so those assigned to the Project anticipated looking omnisciently downward upon servicemen who knew nothing but human science.

Given their own vanity and the record of success that had fostered it, the Project's staff had been slow in coming to terms with the impossibility of their task. Servicemen are recruited in part for their optimism and self-confidence, for their can-do attitude. (As Napoleon put it: "The difficult I do immediately. The impossible takes a bit longer.") And these were not just servicemen, they were the best of the servicemen, a service-within-the-Service. It was not in their nature to give up. So they measured. They modeled. They speculated. They requisitioned more and better equipment. They put forward reasonable conjectures that they were certain would be validated by the next generation of more accurate sensors. They made mistakes occasionally, and more than one of them spent years exploring "phenomena" that in the end turned out to be nothing more than suggestive patterns created by structural defects in their measurement protocols.

The Project's first principal investigator had been fired after three years, and the new PI came in dealing blame in all directions. Inept leadership, staff laziness, lax procedures – these were the reasons why the many wonders of the Object were yet to be explained. Orange had seen the writing on the wall and applied for transfer. (He had been wise. The second principal investigator's regime collapsed two years later in a flurry of back-biting and animosity. Before going down he managed to put serious blotches on the permanent records of nearly every serviceman under his supervision.)

And yet, as much as he was relieved to be away from the impossible demands and dysfunctional politics of the Project, Orange still waxed nostalgic whenever he needed something that his new project didn't have. He was not used to making do, not used to having less than the best, not used to having the practicality of his demands questioned. The Principal filed this interesting fact in the back of his mind and thereafter kept his ears open for further news of the Project.

The third principal investigator, the current Principal's predecessor, was a serviceman at the end of a long and uneventful career. He was a peacemaker, a don't-rock-the-boat man. He had been playing out the string, waiting for retirement. He never realized that he got this job because no one else wanted it. He was not an ambitious man, and yet even he eventually became frustrated with his own lack of accomplishment. Unlike the first two principals, he had never expected to revolutionize human science. But he had expected to do *something*.

The Principal's predecessor had announced his retirement while the Principal was busy breaking terrorist codes. He agreed to stay on while another PI was found, and was

annoyed to discover just how little interest the job attracted.

At the successful conclusion of the code-breaking episode, the Principal was asked what assignment he wanted next. He knew immediately, of course, how perfectly the Project matched his needs. And he knew that he would never get the assignment by asking for it. Instead, he said that he had felt energized by the challenging deadline of the code-breaking project, and wanted to jump right back into something with a similar time-sensitivity. For this, he was awarded two months of leave.

During these two months he appealed repeatedly to highly-placed men who had helped him in the past, acting as if he did not know they had turned against him. He told them that he knew he was being slotted for leadership of the Project – an assignment which, so far as he knew, no one had even considered – and that he wanted them to do whatever they could to get him assigned elsewhere. The Project, he said, had proved itself to be a high-profile dead-end job. He was certain it would mean the end of his career in the Service. Making him the principal investigator of the Project would be tantamount to sending him back to the Outside.

In these interactions the Principal did his best to appear to be what his former mentors undoubtedly thought he was: an ambitious careerist sucking up to men he would gladly betray as soon as he had exhausted their usefulness. They themselves were career servicemen who had betrayed more than a few mentors in their day. They could not imagine that his ambition had turned elsewhere.

As his two months of leave dwindled down to mere days, the Principal began to wonder if his gambit had failed. No plan was perfect, after all. The machinery of the world was too vast for anyone to model fully. And, as chaos theory predicted, small oversights had a way of rippling outward to produce major disruptions: The unmodeled butterfly causes the hurricane. The innocuous Ewoks undo the galactic empire. And for want of a nail the kingdom is lost. The Principal had trained himself not to lose sight of such things. And yet ... this plan had seemed so excellent. He couldn't help feeling that it deserved to work.

One morning he woke up just before dawn, drove to a nearby state park and climbed to the top of a rock that was the highest point for miles around. This was one of his favorite thinking spots. On weekdays he was almost certain to be undisturbed as he watched the towns and roads below. It was just such a place, he had imagined the first time he came here, where Satan had brought Christ to offer him the empires of the world.

He sat on that rock for many hours. Lunchtime came and went, and he ignored his stomach until it stopped growling. If his plan had failed, surely there was much to be learned from its failure. He made a mental list of people to talk to, questions to ask, files to read. He made another mental list of the assignments he might be given and the ways he might be trapped in them. But all the while he was shaking his head. None of the alternate scenarios served his enemies' purposes nearly so well as the one he had laid out for them. Why didn't they choose it? Could they have something in mind that he had not even guessed?

Around sunset his cell phone rang, and a familiar voice spoke a single sentence: “It’s time you came home.”

It took an hour to climb down and drive home. None of his superiors had ever come to his apartment before. It was, he reflected, too spartan, too functional, too unlike the home of a comfortable serviceman. He would have to buy a house soon, he thought, and decorate it, and fill it with the kind of furniture that comes with an explanation and a history. Perhaps he should find a wife and have a child. The other servicemen at his level had them, in spite of the difficulties involved. The Principal disliked distractions, but if his plan had failed he would have to do something soon to make his superiors believe that he had capitulated, that the lone wolf had become a domesticated dog.

Chicago was waiting at his kitchen table, sipping a cup of tea. Once, during a previous undesired leave, the Principal had amused himself by attempting to find out the real names of the Cities. It had been depressingly easy, and he had stopped after cracking four of them. Chicago was one of the four, but it did not matter. Chicago was just a man, after all, not a demon – knowing his true name gave the Principal no power. It was just a name, a list of letters, a series of sounds. It had no meaning.

The gray-haired city (who was neither windy nor broad-shouldered) played his role perfectly, the Principal observed with detachment. He spoke as if he were still an ally, and held out hope that he could get the matter fixed eventually if the Principal cooperated and bided his time. “I tried to call in a number of favors,” Chicago said, shaking his head sadly, “but there was nothing I could do. You have some powerful enemies now. Rome, Atlanta ... they were dead set on you having this assignment. But things change, you know. In six months, maybe a year, something may come up to make them realize how much the Service needs a man like you. They may come to regret wasting you on something like this.”

The Principal played his role equally well. He looked disturbed and disappointed. He pledged his continuing loyalty and his undiminished faith in Chicago as his patron. And he even managed to gin up some of his characteristic energy and optimism. “Maybe I’ll surprise them,” he told Chicago with a gleam in his eye. “Maybe I’ll break this thing and find out all the alien secrets.”

“That’s the attitude,” Chicago reassured him. “Take the job and do your best, and let me worry about the rest of it.”

The Principal did not laugh until after Chicago was gone. Then he took a bottle of good brandy out of a cabinet in the kitchen and poured himself a celebratory drink. There was still a lot that could go wrong, he knew. But so far, so good.

The Project itself was an underground facility in one of the more godforsaken parts of Nevada, the kind of place where ordinary sunglasses are inadequate and hats are a year-round necessity. On arrival he discovered that the staff was every bit as demoralized as he

had expected. “They’ve got us stored out here like nuclear waste,” one of the servicemen told him.

“We need to automate this place,” he announced at his first all-hands meeting. Twenty servicemen were gathered on the floor of the lab, surrounding the Object as if it were another member of the staff. “I’d like to get the roster down from twenty to four, and transfer the rest of you to projects where your talents can be better used.”

This plan instantly made him the most popular principal investigator in the history of the Project. The staff was working for its freedom now, and they worked tirelessly, with all the energy and creativity that had made them Service all-stars to begin with. Transfers were awarded by seniority, and the most senior staff member – Sunday, as the staff consisted of seven days, twelve months, and the Principal – was gone at the end of the first month. They held a party in Reno to send Sunday on his way, and each serviceman was full of the hope and belief that his own day of escape would come.

Except, of course, for the Principal himself and the three servicemen he had brought with him – October, November, and December. (Technically, November was still called a “serviceman” even though she was female. Over time the Principal had developed something of a reputation inside the Service for treating women and minorities well. In truth he actually preferred such subordinates. They were no less able than white males of similar rank, and their lack of equivalent opportunities increased their loyalty.) These three had been with him for several years now, and had volunteered to follow him out here on simple faith. “You have a plan, don’t you?” October, a Filipino man, had asked when they met back in Washington. The Principal only nodded. “So you know how to break the Object?” The Principal shook his head. “So the plan depends on something else,” October concluded. The Principal nodded, and that had been good enough. October signed up on the spot.

It took nine months to get rid of September, the last of the original staff. The desks and cubicles were all gone now, and the floor of the lab was taken up by the computers and other automated equipment the Principal had devoted his budget to. The four remaining servicemen worked mainly in the Control Room, often alone so that they could maintain round-the-clock coverage. But there was little to do: Every measurement was taken, analyzed, and stored automatically. Redundant equipment instantly detected and replaced any malfunctioning component.

“What do we do now?” December asked the morning after September’s going-away dinner.

“Now,” the Principal announced, “we take one of the redundant XJ-20s and program it to simulate the data stream. I want something so convincing that even I won’t be able to figure out which set of data came from the sensors and which came from the simulation.”

October whistled and November’s eyes went wide. “You’re going to take it all offline,” she said.

The Principal nodded. “We’re going to fake the data.”

“And then – ” December began, seeing a step or two ahead.

“And then all this equipment will belong to us, to do whatever we want. We’re going to have more computing power than any private facility in the world. I estimate we can keep this secret for about two years. During those years, no corporate or university research lab on Earth will be able to compete with us.”

“And what are we going to do with it all?” October asked.

“We’re going to make an important commercial discovery and re-enter the outside world as very, very rich people.” The Principal let his gaze wander across the room, resting briefly on each of his co-conspirators. “Does anyone have a problem with that?”

The Months exchanged glances and said nothing. After a few seconds December asked, “What are we going to discover?”

“New materials,” the Principal answered. “Materials research is at the beginning of a revolution. One no longer *discovers* materials, one *designs* them molecule by molecule inside computer simulations. What’s more, the design process is becoming a search process. The problem is to search intelligently through the realm of all possible molecular patterns until you find one that has the properties you are looking for.”

The Months saw his point immediately. “It’s like code breaking,” said November. “It’s an information problem. A needle in a haystack.”

“It’s what we do best,” said October.

“And all these computers,” added December.

“Don’t forget the nanomachinery, the microscopic sensing and probing equipment, and the ultrafine lasers,” the Principal reminded them. “We can adapt it all to prototype molecules that look promising in simulation.”

They sat in silence while each contemplated the possibilities in his or her own way. “I hope that it is obvious to each of you,” the Principal said, making eye contact with each of them in turn, “that if you intend to turn the rest of us in, the best time is now, before you are implicated any further. The longer you wait, the worse it will look on your permanent record. The Service hates even the appearance of divided loyalties. If we’re still in business next week, I’ll assume that we have an understanding.”

The Principal’s internal sense of time-keeping pulled him back to the present, to the Control Room, and the otherworldly green glow of the Object. Eight weeks had gone by since the day he had presented his plan to the Months, eight weeks without any sign of divided loyalties. Three times the Months had agreed that their data simulation was flawless, and twice he had cracked it in less than an afternoon. This third one was taking a bit longer.

Next to his right thumb was a simple toggle switch. Set one way, the Control Room dials displayed the genuine readings from the Object; toggled the other way, they displayed the data generated by the simulation. Both sets of data had been recording in parallel for the past six hours. When he could confidently say which position of the switch corresponded to which data source, the simulation would be cracked.

The Principal well understood the paradox of his situation: Anyone who would create the perfect simulation must love the truth passionately and hate any sense of falseness. Only then can you be certain that when you have fooled yourself you have created something that will fool others. To simulate reality is to betray it, and he knew well that you cannot perfectly betray something unless you have loved it with all your heart. The Months did not understand, and could not be made to understand. They simulated out of hatred. More and more they came to hate the complexity of the Object and the way that it defeated all their attempts at mimicry. Hating that complexity, they tried to deny it, and their simulations fooled them only because they wanted to be fooled.

Of course, the Principal knew that at some level he also wanted to be fooled. He wanted this simulation to be the one that was perfect, the one that he could use in his plan. But he put that desire aside and made himself love the Object and the reality that it represented. Loving it, he could examine its data stream with an intensity the Months could never muster, and see the hollowness of their attempts to fake that stream.

He thought: *It's time to quit when you get this philosophical.* He checked his watch: it was 4:15 in the morning, time to go back to the cot in his office and catch another three or four hours of sleep. He had been resisting going to bed, he realized, because he had expected to crack the latest simulation tonight. Maybe they really had it this time, he thought. Maybe in the morning he should tell the Months to start taking equipment offline for reconfiguring, and let the XJ-20 make up the data they were supposed to be collecting.

"Not yet," he said to himself. "Let's keep running them in parallel for a few days." That was the sensible approach. After all, everything up until now could be explained away, but once they stopped recording the true data they were committed. Caesar had paused before crossing the Rubicon, and the Principal would pause now. He had time. He could afford to wait.

As he climbed the stairs to his office, the Principal once again had the strong hunch that the Object also was waiting, that it had been waiting these last thirteen years. *Waiting for what?* he wondered.

If I'm lucky I'll never know.

Equador: May 1, 11 P.S.

It was still dark when Shaman woke up, but the air around him tingled in the way it usually did before sunrise. Looking to the east, he was momentarily surprised to see the horizon, which was starting to lighten. Living under the jungle canopy had made the horizon seem rare and exotic, so he took a moment to look at it the way a Saudi looks at

Chicago's freezing rain.

Well, that's long enough.

He gathered up his blankets and stuffed them into his bag, then scratched out the ignore-me spell he had cast into a ring around his campsite. The sun would be up soon, and he needed to go relieve Yehnu from his all-night vigil on the top of Mount Keki. The boy had long since become a man, and after this night he would be a shaman as well. Shaman had no doubt he had made an excellent journey to the spirit world and come back with a first-rate vision of great significance for the tribe.

I'm bored. I wish I could get excited about this.

The great thing about sleeping in your clothes, Shaman thought, was that it didn't take you much time to get going in the morning. If he ever made it back to civilization he was going to miss that. In minutes he was on the trail up the mountain.

Yehnu had taken to his shaman training like a fish to water or a Kenyan to marathon-running. It was almost embarrassing sometimes. Yehnu would come out of trance with a technicolor description of some tribal god or goddess that was just an aetheric blob to Shaman, and then he'd look up with that expectant is-that-right look he had. No doubt about it, the kid was going to make a fine shaman, freeing Shaman up to go do ... something else.

But he's not a fulcrum.

That was the problem, the thing that got Shaman depressed on the days when he lost control of his mood. Yehnu would be great at the whole soul-retrieving, curse-mending, faith-healing, season-celebrating, ancestor-consulting schtick of the tribal shaman, but there was no long-distance button on his spiritual hotline. Shaman hated to get all Jungian about it, but he couldn't see that the local plant and animal spirits amounted to much more than projections of the tribal unconscious. They were wise all right, in their way. But it basically amounted to the wisdom you would naturally acquire if you had a few hundred eyes and ears and you lived in the same place for a few dozen centuries. In other words, they were dynamite at figuring out why the birds were migrating late this year, but they weren't going to be much use when the bulldozers started arriving.

The Powers were different from the tribal deities. There were a few resemblances, of course, enough to convince Shaman that several of the Powers had given the tribal unconscious little nudges from time to time. Sometimes Shaman suspected that all the human gods got their start that way, as temporal incarnations of one or another of the Powers. *Avatars*, the Hindus called them. But if things like that had ever happened, Shaman was pretty sure they weren't happening any more. The Powers seemed so distant, so inhuman, so ineffective these days. If they couldn't even come up with a successor for him, well ...

And Yehnu was not it. Shaman had cherished his denial of that fact as long as he could, and then had raced through anger and depression pretty quickly before getting stuck

somewhere between bargaining and acceptance. *It's true,* he thought, *but they owe me.* Shaman hadn't seen any sign of a relationship between Yehnu and the Powers. And things didn't *happen* around him the way they would if he were the next fulcrum.

It's a big day for him. Shouldn't be grumpy.

Truth to tell, Mount Keki had never been Shaman's favorite. It wasn't that tall. It wasn't that beautiful. And the footing was lousy as you got near the top. But it was the mountain you saw when you looked straight up the river, so of course it must be the Axis of the World, the Meeting Place of Earth and Heaven, yadda yadda yadda. The tribal mythology was pretty standard in its form, but Shaman had needed to do some serious bluffing for two or three years before he got all the local details straight. And while some of it was charming – he loved the creation story, in which the world was the skin shed by the Great River Snake – some of it was local in a bad way, like those small town English restaurants that only survived because no one who could cook decently wanted to live nearby. Shaman counted Mount Keki in the second group.

After a couple of slips and one skinned knee, Shaman made it to the top. The sun was already halfway up, and looked unusually huge and red today in Shaman's opinion. Technically, that meant he was late, but Yehnu seemed not to notice. He sat by the smoldering remains of a fire, looking simultaneously blissed-out and excited – a combination that Shaman wouldn't have believed possible if he hadn't seen before.

"You're looking good," Shaman commented. "The night has ended. You can sleep now until noon, when we have to leave."

"We must talk," Yehnu said. He didn't look all that tired for somebody who had spent the night spirit-journeying. But youth was like that sometimes, Shaman remembered enviously. "I have seen much."

"I thought you might."

Yehnu looked off at the horizon, as if his visions were still hanging there. "I saw three visions of salvation. In the first the Earth Mother was angry, but the Son of the Mother came and saved the People from her. In the second the Sun Father was angry, but the Son came again and saved not only the People, but all tribes everywhere. In the third the other tribes came riding great metal animals. They attacked the Mother herself, and if they killed her the People would die. But the Son of the Son came and saved us from them as well." Yehnu took his eyes off the horizon and looked up at Shaman, who was still standing. "Did I see well?"

Like I know.

Prophesy had never been Shaman's particular gift. Or Stavros' either for that matter. "The Powers don't waste their time telling us what they're up to," Stavros had said. "We'd probably just get confused by it anyway."

"Doesn't that ever bother you?" Daniel had asked.

"All the time," the old Greek answered.

"What else did you see?" Shaman asked Yehnu.

"In the first vision you thanked the Son of the Mother and gave him the Mother's gift. I did not see you in the second vision, and in the third you had already gone, so I had to meet the Son of the Son myself."

Did you happen to see where I went? The question almost jumped out of Shaman's mouth, but he caught it before it escaped. Asking it would be tantamount to admitting that he didn't know what he was doing. And that was something that Yehnu really ought to figure out for himself.

But Yehnu's attention was elsewhere for the moment. Shaman realized he was looking at the sunrise as if it had something to say.

"My vision of the angry Sun Father seemed far away. But he looks angry today."

Shaman glanced over at the sunrise himself. Then he squinted his eyes and tried to apply his full powers of vision. The sun, after all, did not belong to the tribe. It was the same sun he had been looking at his whole life.

"Angry?" Shaman said after a minute or two of study. "No, not angry. I'd say more like agitated."

Metropolis: 42-34 P.S.

Of course, the Principal had not always been the Principal or Blue or Jupiter or any of the other code names he had worn and discarded during his years in the Service. Once he had been a baby boy that his mother had named Alexander because it sounded imperial, and then had shortened to Xander because she thought that a name beginning with an X was exotic.

Young Xander's mother herself had been neither imperial nor exotic. In his memory she was quite beautiful, especially on those Saturday nights when she let him see her in her best outfit and fullest make-up before putting him to bed and leaving to meet a date in one of those mysterious places where children were not welcome. But in the few pictures of her that he still had somewhere she was not beautiful, not really. When he looked at those pictures the way that men look at women, he saw someone who might be good to have a few drinks with, someone who might listen while you complained about your wife and dropped hints that you could be getting a divorce soon. Nothing more than that.

Xander's mother – he had realized this so long ago that it didn't even bother him any more – had been a loser. She was a big-boned, red-haired Irish Catholic woman from Boston whose parents Xander never met. He did not know why, whether they were dead or abusive or unwilling to open their door to their daughter and her son. He knew only that the idea of going back to Boston for a Riley Christmas or a summer vacation or a funeral simply never came up. Xander and his mother lived in a series of small apartments in Metropolis, where they spent all their Thanksgivings and Christmases and

Easters together, just the two of them.

He never found out whether she had finished high school, but he rather doubted it. He could still hear her voice in his head, and it spoke the uneducated version of the Boston Irish accent – not the one that the Kennedies had, but the other one, the one that in the movies always belonged to a drunk or a priest or a policeman. She worked a series of entry-level jobs, none of them more than a year or two. Workplaces, he came to understand from the long monologues she delivered on those nights when she let him stay up late to sit with her while she drank some cheap brand of whiskey (whose smell was indelibly etched on his memory), were full of plots and factions and intrigue. There were customers who had the self-centered arrogance of gods, and co-workers who conspired to make you look bad in front of the higher-ups so that you would be laid off instead of them, and bosses who expected something more from a working woman than just a job well done. Eventually the hostile forces would always converge on her, and then she would be out of work for a while, sometimes several months if she was eligible for unemployment. Xander liked those periods. His mother was happy then, and sometimes she would even let him skip school so that they could go to the zoo or a museum.

Xander's father, he deduced by assembling clues from several conversations that his mother probably didn't remember, had been one of those bosses who expected something more. He was a doctor, a smart man, married (of course), but also educated, wealthy, handsome – or at least this was the image that remained in her memory when she could put aside her feelings about the way he had treated her at the end. Perhaps she too had expected something more, because she claimed actually to have been happy when she realized that she was pregnant. She had been happy when she told him about it, and that, perhaps, had been an even bigger mistake than getting pregnant to begin with.

"Oh, you just couldn't imagine how he looked at me," she said on that strange afternoon shortly after he turned eight. He had expected to come home to an empty apartment, and to start working on the math homework he did for a sixth grader who protected him from bullies and occasionally dropped little treats on his tray in the lunchroom. But to his surprise, his mother was already home and already drinking. By that time she was starting to look a little thin, and much older than she had even a month or two earlier. "Like I was some little nobody he never saw before, never really looked at, and now that he did he didn't like it a bit, he didn't. And he said – I can hear the words like he was saying them just this instant – he said, 'So that's the game you're playing.' A game! Can you imagine it? Me talking about about raising his little baby and him talking about a game!"

But it was a game, the Principal knew now that he was a man himself. It was hardball. The doctor was not about to overturn his comfortable life for the sake of some easily replaced receptionist or her bastard son-to-be. He offered to get her an abortion, and when she refused he turned nasty. He told her to clean her things out of the office and not come back, and not to try to call him or see him or do anything to threaten him. "You can't prove a thing," he told her. "You can't prove you ever saw me outside this office, and no one will believe that child is mine. And don't even think about trying to get your job

back. I could have justified firing you any day in the last six months."

"I'm just an old dishrag," she said to Xander. "They just use me and throw me away." She was almost mumbling now. But she looked up at Xander and her energy rallied briefly. She reached out a painted fingernail and tapped his forehead right in the middle, where a Cyclop's eye would be. "But you ... you've got something up there. It must be from him. You didn't get it from me. You're a smart boy. You'll be smarter than they are."

"Yes, Mom," he said, not knowing what else to say. It was true, and he had thought the same thing himself many times as he looked around his classroom at boys who were bigger or richer or more popular. But he had learned not to say such things out loud, and he felt uncomfortable admitting it now.

"I want you to promise me something. I want you to promise me now because I don't know if I'll remember to ask you again." Her finger was resting now on his forehead. He could feel the cool spot where the meat of the finger lay, and just slightly above it the pain of the nail cutting into his skin.

"Sure, Mom," he said. It was best just go along with her when she got like this.

"I'm just an old dishrag, but you aren't like me. You aren't ever going to be like me, are you? You aren't ever going to be stupid and no talent and no class and ugly and ..." She looked down at the table and started to sob and he wanted to lean forward and touch her, but the finger was still on his forehead, pushing him away. "I want you to promise me. I never had a backbone. I couldn't make anybody ever listen to me. And I couldn't ... I always thought someday I would, but now ... But you ... you're going to be different. I want you to promise me that."

"Promise you what?"

She looked up from the table and her eyes were still glassy with tears, but underneath the reflective surface they were more determined than he had ever seen them. "*Promise me that you won't ever let them take advantage of you.*"

He promised. He wasn't sure just who "they" were supposed to be or how they might try to take advantage of him, but he promised. And then she had put her hands over his ears and pulled him forward so that she could kiss the top of his head. "I know you won't," she said. "You're a good boy. You're the only one who was ever good to me."

She fell asleep sitting at the kitchen table that night. He watched her sleep for maybe fifteen minutes, and then, fearing perhaps that she had died right there in front of him, he roused her enough that he could help her stagger to her bed. After he was sure she was comfortable, he took some money from her purse and left to buy himself dinner at the diner two blocks away. The woman behind the counter knew him and tried to strike up a conversation, but he didn't feel like talking.

In the years that followed, the Principal read numerous accounts of men who had lost

their mothers early in life. So often it seemed that their hazy, bittersweet memories were anchored by some special sensual detail – the scent of her perfume, the sound of her singing, the softness of some favorite article of clothing. For him it was the feel of that fingernail cutting into his forehead. In the physical world it had been a mere scratch that healed without leaving a mark, but sometimes in his dreams it would start to bleed again, and he would wake up feeling the sting of it.

It wasn't until the next day that Xander found out what had brought his mother home early and set her thinking about his father the doctor. She had been to another doctor's office that morning. She had cancer.

Kansas: May 1, 11 P.S.

Clark decided not to wait for his alarm to go off. Or rather, he didn't decide, not really. He just found himself standing up, looking out his window at the rising sun. It was the sun that had woken him this morning. Usually it didn't. He slept as soundly as any 13-year-old boy, and it took more than a little sunlight to get him out of bed. It took an alarm, and sometimes a shout up the stairs from his mother, and sometimes even a good shake.

But the sun seemed different this morning, more powerful, more something. As soon as the first rays came through his window, Clark's eyes had popped open. And he hadn't felt groggy or achy or slow. Instead he felt ... *jumpy* was the word that came to mind, but he didn't mean *nervous* or *anxious* or anything like that. It wasn't like he had drunk three Cokes on an empty stomach, or the way he sometimes got before math tests. No, Clark felt jumpy in the sense that he just wanted to jump. He felt like pogo-ing up and down the way basketball players do to loosen up their legs before a game. You can't jump while you're in bed, so he got up. He just thought about being upright and then there he was, standing in front of the window.

The sun even *looked* different this morning. Back when he was just a kid, Clark had thought he could see sunbeams because the light that came through the little windows at the top of the front door made two white shafts in the living room air. But it was just the sun hitting the fine white dust that always hung in the air, indoors and out, during the plowing season. Dad had made him take a close look at the "sunbeams" until he could see the small white particles they were made of. But this morning that illusion was back. The sunlight wasn't just illuminating other things, it looked like something itself. Clark couldn't say exactly what it looked like, though. The sunlight didn't have a color or a shape, but he still couldn't shake the idea that he could see it.

All kinds of racket was coming from downstairs: coffee perking, newspaper crinkling, silverware hitting plates, chairs scooting, Mom walking back and forth from the stove to the table. Clark wondered how he ever managed to sleep through it all. And his parents were talking so loud. He heard every word as clearly as if they were each speaking into one of his ears. It was like they wanted to wake him up or something.

"Anything interesting in the paper, Jonathan?" A scraping noise. Pancakes? Clark noticed his nose and realized it had been reporting pancakes for some time now.

"Nothing good," his father answered. *The Smallville Clarion* was an afternoon newspaper, but the Kents saved it until morning because Jonathan enjoyed a newspaper with breakfast. It was barely a dozen pages, but Jonathan didn't have a lot of time before beginning his morning chores anyway. "There's another famine in Africa. Ethiopia this year. Somebody from the UN is claiming that a hundred thousand people will die if nobody does anything."

"There's nothing like the morning paper to get your day off on the right foot," Mom answered in that way she had of being pleasantly sarcastic. "Anything new on the local page?"

"Nothing you don't already know. You know what I always say: Martha Kent is the best reporter in Smallville."

"Oh, Jonathan, I can't help it people like to tell me things. Half the time I can't stop them. ... Well! Look who's here."

Jonathan looked up in surprise to see Clark standing in the kitchen doorway. He checked his watch. "Ten minutes to six," he observed. "That's never happened before."

"The sun woke me up."

"That's never happened before either."

"And you were talking so loud."

Clark's parents looked at each other and traded one of those expressions he could never decipher. "Well," Martha said, "if you're going to stay up I'll make up the rest of the pancake batter now."

Clark sat down at the table across from his father. For some reason he wasn't all that hungry, but he knew he didn't want to go back to bed. He wanted to do something, anything.

"Well I'll be," Jonathan said, going back to his newspaper.

"What?" Clark asked.

"The Northern Lights. They're supposed to be visible tonight if it's clear enough. Nobody has seen the Lights this far south since. ... Well, I guess it doesn't say, but it's been a long time. Some kind of strange solar activity is supposed to be causing it."

Clark nodded. "I thought the sunlight looked different today."

"Oh, I don't think it's something you can see. Not the solar activity I mean. The Lights themselves, of course, you can see them. But as for what causes it, I don't think you can see ... Well, to tell you the truth I don't know what causes it. You should ask your science teacher."

"I don't think I've ever seen them," Martha added.

"I have," Jonathan said, "but it wasn't around here. It was back when I was 19 ... no 18, I

guess. It was the summer after high school and one of my buddies and me decided to go up to the Dakotas." He lowered the paper so he could look at Clark, and shifted to the tone of voice he used when he was filling in information that Martha would already know. "We went up North to work the wheat harvest," he said, "because their growing season is shorter than ours. So we figured we could make some money running combines up there and still make it back here for our harvest. Anyway, one night we were coming back from somewhere or other and all of a sudden there were these strange streaks in the sky, like it was raining fireflies somewhere way off in the distance. Well, Jack – that's who it was, Jack Colby, we were great friends in those days – was on a religious kick back then, and he thought it was the Judgment, or the ... what do they call it?"

"Rapture," Martha said without looking up from the pancakes.

"That's right. He thought it was the Rapture, that it was – I don't know – angels or searchlights from God or something, come to pull the souls of the righteous right on up to Heaven. And he pulled the car off the road and got out on the ground and prayed. I just sat down and watched the show. I didn't know what it was either, but it was pretty. And if it was the end of the world, well, at least I had a good seat. Anyway, you never saw anybody so disappointed an hour or so later when it was over and we were still here. I mean, it was no mystery to Jack that Heaven didn't take me, but he was so sure he had his reservation in. Well, he was ready to cry or fast himself into starvation or something. I drove us the rest of the way to the boarding house, because he was so upset I was afraid he'd run us into a tree. And when we got back, the first thing the landlady said to us was 'Did you see the Northern Lights?' I about bust a gut laughing then. She wanted to know what the joke was and Jack wouldn't tell her, and I couldn't because I was laughing too hard."

Jonathan was laughing now as well, but not so hard that he couldn't finish his story. Clark found it a little hard to imagine his father laughing so hard that he couldn't talk – although he could picture the other guy kneeling in the field and thought the whole picture looked pretty funny.

It wasn't long before Clark's pancakes arrived. He still wasn't hungry, but he discovered that they tasted really good. The taste of the pancakes, the syrup, the butter – all of it just seemed so much *bigger* than he was used to. He wondered why he had never before noticed all the different tastes that blended together to make pancakes.

"I haven't seen Lana in a long time," Martha said as she poured another couple pancakes for herself. "Is she all right these days?"

"I guess so," Clark answered.

"Don't you see her?"

"Well, sure. We're in Mr. Stevens' homeroom, and the science class." Clark wondered about his mother's memory, as he often did. He was sure she had known all this yesterday. Maybe it was an old-age thing.

“Do you talk to her? I mean, you aren’t mad at her or anything, are you?”

“No.”

“And she’s not mad at you for any reason you can think of?”

“No.”

“Then how come I never see her?”

Clark shrugged in the patented manner of teen-age boys. “I don’t know.”

“Do you think she’d want to see that new Shelly Gilchrist movie that starts this weekend? I could drive you.”

Jonathan cleared his throat.

“I guess,” Clark said. “I don’t know.”

“Well, you could ask her, couldn’t you?”

“Now Martha,” Jonathan interjected. “Don’t rush the boy. He’ll do things in his own time.”

Clark wasn’t sure what that meant, but that didn’t worry him. His father was always saying things that didn’t seem to mean anything. Clark was starting to wonder if maybe that was an old-age thing too.

“He’s certainly finished off those pancakes in his own time,” Martha commented, gesturing at Clark’s empty plate. Clark was a little surprised to look at it himself. He barely remembered eating. “Should I make more?”

“No, uh, no thank you,” he said.

“It’s Pete, isn’t it?” Martha said.

Clark could only manage a “Huh?”

“Pete and Lana. They don’t get along anymore, so you can’t do anything with both of them at once. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Well, maybe. I don’t know.” The truth was that Clark had never thought about it before. But now that he did, there was a sort of pattern. Pete had a way of suggesting things that Lana couldn’t do or didn’t like to do. And sometimes he’d change the plan in such a way that she couldn’t join in. Or when she spoke sometimes he’d make a face like she’d said something really stupid. But he’d never actually said he didn’t like her.

“Those Rosses,” Martha said disgustedly. “Give people a little money and they start to think that they’re too good for the people that don’t have any.”

“What money?”

“Oh, that weird museum and the burger place next to it. The Rosses leased the land to them a couple years ago, and now they’re buying cars and clothes and I don’t know what

all."

Jonathan snorted. "They even put it in the wrong place, over by the road instead of right down over the hill where ..." His voice just trailed off.

"Where what?"

"Where ... I don't know. I forgot what I was thinking." Clark noted that both of his parents seemed unusually scatterbrained this morning. Maybe they were always like that early in the morning. He'd just never been awake to notice.

"Anyway," Martha continued, "the point is that you're still good enough for Pete to associate with, because we have our own land. But Lana living over in that trailer isn't."

"That's not why," Clark protested. "Pete's not like that."

"If you say so." Martha began collecting plates as if the discussion had concluded, but Clark knew that it hadn't. "Clark," she continued, looking directly at him now and not bustling about, "whatever anybody else does, don't you ever be like that. You're smart and handsome and have a lot of talent, and there's no telling what might happen to you someday. You might get rich, you might be famous for something. But don't ever start thinking that you're better than other people. The Lord gives us gifts so that we can help other people, not so that we can set ourselves above them. Promise me you won't ever be like that, that you won't ever start looking down on people who don't have what you do."

It was like that sometimes when his mother got going. Praise and demands and philosophy all got glommed together into a big ball that was more than Clark knew how to react to. He wanted to blush for being told that he was smart and handsome. He wanted to be annoyed at her thinking that he might get to be as stuck up as she thought Pete Ross was. He wanted to go back and explain the whole situation with Lana and Pete and himself, whatever it was. But instead he just met her eyes and smiled at her and said, "I won't, Mom."

She reached out and ruffled his hair. "I know you won't, son. You're a good boy. You've always been everything a mother could ask for."

Now he did blush and pulled his chair back out of her reach. "Mom," he protested. "Stop."

Jonathan cleared his throat again. "Well, I should be getting to work," he announced as he folded the newspaper and put it on the table.

"What are you going to do today?" Martha asked.

"I thought I'd add some fertilizer to the north field. It's supposed to get really hot later on, so I'd like to get as much of it done in the morning as I can."

"Can I help?" Clark asked.

"You've got to go to school," his mother reminded him.

"Not right away," Clark pointed out.

"Well ..." Jonathan looked at his watch. "There is something you might do to help me get started. There's some heavy lifting involved, so you might not be strong enough yet."

"I'm pretty strong," Clark insisted.

Clark and his father got up from the table and walked out the back door, saying their good-byes to Martha as the screen swung shut behind them.. The temperature was comfortable for the moment, but the humidity felt like a wool sweater. "It's going to be some kind of record today, the paper claims," Jonathan said. "A record for May, anyway. Could be up over 95."

"Does it have something to do with the Northern Lights?"

"Nah. I'm not sure what causes the Lights, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't have anything to do with temperature. It's connected to the sun somehow."

Clark looked up at the sun, and then around at the yard. Now that he was outside and sunlight was all around him, he lost the impression that he could see the individual sunbeams, but the air seemed to be full of little flecks that sometimes picked up the sunlight and glistened. It was like walking through a mist, and yet it wasn't, because he could see clearly all the way to the horizon. Was that the humidity? Clark could tell that his father didn't notice anything unusual. "Maybe the sun is stronger today," Clark suggested.

"I don't think that's how it works. Don't ask me how it *does* work, but I don't think that's it. I know it wasn't very hot that night in the Dakotas."

Jonathan let Clark drive the truck over to one of the old buildings that Jonathan's father had built to be chicken coops, but which he used as storage sheds now that chicken-raising was done on big factory farms that he couldn't compete with. Like many of the truck's trips, it was only about fifty yards. Clark backed it up to the door of the shed expertly.

Inside the shed, bags of fertilizer were lined up in two rows next to the wall. They were tall and narrow and the labels claimed that each one weighed fifty pounds.

"I'll be needing about six of them this morning. I thought we'd throw them into the back of the truck and I'd run them out to the field that way rather than bring the spreader all the way back here." Clark had already figured out everything except the number of bags, but he had learned not to feel insulted when his Dad explained the obvious to him. Jonathan had a habit of announcing his plans out loud when he was working. He seemed to do it more to keep his thoughts straight than to inform anyone, and Clark suspected he did it even when he was by himself. "I don't know if you can lift one of those by yourself, though. Maybe I'd better get them."

Clark bent his knees the way that his Dad had told him to do when lifting and grabbed a bag as if he were hugging a child around the waist. He straightened up and the bag came

off the ground easily.

“Whoa. You are pretty strong.”

“I feel different today,” Clark said. “I feel like I could do anything.”

Jonathan shrugged. “Enjoy it,” he said. “Some day you’ll be my age.”

Clark wasn’t sure when he had noticed that his parents were older than his friends’ parents, but it was becoming more and more obvious now that he was 13 and they were getting close to sixty. Lana’s mom wasn’t even thirty yet, though there were days when she looked pretty old too. “You can do a lot of things,” he protested. It was true. In spite of his talking to himself and those occasional meaningless outbursts, Clark knew that if he needed help with something, he’d much rather get it from his Dad than Lana’s mom or one of Lana’s mom’s boyfriends.

“A few less every day. And the ones I can still do make me ache worse than they used to.”

Clark loaded four of the bags and Jonathan two. Jonathan got in the driver’s seat because the easiest way to the north field used a public road. He wouldn’t let Clark drive on the road until he had a legal permit, even if it was just from one field to the next on a road that hardly anybody used.

“Dad?” Clark said when they were rolling. “I didn’t understand some of what you were reading in the newspaper.”

“OK. What?”

“About the famine. I mean, I know what a famine is. It’s when nobody has food. But I still don’t get it. How can nobody have food?”

“Lots of ways. Sometimes the weather is bad and the crops fail. Sometimes there’s a war and the fields get burned or people are afraid to go out and plant them. And then nobody has food.”

Clark mulled this over. “But somebody has to have food. I mean, we have food. We’ve got that whole bin full from last fall.”

Jonathan smiled and yet looked sad at the same time. “Don’t think I haven’t thought about that,” he said. “But what are you going to do with it? Are you going to pick the bin up like one of those bags and fly it over to Africa?”

That’s was what Starman would do, Clark thought. He’d use the cosmic rod to make the bin and all the wheat weightless – Clark was pretty sure the rod could things like that – and then fly over to Ethiopia with it and give it to the hungry people. As he thought about it, though, he realized he’d never seen anything like that in the comics. Starman worried a lot more about spies and bank robbers than about famines and wars. So maybe he wouldn’t take the bin to Africa. But Clark thought that he would, if he had powers like Starman. Anyway, he knew better than to tell his father what he was thinking. He never talked to grown-ups about Starman any more, or any of the other comic book super-

heroes. It just made him sound like a little kid.

“But we could put the wheat in big boxes like the one the new refrigerator came in, and then we could ship it.”

The truck pulled up next to a tractor with a fertilizer spreader attached to it. “Now you’re talking about money,” Jonathan said as he got out of the truck. “That’s always the problem. It’s never really about food. It’s about money.”

“Don’t we have any money?”

Clark picked a bag up out of the truck bed. The bag was tall enough that he had to crane his neck sideways to see where he was going, but he managed to set it down next to the spreader where it belonged. Jonathan opened the spreader’s reservoir and used his pocket knife to cut the top of the bag open. Clark hefted the bag again and started to tip it to pour the contents into the reservoir. “Are you sure you can handle that?” Jonathan asked. “Lifting it is one thing but pouring gets a little tricky.” Clark didn’t put the bag down, and Jonathan shrugged. The fertilizer was in multicolored grains and crystals the size of seeds. A few bounced out onto the ground as Clark poured, but no more than if Jonathan had done it himself. “I guess you can,” he acknowledged.

Clark went back to get another bag. “Yes, we do have a little money,” Jonathan admitted. “Not a lot, and I’m not really sure how much it would take to ship a bin full of grain over to Ethiopia. I’m not even sure how we’d go about doing it. But I’ll bet that if we really wanted to we could probably swing it.”

Clark brightened. “Are we going to? Really?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Clark put the bag down next to the empty one and waited for his Dad to cut the top, but Jonathan was lost in his thoughts. “Well, your mother would kill us, for one thing. And she’d be right. I mean, think it through like we were really going to do it. That bin of grain isn’t a drop in the ocean. Even if it got to the hungry people, even if it wasn’t hijacked by some gang that would trade it for guns, they’d eat it up in a day or two. And then they’d still have no food and no money. And we wouldn’t have any food or any money either. And then who would feed us?”

“Somebody might,” Clark said. He thought about the Rosses, and the bins of grain that they had. And maybe they did have money now, like Mom had said. And what about the other neighbors? Did they have money, too? Clark wasn’t sure. Some of them probably did. “Maybe.”

“Or maybe not,” Jonathan said. “Because everybody we know would think it through the same way we’re doing now. And they’d say, ‘If we give our food to the Kents, what are we going to eat? And what are we going to do if the Kents take the food we give them and they give it away to the Ethiopians like they did with the food they had? What are we

going to do then?' So maybe they wouldn't give us anything. Because that's how people think. That's how we're thinking now. There can be plenty of food, but if you're not sure you'll get your share, you're going to hang on to everything you can."

Clark wanted to argue, but couldn't think of a good point to make. "That doesn't seem right," he said.

"I know it doesn't," Jonathan admitted. "I think about this stuff a lot, and I'm kind of glad to see that you're starting to think about it too. Because it never seems right to me, either. It always seemed to me that if things ever got good and started in the right direction, then people could all be generous – or most of them anyway – because they'd all know that people would be generous to them if they needed it. But it never gets a good enough start, and nobody gives their food away because they think they'd starve if they did. And they're probably right."

Clark expected his Dad to cut the bag open then, but he didn't. "You know what I think?" Jonathan continued. "You know that story in the Bible about Jesus and the loaves and the fishes? Now don't tell Pastor Harris about this, because he'd probably never let me teach Sunday school again, but I have my own ideas about what happened there. I think it was a miracle, all right, but not the kind of miracle people think it was."

Clark couldn't guess where his father was going with this, and he wasn't sure whether he wanted to ask or not. Clark was fascinated on the few occasions when his parents put forward some heretical opinion, but it also made him a little nervous.

"You see," Jonathan explained. "I don't think those people were stupid. I think they all knew that you don't go out into the desert without taking any food with you, even if you are going out there with some great miracle worker. Imagine your mother letting us go anywhere for the day without thinking about what we were going to eat. So I think they had food, most of them. I think there was plenty of food out there in that crowd. But everybody looked around and saw that some people were hungry, and they thought, 'I don't have enough for all these people. They'll eat what I have, and then I won't have anything.' And so they all hid their food and thought they'd sneak it when nobody was looking. So when Jesus sent his disciples out to collect food, all they got was a handful of bread and fish.

"And you know, if Jesus had eaten that food, I think that would have been the end of it. But instead he started giving it away. And he let people know that he wasn't going to eat until everybody else did. And I think that inspired some of them and embarrassed some of the others. So when Jesus came up to give them food, they said, 'We've got enough here, and why don't you take some of ours.' And that was the miracle. He turned a crowd of selfish, anxious people into a crowd of generous, trusting people. And once he did that, there was plenty of food."

"Maybe we could do that," Clark said.

Jonathan shook his head. "It'd be nice to think so. But no, it wouldn't work. It would take

somebody a lot bigger than us to get it started. Sometimes I think that if I won one of those big lotteries, or if some rich uncle I never knew about left me millions and millions of dollars, that maybe then I could do it. But I don't think even that would be enough. It would take somebody really big to start it, somebody everybody looked up to."

"Who, then?"

"I don't know," Jonathan admitted sadly. "I don't think there is anybody like that now. Even if the President or some billionaire was to start it, people would just wonder what he was up to. I don't know who could do it." He fumbled in his pocket for the knife, but then he pulled his hand out quickly and looked at his watch. "Oh, Christ," he said, "look at the time, Clark. You're going to miss your bus. I'll have to take you to school in the truck."

Clark glanced at his own watch. It was a Justice Society watch he had ordered by mail two years before. At the time he had been really proud of it, but now he was starting to wonder if he shouldn't get a grown-up watch like Pete had. "It's OK," he said, "if I run back to the house I can take my bike to school. Classes don't start until 8:30. And then you won't have to pick me up after baseball practice."

"You can get there faster on your bike than the bus can?"

"The bus takes a big loop," Clark explained. "And I can ride straight there."

Jonathan waved him away and shook his head. "I forgot," he said, laughing. "You can do anything today."

Metropolis: 34 P.S.

The cancer created two immediate problems for Xander's mother: how to get treatment (given that she had no insurance and no savings to speak of), and what to do with Xander (given that she had neither family or friends that she could count on). One of the things she tried was to throw herself on the mercy of the church that she had attended sporadically over the previous several years.

The church was named St. Michael's, the same name as the river that Metropolis had been built on. At first Xander had been puzzled that anyone would name a church after a river, and later he had been puzzled that the church was not next to the river, but was on the opposite side of Lowtown from the river, in the neighborhood known as French Hill. Finally, he wondered why his mother insisted on going there, when Lowtown had several Catholic churches of its own.

French Hill was a much nicer neighborhood than Lowtown. Many of the houses in the neighborhood went back to the original French settlers, and some were even owned by old Franco-American families that had been on French Hill since colonial times. Most of the old houses had changed ownership many times, however, and were now occupied by families who appreciated tradition enough to pay top dollar for it.

Xander had never liked St. Michael's. Or, to be more accurate, he thought that the sanctuary with all of its statues and stained glass was the most beautiful place he had ever

seen, but he didn't like any of the people. On the few Sundays when his mother could persuade him to attend classes, he felt like an outcast. The other children dressed differently than he did, in a style that he could recognize without being able to define. They also spoke differently, with a private-school accent that Xander knew would earn him a bloody nose if he ever picked it up and used it in his own neighborhood. The way the other children looked at him made him want to fight them. But when he did he felt dirty, as if he had justified everything they thought about him.

Xander's mother was probably as surprised as anyone when a young priest named Father Andrew took pity on her and her son. Whether the parish helped in any way to pay for her treatment was never discussed in Xander's presence, but Father Andrew took it upon himself to find parishioners to take Xander in during the times when his mother was in the hospital. From the adults' point of view this was a perfect solution, but Xander chafed at receiving charity from families whose children he wanted to push down and kick.

Because Xander had acquired a reputation as a difficult child, no family at St. Michael's was willing to shoulder the entire burden of his care. Instead, Father Andrew shuttled him from one home to another every few days. Each of the homes was close to the church, but tucked away on a different one of the curving streets that made French Hill seem like a maze. Each of the homes was much nicer than any apartment Xander and his mother had ever lived in. They had yards and a variety of rooms that Xander had to learn names for: dining rooms, family rooms, garages, dens, offices, project rooms, and workshops. Ordinary meals consisted of several different dishes followed by a dessert. The children had toys and clothes and books in such quantities that they could let him use what he wanted without resentment. It wasn't generosity so much as carelessness. Letting Xander use their things was no different from leaving them out in the rain or forgetting where they were. Strangest of all was the fact that he slept not on a sofa or a floor, but in a "guest room", an actual room with furniture that seemed to have had no purpose at all until he got there.

Xander hated the homes on French Hill. Whenever he could, he wheedled the privilege of spending his time at school or at the hospital. When he was forced to accept the hospitality of his benefactors, he ate sparingly, turned away desserts, and did not touch any of the toys, clothes, and books. He refused to be bribed into wishing that he could live this way. He refused to be tempted to daydream about the life he might have if his mother would only stay in the hospital.

From time to time she came out for a few weeks, and they lived in their old apartment as if nothing had changed. She slept a lot and was frequently sick, but from his perspective it wasn't so different from a really bad hangover. They played cards together and watched a lot of very old movies on television. Occasionally she would fall asleep, and he would try hard to remember everything that happened in the movie so that he could explain it to her when she woke up.

She looked terrible. After surgery she had been thin and pale, and a tube coming out of her bandages had dripped brown fluid into a bag that had to be emptied. Then the

bandages and the tube and the bag went away, but she stayed pale and her hair began to fall out. Through the entire process she continued to get thinner. Without her hair she didn't look her age, or any age at all. Sometimes when she slept Xander looked at her face and imagined that she was 70 or 80.

She had told him with great certainty that she wasn't going to die, but Xander knew from experience that her predictions were not to be trusted. One day in the hospital waiting room he asked Father Andrew, who he supposed had probably taken some sort of an oath not to lie. "It's in God's hands," the priest had said. "All we can do is pray for her."

Xander had never been a very good Catholic, but he became one now. Church was another place away from the corrupting influence of his benefactors, and if prayer and the church were his only avenues through which to influence God's decision, then he would learn to use them well. Confession was something of a mystery to him, but he quickly learned how to give the priests enough iniquity to satisfy them without setting himself up for an unreasonable penance. And he sometimes wondered whether a God who had sent his own son to be tortured and killed was someone you wanted to put your trust in. But he accepted what he was told and determined to work with it as best he could.

Looking back, the Principal supposed that he ought to be grateful that his mother did not have to suffer long. A few months after the initial diagnosis the cancer arrived in her brain, and from that point things proceeded very quickly. Her range of vision narrowed. She frequently became nauseous and lost her balance. When she began blacking out, the doctors decided that she belonged back in the hospital. Within a few days she was spending most of her time unconscious.

By then Xander was all but living at the hospital. His benefactors took him to school every morning, but its walls could not hold him. By mid-morning he would be in his mother's room. When she was awake he would talk to her, though her answers usually made little sense. More often she would sleep and he would pray over her the way he had seen Father Andrew pray. The nurses had him fill out the lunch order for her, and they brought it even though they knew she had not eaten solid food since she had arrived. By late afternoon Father Andrew would appear with a parishioner in tow to take him home, feed him dinner, and give him another guest room to sleep in. The next day he would be taken to school and the cycle would begin again.

On the sixth day something must have come up in Father Andrew's schedule. No one came to get Xander, even though the dinner tray had come and the room was becoming gray with dusk. Xander noticed, of course, but he didn't think about it or bother to feel neglected. Around four in the afternoon his mother had woken up and made quite a bit of sense. It had almost been like talking to her in the old days, before all this had started. Just before she went back to sleep, though, she had been strange again and told him that he was a good brother, and that she had always known that he would show up when she really needed him. When she was asleep again he began praying a rosary, and lost himself in the repetition of the words and the automatic act of moving the beads. It was a hypnotic feeling, timeless, and after a while he felt as if he could look down on the room from a

great height and see his mother in her bed and himself sitting beside it.

When he woke up the hospital was quieter than he had ever heard it. He was still sitting on the edge of the visitor's chair, but his head had fallen face-first onto the bed a few inches from his mother's legs. He couldn't move at all at first. After a few seconds he realized that he couldn't lift his head because his face was bearing most of his weight. He was planning how to get his arms onto the bed and push downward when he noticed that a dim light was on in the room. And then he heard a rustling of paper. Instantly he sat up in the chair and looked around.

A man in a white coat was standing over his mother's bed. Xander thought that he knew all of his mother's doctors, but he could not place this man. Oblivious to Xander's attention, he flipped papers back and forth on a clipboard as if he were a mechanic searching a technical manual. He appeared to be more interested in the chart than in the woman it described.

"Who are you?" Xander asked.

The man turned to Xander as if the boy had only now appeared in the room. He had blue eyes the color of glaciers. Xander could not estimate his age. He had no hair on the top of his head and the hair above his ears was gray, but his face was unlined. "You're awake," he observed. "You must be the boy. I'm surprised they let you stay."

"I think they forgot about me."

The man turned back to the clipboard, checked one or two more facts, and then hung it back on its hook at the end of the bed. Xander envied him. Often he had wished that he could read the chart, but when he had tried he found it full of numbers and abbreviations that meant nothing to him. Having finished whatever task he had come to do, the man walked toward the door. But just before reaching out for the door handle, he put his hand back into his pocket and turned around.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Xander got out of his chair and showed the man his rosary. "I'm praying for her. Father Andrew said it would help."

The man looked at him intently, studying him the way he had studied the papers on the clipboard. He wore an expression that Xander had never seen on anyone's face before and would not see again for more than ten years. He would be in college then, and a physics professor who knew that he had no family would invite him to stay on his farm for the winter holidays. During his visit, the professor's wife returned from the veterinarian with bad news. The professor's old hunting dog was dying, and the vet had recommended that they bring him back to be put to sleep. "No," the professor had said softly but firmly. "There are some things you don't leave to strangers." The dog limped after him meekly as he went to the shed to fetch his rifle. He told the dog to sit, and he brought the barrel up to within a couple inches of the dog's face and held it steady. One shot was all it took. The dog fell dead instantly, without suffering. Xander had watched the professor's face as

he held the rifle, and that was where he had seen the expression again.

"You look like a smart boy. Don't let them feed you that nonsense," the man said coldly.

"But it's working," Xander protested. "I think she's getting better. Today she woke up and we talked."

"She's not getting better," the man responded authoritatively. "Her chemotherapy is on a three-week cycle, and the effect peaks on the fifth day, which is today. The only appropriate comparison is to her condition three weeks ago, and she's much worse. You didn't understand any of that, did you?"

Xander shook his head.

"Then understand this: She won't make it to the next cycle. My best guess is that she'll be dead Thursday, or Friday at the latest."

"Father Andrew says it's in God's hands."

"It's in no one's hands. There's no one you can ask, no one you can appeal to. And do you know why?" Xander did not answer. "Because this universe we live in isn't a haunted house, it's a machine. All of it."

"All of what?"

"The world. The whole universe is one big machine made up of a lot of smaller machines. And your mother is dying not because some ghost wills it so, but because a machine called cancer is systematically dismantling the machine that is her body."

Xander wanted to get angry and he wanted to cry, but something deep inside told him that it was very important not to. "Maybe somebody runs the machines," he said.

"No," the man said firmly. "I've been watching all my life, and if someone were running the machine I'd have seen him by now. No one runs it. It just runs. Sometimes you can figure out how a part of it works, and then you can turn some dials and push some levers to make that part do what you want. But the universe itself is a machine with no operator. There's no one in charge."

Xander tried to think hard about what the man was saying. He had never felt confident in Father Andrew's God, but listening to this man he found something that he did believe, something he was sure of. "That's wrong," he said with conviction. "Someone should run it. Someone should be in charge."

The man released a couple of soft chuckles, as if Xander had said something funny. It was the first time Xander had seen him smile. "You're right," he said, nodding as he left the room. "Someone should." The door closed behind him with a sound of moving air.

Xander woke up in the same position as before, with his face smashed against the bed. The rosary had slipped out of his hand onto the floor. He felt someone touching his

shoulder and saw through one eye that sunlight was streaming into the room.

“Have you been here all night?” Father Andrew asked.

“I met someone,” Xander said as he struggled upright. “I think he was a doctor. In the middle of the night. He ...” and then Xander remembered it all more clearly and he wanted to cry, but Father Andrew was there and he hated to cry in front of people. “He said Mom was going to die. On Thursday.” *What day is today?* Xander wondered, and then he remembered that yesterday had been Monday.

“There’s no way anyone could know that,” the priest said. “And doctors don’t make their rounds in the middle of the night. I think you had a dream. Which doctor was he? Dr. Gupta? Dr. Ling? Dr. Wilson?”

“No. I never saw him before.”

“I think you dreamed him. Sometimes we dream things we’re afraid of because we don’t want to think about them when we’re awake.”

“He said that it didn’t make any difference to pray. He said God had nothing to do with anything, and that everything was a machine.”

Father Andrew’s expression changed, and Xander wondered if he shouldn’t have repeated what the midnight visitor had told him. The priest looked very serious now, not angry or offended, but serious. “Some people – superstitious people – look for messages in their dreams. They think that God talks to them in their dreams. But that’s very rare. Most dreams are just nonsense. And some of them come from other powers, dangerous powers that want to manipulate us. They want to take our lives off of God’s track and set them on some other track. It’s important not to pay attention to those dreams.”

No one tried to take Xander to school that day, and it was past dark by the time someone came to take him away to eat and sleep. In the morning they brought him back to the hospital. His mother did not wake up, and he continued to pray over her. But at times he found his mind drifting away from the words he was saying. He looked at her body and wondered if there was machinery underneath that sagging skin, and if the cancer was like an orange rust that was making it all crumble away. Wednesday night she was taken to intensive care, and though they let Xander come in and touch her to see that she was still alive, mostly he could only watch her through a window. She died Thursday afternoon.

Kansas: May 1, 11 P.S.

Lana was the first person Clark saw when he arrived at school. As Clark braked to a halt, she was locking her bike to the rack. She never wore a helmet and he could see that her usually red hair was dark and stringy from perspiration. She wore a thin yellow blouse that stuck to her body in several places.

“I know,” she said, looking down at her boyish chest. “If I don’t get into that air conditioning soon I’m going to look like I lost a wet t-shirt contest.”

“A what?”

"Never mind. I should have walked. It's too hot to climb that last hill." Lana lived less than a mile away, and she walked to school about half the time. She picked up what was in the bicycle's front basket – a spiral notebook, the science workbook, and an old thick library book that Clark didn't recognize. "Look at you!" she said in amazement when she got closer. "Not a drop of sweat on you. What did you do, install an air conditioner on that thing?"

Lana was always making fun of the accessories on Clark's bike. It had a light, a horn, fenders, a rack, a water bottle, a speedometer, a compass, and a racing stripe. Her bike had been rescued from the church rummage sale and sported considerable quantities of rust.

"It's not that bad out yet, is it? And, I don't know, there's the breeze when you ride. So it never seems that hot."

"It's an oven out here, Clark. And your hair isn't even damp."

Clark shrugged. He didn't have a good explanation. In fact he had ridden as fast as he could, because pedaling seemed so easy this morning. He was pretty sure he had broken his speedometer too, because it kept bouncing up above thirty, which he knew was impossible.

Clark loved to ride his bicycle. He enjoyed riding fast, hearing the wind roar in his ears. Riding was smooth and quiet, like flying would be if he could fly. If he leaned out a little over the handlebars and looked straight ahead, he could almost believe that the bicycle wasn't there, and that he was skimming over the ground at the daredevil altitude of three feet. Or if he sat back on the seat, the bike could almost be a motorcycle, like the one that Captain America rode in the comics. The Captain wore his red, white, and blue shield across his back when he rode, and the shield's straps lay just about where Clark's backpack straps were.

"Say, Clark?" Lana said, interrupting his daydreaming. They were inside the building now, and there was no air conditioning. In fact it was noticeably warmer than it had been outdoors. Lana's locker was on the opposite side of the building from Clark's, and they were coming to the point at which their paths went separate ways. "I meant to ask, is there royalty in your family? Or nobility or something?"

"This is leading up to some kind of joke, isn't it?"

"No, seriously." She held up the old library book, which he could now see was titled *Plays of Shakespeare*.

"You're reading Shakespeare? On your own?" Of the many ways that Lana mystified Clark, the most mysterious was her reading. In Clark's experience there were two kinds of people in the world: people who did well in school and people who weren't interested in books. Lana was neither. In many ways she was the smartest, most talented person he knew. She was always reading things many grades ahead, just because she wanted to. She could write poems and draw pictures. But she daydreamed in class, never read textbooks,

and completed homework assignments only when they seemed interesting.

“Yeah. He’s pretty neat, really, once you start figuring out the language. But anyway, I was reading a play last night about a king, and he’s got a duke or something named Kent. And I started wondering if he’s like an ancestor, and you’ve got a coat of arms up in the attic somewhere.”

“A what?”

“A coat of arms. It’s like the logo that knights put on their shields. Like a big K with some scrollwork around it or something.”

Clark shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said. “And besides, Dad says we get the name because Kent is a place in England somewhere. So this guy in the play probably just comes from the same place, and we’re not actually related or anything.” In fact Clark knew – and he was sure he had told Lana sometime too – that he wasn’t a Kent by blood at all. Actually his parents had adopted him from his mother’s sister, who lived somewhere far away and had gotten pregnant somehow without being married. He wanted to meet her sometime and ask her who his father was, but she and his Mom didn’t get along that well or something, so she never visited.

“So he’d be the Duke *of* Kent, you mean, not Duke Kent.”

“I guess.”

Lana thought for a moment. They had arrived at the separation point, but she stopped there. Clark felt funny standing there with her while all the other kids walked around them, but he didn’t want to be rude and walk away while she was still saying something.

“So if you were a knight, you wouldn’t be Sir Clark of Kent, you’d be Sir Clark of Smallville.”

Clark didn’t know what to make of that. “I guess,” he said. “I gotta go. We’ll be late.”

As he walked down the hallway to his locker, Clark could hear everyone complaining about the heat. He couldn’t figure out why they were all talking so loud. He could hear conversations not just from the hall, but from inside rooms on all sides. (All the comments were some variation of “Why don’t they turn on the air conditioning?”) Sometimes he thought he could even see the people inside as they talked, but it had to be some kind of imaginary thing because it went away when he looked harder.

He arrived at his homeroom just before the attendance bell. He sat in the front row and Pete sat behind him. Lana came in seconds late and took a desk in the back. As soon as she sat down she pulled out a sheet of paper and started working on it. Clark could see that it wasn’t the science workbook, so he figured it must be homework for some later class. She was always doing things like that, ignoring one class to finish something for another at the last minute.

The intercom chimes rang and the principal began reading announcements. “I’m sure many of you have already noticed that it is warm today,” he began, and Clark could hear

groans not just from his own room but from all over the building. “We did not anticipate switching our ventilation system over from heat to air conditioning this early in the season, but the custodian is working on it, and we should have some air conditioning in a couple of hours.”

There were more groans. “At this rate they won’t get the place cooled down until we have to leave,” Pete whispered. “They should just send us all home. Nobody is going to get anything done today.”

But in fact Mr. Stevens did something interesting, or at least Clark thought so. He decided to ignore the textbook and tell them about the Northern Lights. “Does anybody know what causes the *aurora borealis*?”

Only Clark raised his hand, which wasn’t all that unusual in Mr. Stevens’ class. He waited a few seconds and looked around the room before calling on Clark. “I think it has something to do with the Sun.”

“That’s right. At times of unusual sunspot activity, the Sun ejects streams of charged particles that make it all the way here to Earth. In some ways it resembles what happens when a volcano erupts on Earth and sends dust and gases into the upper atmosphere. Only in this case the particles are much smaller and travel much farther. When they interact with the magnetic field of the Earth, light is emitted. And that’s why the Lights are usually seen in the far north, near the Earth’s magnetic pole. Where else would you expect to find them?”

No hands went up. Clark looked back at the class and saw Lana continuing to work on whatever she was doing. “At the other pole?” Clark ventured.

“Correct. In that case they are called the Southern Lights, or *aurora australis*. The *aurora* is very seldom seen this far from the poles, which indicates that the Sun must be having some very unusual weather or volcanic activity. Some scientists have speculated that the Sun is capable of having an eruption large enough to create a new comet or even another planet, though no one is expecting that to happen any time in the next few million years. Clark?”

“These charged particles, could we maybe ... see them? Would they look like ... like little-bitty twinklings in the air?”

“No. We don’t see the particles themselves without very special equipment. We only see the light that gets released when they interact with the Earth’s magnetic field. Why, Clark? Are you seeing little-bitty twinklings in the air?”

Clark looked around the room again and saw that the few students who were paying attention were looking at him and chuckling. “No,” he said. “No, I’m not.”

When class ended Lana brushed quickly past him and dropped something on top of his books. It was a piece of paper folded in half and he could see that something was drawn inside. “What’s that, Clark?” Pete asked.

Clark swept the paper into the middle of his spiral notebook. “Nothing,” he said.

His next class was English, and neither Pete nor Lana was in it. He didn’t return to his locker, but went straight to the room and took a desk in the back. When he was sure no one was watching him, Clark slid Lana’s paper out of his notebook and opened it.

It was a drawing of a knight in armor. But the knight wasn’t wearing a helmet and had black hair and huge black glasses. Instead of a horse, he rode a bicycle that was covered with gadgets of all sorts. His shield was five-sided, flat on top and pointed at the bottom. The insignia on the shield was a big S. It resembled the S that the high school lettermen wore, but Lana had stylized it to fit the shield’s geometry. At the bottom of the paper she had written “Sir Clark of Smallville”.

A damp lock of hair fell in front of Clark’s eyes and he noticed that he was sweating. He carefully tucked the paper back into his notebook, then pulled it out again and looked at it. It would terribly embarrassing if anybody else saw it, but it made him smile. He liked it.

Especially the shield.

Metropolis: 34-25 P.S.

For the next five years Xander bounced from one foster home to another, none of them so fine as the homes of Father Andrew’s parishioners, but none so cramped as the apartments he had shared with his mother.

In retrospect, the Principal came to believe that this series of disruptions was a blessing – a training ground, as it were. He learned to adapt to a variety of environments. He learned to size up a situation quickly. He had the opportunity to observe many kinds of people, and to know at a glance who could be safely defied, who could be swayed by pity, and who could manipulated by anger. And he came to appreciate the words of his mother’s midnight visitor, whether he had been a man, a vision, or just the manifestation of nocturnal fears. Because households were machines without operators, he came to realize. Everybody felt helpless. Everybody thought someone else had power. No one was in charge, even if some people pretended to be. And yet these machines worked according to predictable patterns, patterns that you could turn to your advantage once you knew they were there. Yell in one situation, cry in another, sit in sullen silence in a third. It was indeed like turning dials and pushing levers.

Xander disliked all of the families he was sent to. All of them believed they were doing him a favor. All of them believed that they were better than the household he was raised in, and that he would be better if he learned to be more like them. And all of them sooner or later found some excuse to return him to the state.

It was while he was between families and living in a state dormitory that he began to think seriously about escaping the system and living on the street. Several of the older residents had been runaways. They all tried to make their time on the street sound daring and impressive, of course, but it was obvious to Xander that they had all made a botch of

it. Otherwise what were they doing back at the State Home?

What made Xander begin thinking about the street himself was that one day he realized that he understood *why* the others had failed: All of them had run away impulsively. One day something happened to make them mad, or they got into some trouble they didn't want to face, and then off they went. They wound up on the street with no preparation, and with no way to make money other than panhandling or prostitution. Either occupation made them prey for the gangs, which meant that they needed a protector, and then it was a short trip into virtual slavery. If the protector got them into drugs, the game was over. Nothing they could do would ever produce enough money to meet their needs. All in all, the runaways Xander met at the dormitory were lucky to be alive, and would have to be luckier still to survive until adulthood.

Success on the street, Xander realized, was like success anywhere else. You needed to plan and study for it. It required having minimal needs, and learning a skill that would supply them. And so Xander began to practice three- and four-day fasts, sleeping while sitting up, tolerating cold, and enduring other forms of discomfort. In his next foster family, he disappeared for longer and longer periods of time into the worst parts Lowtown, places his mother had kept him away from when he was younger. He studied how the street people lived there – where they slept, what they ate, and who they stayed away from. And he taught himself a skill: shoplifting. Shoplifting was all about geometry, he came to understand. It was about camera angles and mirrors and lines of sight. It was about misdirection and knowing whose vision would be obscured for how long. It was about presentation, about knowing the stereotype of a teen-age shoplifter and trying not to match it. And it required self-control. The flashy things that caught your eye would get the rest of you caught too. But if he examined any store patiently, Xander could find lightly guarded items that he could eat or wear or easily turn into cash.

After a year of training he was ready. He waited until he was placed with another family, spent a month gaining their sympathy, and then escaped with as many of their valuables as he could carry. He fenced the goods for ten cents on the dollar, hid the money, and vanished into the wilds of Lowtown. Later he found out just how well he had done his work: The family refused to believe that he was guilty, and worried instead that he had been kidnapped or killed by the real burglars. When he found that out, he almost considered trying to ransom himself. But he decided that shoplifting was a safer and more reliable source of income.

Xander was half a century too late to find an Irish gang in Metropolis. His white skin and red hair marked him as an outsider in the lawless parts of Lowtown, and earned him the first of his many adopted names: Red. But he refused to believe that the accidents of his birth gave him no course of advancement on the street. The street, he assumed, was just another machine with no operator. Anyone smart enough to find the right dials and levers could make it work to his advantage.

Before long he developed a second profession: messenger. The black street gangs used him to deliver messages to the Hispanic street gangs, and vice versa. He belonged to no

one, so he could cross territorial boundaries without provoking a border war. As a messenger, he often found himself inside the room where the message was being composed. And that was where he began to practice his third and fourth professions: diplomat and adviser. He knew that no one would want to take advise from an outsider, and so he did not (at first) appear to give any. But before long the smarter gang leaders began to notice that they had their best ideas when Red Riley was in the room.

For the two years that followed, neither the police nor the older, more corporate Italian mob could figure out what was going on in Lowtown. It became harder to play the local gangs off against each other. The gangs acted with more cohesion and discipline, grabbing larger and larger pieces of the action. There seemed to be no leader of this movement. Gang leaders came and went as they always had – some to prison, some to the hospital, some to the cemetery. They got richer, flashier, and better armed, but none of these changes could explain the new arrangement of things. No one thought to connect it to the Irish boy who wore no gold chains, assembled no harem, and had no followers of his own.

It took the Feds to ruin Xander's set-up – a part of the world-machine beyond his mapping. He didn't know yet what dials and levers controlled the FBI, and so he was taken by surprise when they brought him in and threatened to send him to prison for a long, long time. As they interrogated him, he studied them.

His first conclusion was that they weren't after him. They saw him as an instrument, not a prize. They wanted something on the more established gang leaders. If he could give them what they wanted, he could walk.

The question was: Walk where? Whoever he gave up to the Feds wouldn't be happy about it, if he found out. Xander sat in the interrogation room in total silence for three hours. The agents thought he was being a tough guy, and tried to soften him up with a little pain and a lot of intimidation. Actually Xander was thinking, trying to come up with a scenario that would get him out of federal custody without getting him killed.

When he had one, he talked. He let the interrogators think they had cracked him, and so they lapped up his story. Most of it was even true. He picked the least intelligent, most impulsive of the names that would satisfy the interrogators, and told them how to set him up in a way that wouldn't point to Xander as the source of the information. His luck held, and things worked out the way he (and not the Feds) had anticipated: Three days later the man Xander fingered was killed in a botched attempt to shoot the guy that he thought had turned him in.

Unfortunately, this episode had brought Xander back to the attention of the legal system. He was returned to the State Home. Since he was over 16, they couldn't force him to go to school, but he was assigned a counselor to help him find honest work in a field like telemarketing or fast food.

Xander was not sure why he tolerated this situation. He still had money hidden in any number of places, and it would be child's play to vanish again into Lowtown. But for the

moment he found it strangely relaxing to have someone else provide a bed for him to sleep on and put food in front of him three times a day. Years before, the regimentation of the State Home had grated on him, but now it only amused him. If these people wanted to believe that they were in charge of his life, he could let them. He knew better.

His counselor was a small, middle-aged man named Biddle. He was balding on top and wore a thin moustache that looked like it might come off if he washed his face too vigorously. He appeared to be bored with his job and bored with Xander from the moment he laid eyes on him. "Alexander Riley," he said seconds after Xander sat down in his office. "Your file is incomplete."

"The places I've been, they don't keep good records," Xander answered.

Biddle glanced up briefly from the papers in his hand. His expression indicated that Xander's insolence had been noted, but was not interesting. "We'll need to have you take some tests, so that we can decide whether it's worth going after a GED. Might as well get right on that, I suppose." He opened a file drawer and pulled out a booklet, then plucked a #2 pencil out of a jar on his desk. "There's a desk in the hall. Go fill this out, and I'll come out in half an hour to see how far you've gotten."

In ten minutes Xander returned with the completed test. Biddle snorted disapprovingly, but pulled a plastic answer key out of the same drawer and placed it over the answer sheet. The circles lined up perfectly.

"You know," Biddle said, gesturing with the answer key, "these tests are purely informational. There's no point in cheating on them."

Xander did not respond.

"We'll have to try again," Biddle said. He found another test booklet and another answer sheet. "This one is a bit longer, so you'll have an hour. But do it here in the office where I can see you."

Xander took the test booklet, sat down, and began to fill it out. Biddle remained behind his desk sorting some papers, but before long he stopped and did nothing but watch Xander fill in ovals with his pencil. In fifteen minutes the answer sheet was full. Once again the answer sheet matched the key perfectly.

Biddle got up from his desk and walked to the window, which looked out over some badly cracked pavement with a basketball hoop at the far end. A game was being played, and he appeared to watch it. Eventually he turned back to Xander and said, "That will be all for today, Mr. Riley. Come back tomorrow at ten."

The next day Biddle had prepared a full battery of tests. There was an intelligence test, an aptitude test, an achievement test, a segment of the previous year's SAT, and several others. Xander filled them out one after the other while Biddle watched. Xander had the most trouble with a test that he deduced was supposed to provide a personality profile. He had not anticipated the test, so he hadn't decided ahead of time what personality he

wanted the test to reveal.

He finished the last test at 4:30. No one else had come into the office all day.

Biddle scratched his moustache while he studied the results in silence for a considerable length of time. Then he asked: "What are you doing here?"

"That part must be in the file. The police brought me here."

"No," Biddle responded. "That's not what I meant. Forgive my bluntness, but most of the boys who sit in that chair are too dumb to know what day comes after Thursday. You clearly are not one of them. So what are you doing here?"

"Where should I be?"

"You should be at Johns Hopkins curing cancer or at Cal Tech finding new galaxies. Instead you're here in my office. I want to know why."

"Maybe I wasn't home when Johns Hopkins and Cal Tech called."

Biddle nodded and smiled. "Well then, Mr. Riley," he said, "let's call them back."

Biddle lived up to his word and then some. He called Johns Hopkins, Cal Tech, and 23 other colleges. Twenty-four of those schools had no interest in a young man who had been in trouble with the law and who had last seen the inside of a classroom at the age of 12. The University of Metropolis was the lone exception.

Despite its name, the University of Metropolis (like the University of Chicago or the University of Pennsylvania) was a private university, not a public one. It had been founded in colonial times by the first English governor to take control of the city after the French were expelled – well over a century before the "University of" moniker became associated with public land grant colleges. (Having just changed the name of the city from the French "Fort de Saint Michel", the governor had been eager to put the new name of "Metropolis" on as many institutions as possible. The Bank of Metropolis was founded during his reign, as well as *The Metropolis Herald*, the once proud newspaper that eventually devolved into *The Daily Planet*'s tabloid rival. He tried to rechristen the river that bisected the city as "the Metropolis River", but the change never took hold – probably because the upstream trading ports refused to recognize it. Shortly after his retirement the new administration bowed to popular usage and merely Anglicized the name to the St. Michael River.) It grew with the city, and by now occupied a considerable portion of the valuable south bank of the St. Michael.

In the other direction, the University overlooked the slums of Lowtown, which once had been the St. Michael's marshy flood plain. The contrast between the Ivy League splendor of the University and the inner-city squalor of Lowtown was a continuing source of distress to the University's administration. On the one hand, the University's image and continued success depended on maintaining its idyllic isolation, not to mention the safety of its students. And so it had walled itself in (with charming red brick) during the 1950s,

and continued to employ a security force larger than the police departments of many small cities. On the other hand, the University was sensitive to the charge that it "overlooked" its Lowtown neighbors in more ways than one. And so it developed what was arguably the world's premier Department of Urban Studies, including a well-funded Committee on Social Intervention, which backed a number of programs to alleviate the suffering of the poorest of the poor. One of the Committee's least successful programs was a scholarship fund to give ten new Lowtown students each year a free University of Metropolis education. Typically eight of the ten failed to complete their freshman year, and the apparent turn-around in that trend in recent years had been exposed by *The Daily Planet* as fraudulent – most of the success had come from ringers, above-average suburban students who had transferred briefly to Lowtown high schools in order to be eligible.

The Committee could hardly believe its good fortune when the application of Alexander Riley arrived on its doorstep. An authentic Lowtown orphan, recovered from the street, rehabilitated from the drug trade – and those test scores! Naturally they would have preferred him to be black or Hispanic, but this red-haired Irishman would do nicely. In their minds they were already writing feature stories about his future accomplishments and the rosy reflection they would cast on the Committee and its programs. And so Xander was in. Without touching a penny of his hidden wealth, he would receive the best education America could offer.

At the University Xander came to understand that the man who said "knowledge is power" had it at least half right. *Some* knowledge is power. Science is power if it helps you advance the state of technology, or predict the advances of others. History is power if you can see the larger patterns in it, and learn to ride those currents rather than fight them. Philosophy and literature are power when they tell you how humans think of themselves, and how to avoid the mistakes that are endemic in human lives. Psychology is power when it demonstrates how manipulable human beings are. Poetry is power when it stirs men's souls and sends them to do deeds of great heroism or foolishness. Xander drank down such knowledge in great gulps. He attacked his studies with ferocity and demanded that they yield their secrets to him.

Other knowledge, he came to see, is not power, and even worse, is a great distraction from power. He was appalled to realize that entire communities of scholars, men and women of great intelligence, devoted their lives to projects that Xander judged to be little more than community jigsaw puzzles. Entire careers were spent getting another piece or two to fit, even though the completed puzzle itself would be of little or no value. Who really wrote Shakespeare's plays? Is every even number the sum of two primes? Will the Universe go on expanding, or eventually collapse back to a point? Every field of knowledge had such questions, and they seemed to Xander to be tar pits for trapping brilliant minds so that they do not disturb the established order.

Institutionally, the University was yet another machine without an operator. He needed grades in order to stay, and so he got them. Otherwise he cared nothing for them, or for the opinions and judgments they represented. And yet the self-importance of the

professors annoyed him. He knew that they ought to mean no more to him than the resident supervisors at the State Home. He tried to find amusement in the spectacle of professors waddling under the weight of egoes the size of a sumo wrestler's belly, and sometimes he did find it. But other times resentment smoldered in him the way it had when he was shuttling from one French Hill family to another. He was taught Marxism by a professor who had never seen the inside of a factory, and who humiliated Xander for an entire semester because he once tried to inject some small amount of realism into a discussion of the condition of the working class. Within a year, that professor was gone from the university in a sexual harassment scandal. There appeared to be no connection between that event and Xander's resentment. But the machinery of the University was vast and worked in mysterious ways. A person who understood its dials and levers could do many things.

It was at the University that Xander first ran into the conspiracy theorists. They were obviously losers, obviously deluding themselves for their own ego trips. Xander enjoyed baiting them and listening to them try to stuff the world into the oddly-shaped boxes of their theories. But even as he laughed at them, he began to notice that events in the world had larger patterns, patterns that never seemed to show up in the newspapers. There were secret links between one event and another, he came to believe. Maybe, somewhere back behind a long series of curtains, somebody was really in charge. He wanted to know.

His senior year there was a protest against the CIA coming to recruit on campus. He slipped through the protest line to an interview with a Mr. Brown. The interview was just a screening. He got invited to Langley for a weekend, and he took some tests there. Then he was turned over to an agency that he had never heard of, one whose name he couldn't find in any publicly available reference. They offered a handsome salary and he took it. After a series of promotions in his first two years, he was transferred to an organization that even the nameless organization hadn't heard of. Finally, he thought, he would find out what was really happening; he would find out who was really in charge.

That was how the Principal wound up in the Service.

All in all, the Service had been a great disappointment to him. The secrecy, the power – it amounted to so little, compared to what it could have been. The Service did not rule the world, or even manage it. Instead, it simply fed off the world, like a tick or a leech that had settled into a spot beyond its host's ability to scratch.

He was reminded of a story he had once heard about the great economist John Maynard Keynes. It was during the Great Depression, and Keynes had begun to despair that the world's financial powers would ever get their acts together well enough to put the world economy back on its feet. One day an acquaintance began telling Keynes his theory about the world-encompassing conspiracy of international bankers.

"If only there were one," Keynes said wistfully.

Kansas: May 1, 11 P.S.

The cafeteria staff refused to turn on the ovens to heat up the turkey tetrazini promised by the school's menu. Instead they scrounged up bread and cheese for sandwiches and served them with cold canned green beans. Large tubs of peanut butter and boxes of crackers were set out, but got little attention. The orange juice ran out before even half the students were served, and milk had to be rationed one carton to a customer. From time to time students or teachers would kneel down to put a hand over one of the vents on the floor, then turn away in disgust. Just before classes were scheduled to resume, Principal Philips capitulated and canceled the remaining classes, along with all after-school activities.

"See you tomorrow," Clark announced as he unlocked his bike from the bike stand.

Lana stood by the bike stand with an amazed look on her face, though Clark knew he could never tell when she was honestly amazed and when she was putting him on. "You're going *home*, aren't you?"

"Well, sure. School's out. They've canceled baseball practice. Where else would I go?"

"Honestly, Clark. I just don't know what to do with you sometimes."

"What?"

"Think it through. School isn't supposed to be out for another couple of hours. Your parents don't know baseball practice is canceled. Nobody back home expects to see you until – when? Five, six o'clock?"

"Something like that."

"So do what they expect and don't show up until five or six o'clock."

Clark thought this over. "They're going to find out that school let out early. Stuff like that never gets past Mom."

"So? Did they tell you: If school lets out early, be sure to come straight home?"

"No. But they probably would have if they'd thought of it."

"You don't know that for sure. They may not even want you to come home. You might walk in on them while they're doing something they don't want you to see."

"Like what?"

"Clark! Oh, forget it. You're hopeless." She pulled her bike away from the stand and got on it.

"I guess I could call and ask. There's a pretty long line to use the phone, though. Everybody's calling for rides."

"Never mind." Lana started rolling and brought her feet up to the pedals. "You just go your way and I'll go my way and I'll see you in school tomorrow."

Clark matched her pace up the hill that led out of the school grounds. Lana's bike was the

old-fashioned kind with only one gear, so she worked hard while Clark rolled easily beside her. “But if you’re not going home, where are you going?” he asked.

“No place you’d want to know about,” she said between breathes. “You’d just feel obligated to tell someone, and then I’d get in trouble.”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

“Sure you would. You’re a straight arrow. A boy scout. You always do the right thing. It’s OK. I don’t hold it against you. I just figure you were born on a planet where people behave that way.” They were on the road now and the pedaling was easier, but Lana still needed to catch her breath. She was sweating again and her blouse was sticking transparently to the center of her back, right where a bra would have been if she’d been wearing one.

“I wouldn’t tell. Really.”

“You could just follow me, and then you’d know. It’s not like I can outrun you on this thing. I bet I could if we switched bikes, though.”

She turned west and Clark followed. It was the wrong direction if he wanted to head home.

“I bet not.”

“Don’t be so sure. I won that ice cream cone from you last summer at the pool.”

“That’s different.” Lana was like a fish in the water, and she had indeed won a cone by beating him from one end of the town pool to the other. Clark had known it was a stupid bet at the time, and he wasn’t sure why he had let Lana goad him into it.

She stopped and Clark circled back to her. “Prove it,” she said. “We switch bikes and I bet I get completely away. You’ll have no idea where I went. I’ll give you your bike back tomorrow at school.”

“And if you don’t get away? If you give up?”

Lana wrinkled her nose. “Then I’ll tell you where I’m going. But you can’t tell anybody.”

“Deal.”

Clark got on Lana’s bike, which was a little too small for him. But he didn’t think it would matter because if they were racing he’d be standing up most of the time anyway. Lana took her time adjusting Clark’s seat to exactly the right height. He was beginning to think she was stalling.

“How do the gears work again?”

“Come on, Lana, you know that.”

“No I don’t. Show me.”

Clark got off Lana’s bike and took a step towards his own. As soon as his feet were on

the ground, Lana took off at top speed. “So long, sucker,” she called.

Clark surprised himself by catching up so quickly and easily. He even passed her, but she darted down a side road and he was behind again. Again he caught up with hardly any effort. This time he road next to her and mimicked her every move. “You aren’t really trying,” he said. But it was obvious she was pedaling as hard as she could. Her hair was almost black with sweat and she was breathing too hard to talk.

She stopped, walked the bike to the shoulder of the road, and then sat down in the grass and panted. When he was sure she wasn’t about to jump back on the bike again, Clark came over and sat down next to her.

“Somebody ate his Wheaties this morning,” she said between gasps, still looking at the ground in front of her.

“So where are you going?”

After a few seconds Lana looked back up at him. “This just isn’t natural,” she said. She reached out and touched his dry forehead. “You’re fresh as a daisy. And look at me.” She started to raise her arms but then quickly folded them over her chest when she realized that her nipples were visible through her blouse. “Well, don’t look at me. But I’m not. Fresh, I mean.”

“So where are you going?”

“Swimming. What else do you do on a hot day?”

“But the Lake is too far to bicycle, and it’s the other direction. And the pool doesn’t open until Memorial Day.”

“So I’m not going there.”

Clark thought for a moment. “You can’t be going to the quarry,” he said. There was an exhausted quarry three miles west of Smallville. It was dozens of feet deep in places, and in the spring it filled up with rainwater. Clark had never been there, but he had heard stories. Brad Johnson had drowned there a few summers back, and whoever owned the quarry had been forced to put an impressive looking fence around it with barbed wire on top. Clark had seen the fence a few times when he had been riding around, but it never occurred to him to try to get past it. He was sure it had never occurred to his parents either, otherwise they would have told him not to do it. “You can’t get in.”

“Sure I can,” she answered. “There’s a gap in the fence about halfway around the west side. I found it last August. I bet it’s still there.”

“You’ve done this before?”

“Not exactly. It was right at the end of August, so the water was all low and yucky, and I didn’t want to go in. We had a really wet April, though, so I’m betting it’s a lot better. And cold. I bet it’s really cold. Doesn’t that sound great?”

“But it’s dangerous. That’s why they had to put the fence up.”

"It's dangerous if you do it at night. And if you're drunk, like Brad probably was. And if you're alone."

"Wait a minute. You don't think *I'm* going in there, do you? That's trespassing."

"That's what they call it if they catch you. But who's going to catch us? Nobody watches the quarry. It's not like there's anything to steal out there."

"I'm *not* going past the fence. And you shouldn't either."

"Well, you know me. I do a lot of things I shouldn't do. And it's OK. Really. When we get to the hole in the fence, I'll go through, and then you can go home and explain to your Mom that you let me drown. She'll understand."

"Lana!" Clark whined.

They rounded a curve and made a turn onto a dirt road. Clark could hear cars that sounded as if they were right behind, but when he looked around there were none to be seen. Ahead he could see the metal fence around the quarry, and its fearsome sign warning against unauthorized entry.

"Shouldn't we like sneak up on it or something?" Clark asked.

"Never sneak," Lana instructed coolly. "It just looks suspicious and gets you caught. Always act like you own the place."

True to her word, Lana road down the middle of the dirt road and right up to the warning sign. She inspected the padlock on the gate, then turned right and headed across the foot-high grass next to the fence. She used his bike's gears expertly now, shifting into the lowest gear to cross the rough terrain. Clark followed, grateful for the balloon tires on Lana's bike, but worried about the thin racing tires on his own bike. The last thing he needed to was have to walk home from here.

"But what are you going to wear?"

"What do fish wear?"

"I mean, shouldn't we go back and get swimsuits or something?"

She looked back to roll her eyes at him, but a hard bump forced her to look forward again. "Picture it, Clark. You go home and say, 'Everything's normal, Mom. They didn't let school out or anything, but I thought I'd come home in the middle of the day and look for my swimsuit. Do you remember what drawer it's in?' Is that your plan?"

"I guess you could swim in your underwear."

"I guess. I'd hate to offend your modesty. But then you're not going to be there anyway, are you?"

When the fence made a corner they turned, and the brush got higher. "This is a good spot to leave the bikes," she said. They got off and put the bikes on the ground behind a bush. She walked another fifty feet parallel to the fence, and then ducked into a bush. "It's in

here," she said.

Clark lagged behind, not wanting either to follow or to leave. He got down on his knees and raised the bush's lower branches enough to see that there was indeed a hole in the fence here. Someone had bent the wire up just far enough to make a comfortable crawling space.

"You *found* this?" he asked.

Lana crawled through the hole and under the bush on the other side. "Not exactly," she said. "I don't really want to talk about it."

Clark examined the fence. "Well, you didn't make it yourself. The wire was cut with some kind of tool, and even then it must have taken a lot of strength to bend it back like this."

"Does it matter? This is where you turn back, right? I go do the danger thing and you go home."

"I'm curious. That's all."

"OK," she said, turning to walk towards the water. "Roy made it."

Roy was her mother's previous boyfriend. Before Clark knew he was planning to do it, he was through the fence and walking next to Lana. It startled her a little to see him there so quickly. "You came here with your *mother*?" he asked.

"I didn't say that." Clark looked confused and Lana became impatient. "Look, I didn't tell you the truth before, OK? I didn't go through the fence back in August. Mom was at work and Roy said he knew a new place to swim and he brought me here and he made the hole in the fence. And I didn't go in. It just kind of creeped me out all of a sudden, so I got him to go through first and then I took off running and hid in the bushes and he didn't find me. I waited until his car was gone and then I had to walk home and I didn't get there until after dark and Mom threw a fit and got really mad at me."

"Didn't you tell her what happened?"

"It wouldn't have made things better." She stopped walking and studied Clark's face. "You really don't understand, do you?"

"I guess not," he admitted.

She smiled. "That's what I ... that's what I *like* about you, Clark. That you don't understand. That you live in a world where parents stay together and think that their boy is just the most wonderful thing that ever happened to them. And they'd never let anything bad happen to you if there was anything they could do about it. And so there are things you won't ever understand, Clark. And that's wonderful."

"I won't understand them if nobody explains them to me."

"Exactly." She changed her expression and patted him on the shoulder. "Now look at you,

Clark. You're trespassing. I'm proud of you."

Lana looked ahead. Tall wild grasses grew almost up to the top edge of the quarry. From there the rock wall went almost straight down for about fifteen feet to a ledge, but several roads had been built to get equipment down. The rainwater had almost completely filled the basin below, in places coming within a foot or two of the ledge.

"Where to put your clothes is one of the tricky points," she explained, speaking now as if she were some kind of coach or teacher. "You for sure don't want to lose track of them, but you don't want anybody else to spot them either. Because if they spot you in the water, you can swim away and run for it. But if they spot your clothes they can just wait there until you have to come back. So the clothes should stay up here in the grass." She began unbuttoning her blouse.

"So why aren't you creeped out now?" Clark asked, looking away.

"Huh?"

"Last August you were afraid to come in here, but today you aren't. Why not?"

"Because I'm with you, silly. Sir Clark of Smallville." She reached out and traced an S on his chest with her finger. "Why would any girl be afraid to be with you?"

"We shouldn't be here."

"That's right." Lana kicked off her shoes and pulled off her socks, then dropped her jeans and stepped out of them so that she was wearing nothing but white panties with blue flowers on them. She turned and walked down the gravel road as quickly as she could without hurting her feet. At the rocky lip of the ledge she stepped carefully from rock to rock until she found a place to enter the water. In two steps she completely underwater, but she quickly bobbed back up like a cork. Clark couldn't believe how clear the water was. Only her head was above the waterline, but he could see all the way down to the toes that she pointed at the bottom below. "We should be *here*. This is what we came for. It feels great."

"I'm not going in. I didn't come here to swim. I just want to see that nothing happens to you."

"You're not going to be in any less trouble just because you're not wet." She backstroked away from him and then floated again with just her head out of the water. "And if I suddenly cramp up, what are you going to do from up there anyway?" She grabbed her leg and faked a cramp, then bobbed like a drowning cartoon character, holding up one finger, then two, then three to mark that she was going down for the third time." The third time she went under for what seemed to Clark like a long while, but he watched her easily the whole time. She surfaced gasping for air and laughing. "Well, you can suit yourself," she said finally, "I'm swimming to the other side."

With that she went under again and swam under the surface like a seal. A third of the way across she came up and breathed, then went down again.

"Oh, heck," Clark said, and started taking off his shirt.

Nevada: May 1, 11 P.S.

The Principal surprised himself by sleeping for seven hours. *I must have been more tired than I realized,* he thought.

The unexpected sleep made a world of difference in the Principal's outlook. He awoke feeling calm, with no need to rush. His plan was proceeding according to schedule. If this simulation wasn't the one to settle on, then maybe the next one would be. And if this was the right simulation, then it would be time to move on to the next phase. Already he had detached December from the simulation effort and set him collecting recent research on new materials. Perhaps he should move October onto the next phase as well, and count on himself and November to finish the simulation.

As if to emphasize his rediscovered patience, he went to the Project kitchen and cooked a breakfast for himself, rather than simply munching something from the refrigerator by the cot in his office. By the time he finished eating and cleaning up it was almost noon. *Still no need to rush,* he thought. And then he wondered if Caesar had waited by the Rubicon not (as historians supposed in the obscurity of their ivy-covered halls) because he hesitated to make an awesome decision, but rather because he wanted to savor the moment.

He went back to his quarters and dressed himself for a walk on the desert above. The sun would be at its most potent now and the heat would be like a sauna. He put on a long-sleeved khaki shirt to protect himself from burning. He found his wide-brimmed hat and covered his balding head. *I should shave it all off when I go back to the world.* If he returned to Metropolis as planned, with wealth and power, surely no one would notice his resemblance to the one-time street urchin Red Riley. But there was no sense in leaving unnecessary clues.

The elevator to the surface was virtually silent. When its doors opened the desert air rushed in with all of its dry heat. If anything, the day was even hotter than the Principal had expected. He left the featureless shack that housed the elevator and walked out into the powerful sunlight.

He walked for fifteen minutes until he reached a small outcropping of rock, then climbed to the top of it and sat down. The landscape was flat and desolate for miles. The east side of the black rock underneath him blazed like a skillet, but the west side had only recently been exposed to the direct sunlight, so it still retained a little of its nighttime cool. The exertion of climbing had raised a sweat, but it was already evaporating. *I need to do this more often*, he thought, *I'm beginning to forget what the sun looks like.* If he tried, he could almost convince himself that the sun looked different today.

After a short rest, the Principal walked back to the shack and returned to the Control Room. The Months were working in their respective offices and had left the Control Room empty, as they did occasionally now that they were developing confidence in the

recording equipment and the simulation. During his walk he had thought of several new tests that might reveal which position of the toggle switch was the true one, but he also began to develop an intuitive confidence that maybe (just maybe) the Months had gotten it right this time.

That confidence vanished as soon as he sat down at the main desk and flicked the toggle back and forth. Something had gone wrong. Both settings caused the sensor read-outs to fluctuate in a semi-random way – the ones that could detect the Object at all, that was – but even without a statistical analysis he could see that they were fluctuating in *different* semi-random ways.

He punched the intercom button. "November," he barked, "get up here."

Apparently November had been catching up on sleep as well, because her shirt was misbuttoned when she stumbled into the Control Room.

"Look at this," the Principal said as he flicked the toggle back and forth. "Something has gone wrong with the simulation. The left-hand setting shows the readings doing the kinds of things they usually do. But the right-hand setting has started doing something completely different. They looked indistinguishable yesterday, but now it's obvious that the right-hand setting is the simulation. See if you can figure out what threw it off, so that we can get back to checking it."

November rubbed her eyes and squinted at the readings. "But sir," she said, and then her voice trailed off. She flicked the toggle switch back to the left and looked around the panel as if she couldn't remember what she wanted to check. Then she toggled back to the right and looked confused.

"Get a cup of coffee, November," the Principal ordered. "You can get this fixed after you wake up a little."

"But sir ...," November said incoherently.

"What?"

"It's the left setting that's the simulation. It's fine, sir."

The Principal's mouth fell open. "That can't be right," he said. "That would mean ... "

"Yes, sir," November told him. "The real readings are the ones that look strange."

<u>Kansas: May 1, 11 P.S.</u>

Clark had never thought of himself as much of a swimmer, but it amazed him how easy everything seemed today. In the middle of the quarry, presumably over the hole's deepest regions, he rolled over on his back and looked up at the Sun. In his imagination he could see the flow of solar particles Mr. Stevens had been talking about. They came down in streams, like a waterfall, and one of the streams splashed directly onto his chest, charging him like a battery, filling him with yellow light and power.

He turned back over onto his chest and began swimming again, chasing after Lana, who

had not stopped to admire the view. At the edge of the water was a shelf a few feet wide where the water was only six or eight feet deep with occasional rocks that came closer to the surface. Clark put down one foot and balanced on a rock, keeping his head and shoulders above the waterline. Lana had found a spot nearby where the wall was smooth and had her back to it. She was neck-deep in the water, which was as transparent as glass to him. He tried not to look at her chest, but he couldn't look in her direction without seeing it. Her breasts were just beginning to grow. They didn't look like independent body parts at all yet, but rather like her chest was swelling up the way that Pete's ankle had swollen when he sprained it playing basketball.

"Clark, do you ever wonder what things will be like when we grow up?"

"Ummm ... what kind of things?"

"What we'll do, where we'll live – stuff like that."

"I used to, but now I figure that we'll both drown before then. It's a load off my mind, really."

"Clark! You made a joke!"

"So? I make jokes."

"No you don't. Sometimes you *tell* a joke, like a riddle that you found in a magazine or something. But that was a humorous observation on our current situation, a Clark Kent original. First you trespass, then skinny-dip – well, sort of – and now you have a sense of humor. I'll have to change my whole picture of you now, and make room for strange new powers and unexpected depths in your personality."

"Now who's making jokes?"

"I am. But I do that all the time. It keeps me sane."

"Your sanity is an inspiration to us all."

Lana slapped the water, sending up a shower of droplets to sparkle in the Sun. "Wow! Another one. You're on a roll. But seriously, do you ever think about what you'll do when you're done with school?"

"Sure, sometimes. Sometimes I think I'll do all kinds of things, like be a pilot or a policeman or a newspaper reporter or something. But probably I won't. By the time I'm grown up Dad will be getting too old to manage the farm by himself, so I'll probably just stay and help him."

Lana frowned. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because you can do so many things. You'd just be wasting yourself here in Smallville. You should be someplace like New York or Metropolis or Washington – someplace where important things happen, things that get on TV. You're way too talented to stay

here."

"So what about you? You're talented. You can draw and write and you've read everything there is. Where are you going to go?"

"Away," she said. "Just away. I don't know." She looked sad for a moment, but then she brightened again and started climbing. "Hey, Clark, let's dive in and race across." Lana was out of the water, on the higher ledge three or four feet above. She stood there straight and near-naked and skinny as a flagpole.

Suddenly Clark realized he was staring, and looked away so quickly that he lost his balance on the rock and dunked himself. When he came up Lana was kneeling on the rock shelf laughing at him.

"Honestly, Clark," she coughed out before losing herself in laughter again. "I know you don't have sisters, but you must have skinny-dipped before with cousins or somebody." He regained his spot on the rock and didn't answer. "Come on," she continued. "Get up here and we'll dive off this ledge and race across back to where we came in. And I don't want to hear anything about how shy you are. I'm not going to take your picture or anything. We're just swimming. There's nothing to be afraid of."

The air felt cold as Clark climbed up the rocks, but the Sun was warm and he didn't mind. When he reached the shelf Lana was on, the water below looked rockier than he had expected.

"This seems like a bad idea," he protested. "It'd be too easy to dive onto a rock or something."

"Bawk, bawk, bawk, BAWK," she screeched in a passably good chicken imitation." You just know you're going to lose. Now come on. One ... two ... three!"

Clark tried to dive as far as he could to be sure to clear the rocks, and was pleasantly surprised just how far he got. He started thrashing as soon as he hit the water, and knew that he had never swum this fast in his entire life. Even stranger, it felt good. There was no heaviness in his arms, no straining for breath as he sprinted. *Maybe I really am a good swimmer*, he thought. *Maybe my body got stronger over the winter.*

He knew better than to look back. Lana was like a fish, he knew from watching her summer after summer at the municipal pool. Moving through the water always seemed to cost her no effort at all. He may have gotten an advantage from the dive, but he was sure that if he looked back it would break his momentum just enough for her to catch him. He kept pumping his arms and legs powerfully, breathing whenever he found his head above water, and occasionally catching a glimpse of the rapidly approaching quarry wall. When he reached the goal, he grabbed the edge of the shelf and propelled himself upward onto the ledge. "I won!" he yelled, and the yell echoed back to him from the other side of the quarry.

It took two quick breaths for him to realize that something was wrong. The quarry was

quiet, the water as smooth as if he were simply sitting here admiring it by himself.

Where was Lana?

Nevada: May 1, 11 P.S.

The Principal sat by the leaded glass window, looking down at the Object's eerie green glow. *What are you doing, and why are you doing it now? Do you know we're about to stop watching you?*

"It can't be different," October protested as he sat down at his console. "It hasn't been different for thirteen years."

"Look at the numbers," November argued. "Tell me that looks normal to you."

"It's agitated all right," December agreed. "It's up to something."

The Principal did not look at the sensor read-outs, knowing that they would all be in the record. He stared at the Object as if he could x-ray it with his eyes, and added emphasis to his thoughts as if he believed he could contact its artificial alien brain directly.

What are you doing? Why are you doing it now?

Kansas: May 1, 11 P.S.

The surface of the water was perfectly still. Clark was wet but did not feel cold. The sun beat down warm and strong. The sky was clear. A blackbird high above circled lazily. It seemed impossible that anything could be seriously wrong.

"Lana?" Clark said uncertainly. "Lana, this isn't funny. Come out and show me that you're OK."

Everything sounded louder than it ought to be. The slight breeze roared in his ears. He could hear the pounding of his heart and the breath flowing in and out of his lungs. He imagined what it would be like to hear something move in the water, to hear Lana giggle at how worried he was. He imagined it so strongly that he almost had himself convinced that he heard it.

"Lana!" he yelled, loud enough to echo off the quarry wall.

I should go and get help, he thought. And then he realized how stupid an idea that was. It would take him an hour to find anyone. All they could do then was look for a body.

Clark gritted his teeth so that he wouldn't cry. The quarry was huge. He could swim around and look, but she could be anywhere. At least, she could be anywhere on the line between where he was and where they had jumped in.

And then he *saw*. He didn't know how he could see, but he did. She was back on the other side, about ten feet under the surface, not moving.

And then everything began to move slowly – everything but Clark himself. He tried to jump back into the water and swim to Lana, but it seemed as if he had jumped most of the

way across the quarry, as if he were flying, hanging in the air and then diving straight into the place where she was wafting slowly towards the bottom.

And suddenly there was a loud ringing in his ears.

Nevada: May 1, 11 P.S.

"It's transmitting!" October yelled without looking up from his console.

"Transmitting what?" November demanded.

"On the HF band. It's just a tone. A beacon. I don't know."

"Is it phoning home?" she asked. "Signaling for a pick-up?"

"HF is terrestrial. It bounces off the ionosphere and goes all over the planet. Whatever it is, it's a local call."

"That's not all," December added. "Look at it!"

November looked down to the laboratory floor and saw a distorted reflection of the Control Room and her own head behind the glass. No green luminescence. "Mother of God! The shields are down! Shoot everything at it! Record everything!"

"We're already getting it," December reported. "We're seeing into it on half a dozen bands. The imaging computers are resolving it right down to its heart."

The Principal looked down at his terminal, and was overcome with awe. While the Months scrambled and shouted around him, he said nothing and stared. What he was seeing inside the Object was so alien that he had no hope of grasping its structure, but the little he could decipher was beautiful and exciting beyond his wildest imaginings. The entire craft had not a scrap of metal in it.

"It's crystal," he said quietly to himself. "It's crystal all the way through."

Kansas: May 1, 11 P.S.

In the cold water Clark cradled Lana's body in his arms and wondered how he was going to swim back. But with just a thought the two of them erupted through the surface like a whale spout. Suddenly the water was far below them, and Clark wondered if they would fall now, and if it would hurt. But at the same time he knew that it couldn't possibly hurt, because it couldn't possibly be happening at all. He would begin to fall and wake up falling, the way he had so many other times.

He landed with feathery softness up on the ledge and laid her body on the hard rock. He placed her on her stomach and pushed on her back. He knew just where to push. He could see the half-filled sacks of water that were her lungs, see the water come rushing out of them. Then he turned her over on her back. (How could she be so light? She felt like a doll. She weighed nothing.) When he inhaled he could smell the blood from a cut on her forehead, and then he blew air into her mouth. He blew her lungs up like a balloon, then sucked the air back out of them. In, then out. In, then out. She couldn't be dead. Her heart

was beating. He could see it beating, though he didn't know how he could be seeing it.

Lana coughed. Then she rolled over onto her knees and coughed more water out of her lungs.

Clark realized that he was dizzy and weak. He crawled over to look into the water and threw up on his reflection. He closed his eyes and began to pant. He wasn't sure how long he stayed in that position, watching the violent red patterns on the backs of his eyelids. Eventually he heard a soft voice near his right ear.

"Are you going to be all right?" Lana asked.

"I think so." Clark inhaled and exhaled a few times and realized that he was crying. "I think so," he repeated. "My ears were ringing, but they've stopped now."

Kansas: May 1, 11 P.S.

Jonathan Kent was tired and dirty when he returned from the fields. The sun was still red on the horizon and he knew that he could have squeezed in another hour on the tractor before it got too dark to see, but it had been a good day and he was ready to quit while he was ahead. The spring rains had put him behind schedule – most years he managed to get all the crops planted by the first of May – and there were still wet spots on the field where the tractor needed to be coaxed through the mud, but he had done a lot of catching up today. Tomorrow or the next day he'd be back on track. If it didn't rain again. If the heat didn't break with a thunderstorm.

The kitchen door was open but for the screen, so as he sat on the porch taking off his muddy boots he could smell pie baking. Martha always seemed to know when he needed an extra lift, he thought. The thought of an apple or peach or rhubarb pie with a little whipped cream to top it off, it made the evening seem a little special.

"I hope I'm not holding things up," he said as the screen door slammed behind him. "I'll just get cleaned up quick and then we can get started on ..."

Something was wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it exactly. Martha was in kitchen and the preparations for dinner seemed to be proceeding apace. Clark wasn't around, but that probably just meant he was up in his room reading a comic book or playing some kind of game against himself. And Martha looked ... well, she looked perfectly normal, he had to admit. But you didn't spend three decades in the same house with a woman without knowing when things weren't quite right.

"So ... what's happening?" he asked.

Martha checked that the stew was bubbling properly and then turned down the flame under it. "We have to talk to Clark," she said. "He came home on his bike an hour or so ago. He went right up to his room and didn't say anything."

That didn't sound like Clark, Jonathan had to admit. Clark had his little secrets the way that all boys did, and there was always more going on in his head than he talked about. But he was always polite to people and unfailingly respectful. "Is he sick?" he asked, but

as soon as he said it he knew that he didn't believe it. Clark didn't get sick. Dr. Johnson was a little concerned that he hadn't had any of the standard childhood diseases, and had warned them that Clark might have a tough time of it if he got them later in life. But Jonathan couldn't remember Clark ever having so much as a sniffle. "Did something happen at baseball practice?"

"There wasn't any baseball practice. School let out just after lunch because they couldn't get the air conditioning fixed."

"And he didn't come home? He didn't call?"

Martha shook her head.

"That's not like him at all," Jonathan said. "Maybe some of the boys went out and had their own baseball practice." But he didn't believe that either. Clark would have called first.

"I was going to wait and see if he'd decide to tell us himself. And then Joleen called."

"Lana's mom? Was she sober?" It was starting to seem like a shower would have to wait, so Jonathan went to the kitchen sink to wash his hands.

"Sounded like it. She was mad as a hornet, too. I guess Lana had come home around the same time as Clark, but with a big cut on her head. And at first she wouldn't say where she got it, but then some long story came out about going swimming up at the quarry with Clark. So Joleen was yelling about how we should keep our boy away from Lana before he got her into any worse trouble."

"Probably the other way around, I'd bet."

"Anyway, I no sooner got off the phone with her than it rang again. It was Lana this time. She had snuck out and phoned me from the pay phone at Phil's gas station. And she said it was all her fault, and that she hit her head on the rocks somewhere and almost drowned, but Clark pulled her out of the water and got her breathing again."

Jonathan wiped his hands on the dishtowel. "So she says he's a hero. Do we punish him or give him a medal?"

"I think we talk to him. We'll have to give him some kind of a punishment for not calling us after school let out. But if it's anything like the way Lana tells it, he got a good enough scare that he's not going to do that again anytime soon. All the same, he's going to have to tell me what happened if he expects me to be understanding about it."

Jonathan nodded agreement. "It's not like him to sulk. He usually fesses right up when there's something he should be punished for."

Martha turned off the oven, set all the burners down to a simmer, and took off her apron. "That's what I've been thinking," she said. "Maybe there's more going on here. Call it mother's intuition or something. That's why I was hoping you wouldn't be too late, so we could go up and talk to him together."

They walked up the stairs and Jonathan rapped on Clark's bedroom door. There was no answer. "Clark?" he said through the door. "Clark, we want to talk to you about some things."

"He couldn't be asleep, could he?" Martha whispered. "Clark, honey, are you in there?"

Jonathan opened the door. The room was almost totally dark, with very little light coming through the east-facing window. Clark was sitting on the bed with his knees against his chest and his hands over his eyes. "I don't know what's happening to me," he said. He seemed tiny to Jonathan, as if he were eight instead of thirteen.

"Did something burn in here?"

Clark dropped one hand from his eyes and fished around on the surface of the bed, then flipped something in his parents direction. Jonathan wanted to say something about throwing things at his parents, but something told him that it wasn't the right time. He turned on the overhead light and looked at the charred comic book Clark had tossed his way.

"It's the new issue of *Doctor Midnite*," Clark said. His voice was high as if he might start to cry at any moment. "I came up here and started to read it when I got home because I didn't know what I was going to tell you. And then it started burning. It burned wherever I looked at it. I don't know why. But I can't look at anything. I want it to stop."

Jonathan examined the comic book more closely. It had been burning, all right, but not in the page -by-page way a magazine burns when you light it with a match. It had burned through in several long rips, as if someone had taken a welding torch to it.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he said. He held up his left hand while looking away and hiding his eyes behind his right forearm. "Give it to me and I'll show you."

Jonathan put the remnants of the book in Clark's hand, and Clark turned 180 degrees away from them as he opened his eyes.

"It's not working now," he said uncertainly. He stared at the book for several seconds before he dared look back at his parents. "But it did. It happened just the way I said."

Martha sat down on the bed and held his hand. "I'm sure it did," she said. "But it's OK now. Nothing's burning. You're just fine now."

"I'm not," Clark protested. "I've been strange all day long. I hear things and I see things in other rooms. And everything ... everything looked different, all day long. Brighter, more sparkly, more something, I don't know what it was. I thought it was neat at first, but I just want it to stop now." He looked around the room as if he expected it to be different from the room he had slept in all his life. "It ... I guess it has stopped now," he said. "Things look like, well, they look like things now. Just things."

"That's good, isn't it?" Martha said reassuringly. "Things ought to look like things."

Clark took his hand back and clasped both hands around his knees. "You're talking to me

like I'm crazy. And maybe I am. I can't explain any of it. I don't know what happened with Lana."

"Lana says you saved her life," Jonathan offered. "She says she would have drowned."

"I guess," Clark admitted uncertainly. "But it couldn't have happened the way I remember it. It doesn't make any sense."

There was a long silence. Jonathan looked at the charred comic book lying on the bed and he thought about all the things that had been nagging at his mind, all the little things about Clark that didn't fit. He was never sick. He was never injured. Jonathan had even seen him fall out of a tree and come up without a scratch. And there was that knack he had for finding things that were hidden, things that had slipped behind other things and gotten lost. There was how strong he was without seeming to have any muscle. And there was the fact that it was all too good to be true. Perfect sons didn't drop out of the sky. Jonathan knew that was the truth, no matter how many times he tried to deny it.

"I'll make you a deal," he said softly. "You tell us your story that doesn't make any sense, and then I'll tell you our story that doesn't make any sense."

"Jonathan," Martha protested. "Now?"

"When, then? We always said we'd tell him when he was old enough to keep a secret. Look at him, Martha. He's old enough."

"Old enough for what?" Clark asked.

"You first. What happened today?"

The longer the conversation went on, the calmer Clark got. Mom and Dad were here now, and comic books weren't bursting into flames in front of his eyes. Now as he told his story, he sounded more and more like a well-behaved 13-year-old who realized he had been caught doing something out of character. Jonathan was pretty sure he wasn't lying, but his words speeded up whenever he got to a point in the story where his parents would be likely to find fault. When he got to the rescue, he slowed down and looked out the window, as if he were studying something far away. "And then – this is the part I can't get straight. It was like I flew or something. I saw where she was and I took one big dive and came down on the other side of the quarry. And when I got to her, then ... then I dove *out* of the water. I was carrying her and I just jumped out of the water and came down on the ground. And then breathed some air into her mouth and she coughed up a bunch of water. And ... and then I got sick. I threw up right there and I laid down on the ground and I just couldn't move for the longest time. And then I came home."

No one spoke for almost a minute. Jonathan heard the rumble of the hot water heater's burner coming on in the basement.

"Did you really fly?" Jonathan asked.

"Well," Clark answered uncertainly. "I thought I did. But that couldn't really have happened, could it?"

Martha sat down on the bed next to her son and hugged him. “A person’s mind plays tricks in an emergency like that. But the important thing is that you got Lana out of there. You did the right thing. It doesn’t matter what it seems like when you remember it.”

Clark nodded uncertainly. “So you don’t think I flew.”

“Well,” she said, “people don’t fly, do they?”

There was a long pause, and then Jonathan said, “I don’t know.” He said it very softly, as if he half hoped that no one would hear him.

“What do you mean, Dad?”

“I mean ...,” he looked down at the floor and started to sway a little, as if he couldn’t decided whether to pace or not. “I mean that if anybody else told me that same story, I wouldn’t believe it. If anybody told me that story about another boy, I wouldn’t believe it. But you ...” He looked up now and saw Martha shaking her head. “You’re not a normal boy, Clark.”

“Of course he’s a normal boy!” Martha protested. “He’s got two arms, two legs, a mouth, a nose. He’s as normal as any boy in Smallville. He’s better than normal. He’s smart and handsome and healthy and strong. And he ... he ... “

“That’s just it,” Jonathan continued, talking to Clark. “You’re *better* than normal. Answer me something, Clark. You remember last year when you fell out of that oak tree down by Fletcher’s Creek? What did you fall, about 20 feet?”

Clark shrugged. “I guess.”

“Did you break any bones?”

“You know I didn’t.”

“Get any bruises?”

Clark shook his head.

“In your whole life, as far back as you can remember, have you ever been sick? Measles? Flu? Head cold? Ever miss a day of school?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Jonathan, stop. So the boy is healthy. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Clark’s parents stood silently and looked at each other. “What does it mean?” Clark asked. “Mom? Dad? What does it mean?”

“It means there are some things we haven’t told you about yourself. Martha, don’t shake your head at me. We always said we’d tell him when he was old enough to understand it. How old did you want him to be?”

“Older,” she said weakly.

“Tell me what?”

Jonathan was surprised how short the story was, once he started telling it. Martha continued to be reluctant, but she filled in details as he talked. Clark listened to it all without interrupting. When the story was done, Clark said, “So, I’m like an alien or something? I’m from Mars or Alpha Centauri or someplace like that?”

“Oh, honey, no,” Martha reassured him. “Look at you. You’re just as human as I am. I knew that the minute I pulled you out of that egg thing. You were just the most perfect little baby. I washed you in the sink every night until you were a year old, and I never saw so much as a freckle or a birthmark on you. Not a thing out of place.”

“She’s right about that,” Jonathan agreed. “So I don’t see how you could be anything but human. And that was a little spaceship. I don’t think you could have come very far in it. No, I always figured that somebody on Earth had shot you up into orbit for some reason, and that something happened to you up there that made you special. Maybe they knew it would happen and that’s why they did it.”

“You mean like the Fantastic Four?”

“Is that one of your comic books?”

Clark fumbled under the bed until he found the comic he was looking for. “They were like four ordinary people, more or less, and they went up in a rocket and got hit by cosmic rays. And when they came back to Earth they had all these strange powers.”

“I guess,” Jonathan said. “Something like that. After I started hearing about DNA, I thought maybe that’s why they sent you up as a baby. Whatever they did up there, it would only work because you weren’t developed yet. Or maybe they even conceived you up there. I don’t know. That was the only way I could make sense out of it. I mean, otherwise it doesn’t make any sense at all to put a baby in a rocket ship.”

There was another period of silence. Clark fidgeted with the comic book, but didn’t read it.

“We kept it a secret after we found you,” Martha said, picking up the story, “because we were afraid that whoever put you in the rocket would try to find you and take you away from us. And who knew what else they would do to you? I was so afraid for you. We both were. I just knew they thought of you like a lab specimen or something, and not like a baby. And then the government people came and took the rocket from the Ross’s field. And one of them even came right here and sat in our kitchen.”

“That was another mystery,” Jonathan added. “Whoever he was, he looked right at you and didn’t know that you were what he was looking for. So I figured that either the government wasn’t behind it, or else it was some branch of the government that this guy didn’t know anything about.”

“So who, then?”

“I never figured that out. We spent the first four or five years looking over our shoulders half the time. The other parents thought we were crazy, the way we wouldn’t let you out

of our sight or let anybody else look after you. Martha wouldn't even leave you in the nursery at church. I don't know what she was planning to do if a bunch of foreign agents came busting into the church basement to get you, but we were both bound and determined that nobody was going to sneak off with you. We had to fake some papers to get you into school, but after that worked I think we both relaxed a little. Even so, whenever somebody new moved to town, I'd always wonder if somebody had sent them to keep an eye on you."

Martha reached out and touched his hand. "You never told me that," she said.

"I didn't want you to think I was crazy. After awhile, I started to hope that whoever had sent the rocket up, that maybe it was so secret that only a few people knew, and that they'd had some kind of an explosion or an accident or something and that maybe the secret had died with them. I knew it wasn't Christian to wish people dead, but that was what I hoped, when I thought about it."

Again they were silent. Several minutes passed, and then Clark said, "What do I do now?"

"You go on keeping the secret," Martha said, "the same way we have. You didn't say anything to Lana about flying, did you? And she didn't see anything strange?" Clark shook his head. "Then you just keep on keeping the secret. Right now it probably sounds hard, but after awhile you get used to it."

"That's not what I meant. I meant: What if it's true? What if I'm special? What if I can do things nobody else can do?"

There was another period of silence.

"Well," Jonathan answered eventually, "Jesus said, 'To whom much is given, of him is much required.' I think that means that when you figure out what your gifts are, you need to find yourself a mission in life that's the same size."

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary," Martha argued. "Look at us, honey. We just try to be good, honest people and live a good life and raise the next generation to do the same thing. That's all you have to do. We never tried to save the world."

Jonathan had a pained, embarrassed look on his face. "Maybe we should have," he said. "Have you taken a good look at the world lately? Maybe it needs some people to try and save it."

<u>Nevada: September 13, 11 P.S.</u>

The last official meeting of the Project took place around a small table that sat on the floor of the observation area, precisely where the Object used to be. Looking from Month to Month, the Principal saw that the mood of the team was nervous but hopeful. He believed that what he had to announce would satisfy their expectations.

"As you undoubtedly know, Oversight took control of the Object yesterday at 1600 hours. My sources say that Oversight intends to carry out the recommendations of our report: the

Object will be encased in a lead vault and placed in a deep cavern several miles below the Great Salt Flats. It will not be under surveillance, and so any future events resembling those of May 1 should go unnoticed.

"As you also undoubtedly realize, the unexpected event of May 1 complicated our plan considerably. On the one hand the disks containing the information we recorded during the Object's five minutes of complete visibility are probably the most valuable items in the world today, and because we recorded them under the cover of the simulation data, we are the only people who know of these disks' existence. Consequently, our plan to re-enter the Outside world as inventors is likely to succeed beyond our wildest expectations.

"On the other hand it became necessary that we prevent any future servicemen from repeating our discoveries. It is of course possible that May 1 constitutes a one-of-a-kind event that will not recur, but I for one was not willing to stake my life – or yours – on this possibility. And so it became necessary to construct a plan to remove the Object from the Service's observation.

"The first step in this plan was the report that we submitted in early June. It was designed to be a shrill and alarmist report that the Cities would reject out of hand. The gist of this report was that the Object was in fact observing us rather than the reverse, and that by training our most advanced sensors on it we were in fact revealing the exact limits of our technology to its makers while getting nothing in return. Consequently the recommendation that the Object be sealed off to the extent humanly possible.

"As expected, this report was tabled and the Service took no action on its recommendations. I might point out that we would be in deep trouble right now if action had been taken, because the Project would have ended without giving us an exit from the Service that would keep us all together.

"Subsequently, our report was leaked to Oversight. Naturally, you and I have no knowledge of how this could have happened." The Principal smiled and each of the Months smiled back. "Given that the Service had not kept Oversight (shall we say) fully briefed about the existence of the Object, Oversight was not only alarmed by our shrill and alarmist report, but embarrassed at the same time. Swift and decisive action was taken, and I believe (but cannot confirm) that several of the Cities have been returned to the Outside.

"At the moment it is in the best interests of all concerned that the identities of the parties who leaked the report not be known. The Service would undoubtedly view these parties as traitors and want them shot. However, Oversight may view the matter differently and insist that these parties are whistleblowers whose status within the Service should be protected. This is a conflict the Service would dearly love to avoid.

"Therefore, given that no one in this room has been positively identified as the source of the leak, no one in this room will be shot, a fact that I'm sure brings you all great peace of mind. Conversely, none of us is in a position to claim protection from Oversight, and so we will all be returned to the Outside without recommendation.

"I have negotiated the following terms of return, which I strongly recommend that you all accept. The details are contained in the handout I have given you, but the gist of the agreement is that none of us will return to the identities that we established prior to joining the Service. We will choose new names and will be furnished with educational credentials equivalent but not identical to the ones we have actually earned. The Department of Defense will verify that we have been employed these last several years, but will make no further comment.

"The Service believes that I have negotiated a very bad deal indeed, and anticipates that our complete lack of employment record or publications will keep any reputable company from hiring us at anything resembling the level we deserve. Consequently, they will find it quite believable when we choose to stick together and try to invent something.

"You have all had a chance to look at some of the data we collected from the Object, and I think you agree that most of the technology in the Object is so far beyond current human technology that we have no hope of figuring out what it does or how to replicate it. However, at the most basic level, the Object is constructed from crystalline materials that have extraordinary properties. If we start there, I believe that we can have a proposal deserving of venture capital funding within six months. Will any of you have difficulty surviving for six months without further income?"

No one spoke.

"Then I think we have a plan. Be thinking about the names you want to take on and some plausible home towns that are not identical to where you were actually born – unless you come from Gotham or some other large city that wouldn't give your exact identity away."

The Months all exhaled at once and then laughed at having done so. Each smiled at the others, and then November asked, "Have you chosen a name for yourself?"

The Principal shifted into a more personable mode and smiled warmly. "I've decided to keep my original first name, Alexander. But I'm going to drop the nickname Xander that my mother used and go by Lex instead. And I'm stealing my new last name from a former employer of my mother's, a Dr. Luthor."

"Lex Luthor," November said approvingly. "It has a ring to it."

From *LexCorp Annual Report, fiscal year 10 A.S.*

A History of Vision and Community

LexCorp was founded in 10 P.S. by Lex Luthor, one of the great technological visionaries of our time. Luthor, alone among his contemporaries, foresaw the revolutionary possibilities of crystalline structures in virtually all areas of high technology, from the construction of light, strong materials to radically new methods of information storage and processing.

From the very beginning, LexCorp has been synonymous with the

> city of Metropolis. Luthor, who remains LexCorp's CEO and largest shareholder, started the company with three employees working out of an office in a converted 19th century warehouse on the waterfront of the St. Michael River – barely two miles from his birthplace in Metropolis' notorious Lowtown.
>
> Never content to stay within a narrow niche, LexCorp has used its rapidly growing high-tech wealth to remake the skyline and image of its home town. From the skyscraping LexCorp Tower to the cavernous Luthor Center (for which the original LexCorp warehouse was demolished), LexCorp's familiar L-logo always stands at the center of progress in the city of Metropolis.

Kansas: May 1, 11 P.S.

After his parents had gone, Clark turned out the light and sat in the dark. He could hear them eating supper downstairs – the normal clinks of silverware on plates and murmurs of conversation, not every word and and action like before – but he wasn't hungry and they did not call him to come down. He opened his window and leaned out to look in the direction of the Ross' farm, where his parents claimed that the rocket had landed.

"I came in a rocket," he said out loud. It sounded incredible, but why would his parents make up a story like that? And it was like his Dad had said: their story wasn't any more unbelievable than his. "I came in a rocket," he repeated. But what did that mean? What did it say about him? Who put him in the rocket? Who were his real parents? Was someone still looking for him? And if someone was, were they good people or bad people? Would they take him away? What would they do with him?

He wondered if he could keep the secret the way his parents had all these years. And then he realized that he couldn't *not* keep it. He imagined telling Pete and knew that he would never believe it. (But maybe Lana would, he thought, and then he wondered if he wanted her to know.) He couldn't even imagine how he would start to tell Pete or any of his other friends. (But if he started to tell Lana, she would help him find the words, wouldn't she?)

He tried to imagine where he had come from, but everything he could think of sounded like a bad TV plot: Maybe a lab had created him and then needed to get rid of him so they tried to shoot him into the Sun. (But why not just kill him and throw his body in the trash?) Maybe the rocket was some kind of escape pod from an alien ship. (But why weren't there any other escape pods – or were there? And why did he look so human? Why didn't he have an extra gill somewhere or a tail or pointed ears?) Maybe they had shot him up into space so that he would be exposed to cosmic rays like the Fantastic Four. (But why hadn't any of the real astronauts gotten fantastic powers from their space flights? Or was that why they needed to shoot a baby into space? Maybe it was like his Dad had guessed, and only babies were adaptable enough to be changed.)

He thought about the Shadow and Doctor Midnite and Starman and the other comic book heroes. Had he really flown today? Had he really seen Lana so clearly through all that

water? Had he burned up that comic book by looking at it?

What would happen if he jumped out of this window right now? Would it be like in *Peter Pan*? Would he just float upwards and go to some strange land? Would he shoot off like a rocket? Would he be able to get down? Or would he just fall and break his neck? The ground looked uncomfortably far away. He grabbed tightly onto the windowsill and shook his head back and forth.

Off to the left something caught his eye. He turned to look and (very slowly) leaned out a little farther. He could see strange green vertical streaks in the night sky, coming all the way down to the horizon. They wavered a little, as if they were trying to decide between moving left and moving right. It was starting again, he thought. This was another strange new kind of vision or some new hallucination. Or maybe they were alien searchlights pointed down at the ground, trying to detect him. Should he hide? Or tell his parents? Or leap outward and trust the lights to pull him home, wherever home was?

Then he put it together: It didn't have anything to do with him. It was the Northern Lights. He took the chair from his desk and brought it over to the window, so that he could kneel on it and rest his head on the windowsill and watch. He wasn't sure how long he watched, but eventually he fell asleep in that position and dreamed of dancing lights.

Kansas: August 23, 10 A.S.

Just as Jon was about to leave his position by the fence and begin the torturously long limp around to the gate onto the field, he heard Darla talking, and looked around until he spotted her walking with Judy and Leslie Lance, a girl that she didn't usually hang around with. "Why would we want to do that, Lez?" she was saying. She had denim shorts on and wore a black top of a type that Jon knew he didn't the name of. It was held up by a string over each shoulder. "I mean, history class was bad enough, but world problems are all so *depressing*. People are starving and people are killing each other and people are killing the animals and on and on and on. I wouldn't have to go to school if I wanted that kind of stuff. I could just be a couch potato and watch the news."

Judy made some agreeing noise and Darla started to talk about something else, but Leslie broke back in. "But SHS needs to have a World Problems elective, and if two more people don't sign up, they're going to cancel it. We're out here in the middle of nowhere and there's a big world out there that needs people to get involved and do something about it. We can't just spend all our time thinking about games and dances and student councils. We need to know what kind of world we're inheriting and what we can do to help."

"Oh?" Darla said. "What part of the world are you inheriting?"

"Give it up, Lez," Judy said. "Go hit on somebody who's more your type."

Leslie, who was barely five feet tall, seemed to shrink even further. She started walking more slowly and fell behind. When the other two girls were two strides in front of her and not looking back, she turned toward the grandstand. Darla began talking about the new

fall colors she had seen over the weekend at the big mall outside of Hollis.

Jon moved in their direction. *Limp*, he told himself. *Limp. Use the cane.* When he got within normal hailing range, he waved.

"Jon Kent," Darla announced. "I'm not talking to you, not at all. You vanished off the face of the Earth all summer long. What there had been some big crisis? What if I'd gotten sick or my parents had gotten divorced or something else where I would have wanted a big, strong football player to lean on? You wouldn't even have known about it."

She was even more beautiful than before, and Jon figured she had to know how cute that pouty expression was. He looked down at his cast. "I ... well, I was in Asia with my Mom. I wanted to call. But, well, it''s like 12 hours of time difference. When I had a chance to call was always like three in the morning here. And then I got ... injured."

"Nasty cast," Judy commented. He couldn't tell whether she meant that she was impressed or just embarrassed on his behalf.

"I'm not listening," Darla said, walking past him. Jon turned to follow, then realized he was pivoting on his bad foot and stopped himself. "You're not going to sweet-talk your way out of this. You're going to have to work very hard to make this up to me. I haven't even decided whether I'm going to cheer for you today or not."

"Darla," Jon called, hobbling as fast as he could without making himself look too healthy. "That's just it. There's nothing to cheer for today. I'm hurt."

The girls stopped and turned back to look at him. "*You're* hurt? You don't get hurt, Jon. I've seen 300-pound guys fall on you and you bounce right back up. What are you trying to pull? Is this a sympathy ploy or something?"

For a moment Jon didn't know what to say. Because he *was* trying to pull something, wasn't he? She was right: He didn't ever get hurt. All the time he had worried about screwing up the deception, and yet it had never occurred to him that people might just refuse to believe that he was hurt no matter how well he played it.

"I broke an ankle skiing in New Zealand. It happened almost a month ago."

"And you didn't tell me? Not a card or anything? Well, it's not serious or anything is it? You'll be ready for the start of the season, right?"

"No. It's serious. The doctors say I should sit out the whole season."

"The whole season! What's going to happen to ... to the team and the school and everything? How are we going to get to the state championship? And-and you've got to play! Doctors don't know everything. I bet if you work really hard you could come back after a couple of games and it would be just like last year with you scoring all those touchdowns, except that this year I'll be up in the stands telling everybody that that's my boyfriend. Wouldn't that be great?"

She had hold of his hand now, the left one, the one that didn't hold the cane. She had

picked up a tan during the summer, and her blonde hair looked fabulous against her copperish shoulders. *It would be great,* he thought. He liked the idea of a whole stadium cheering for him, and Darla there in the middle of it. And they would walk together in the halls before school and everybody would look at them and they would be the couple that everyone wanted to be. And he could play football like nobody ever. In his mind he could see himself playing, dodging this way and that, beating the defense to the sideline, lowering his shoulder to knock down some would-be tackler twice his size.

And what if you get excited and screw up? What if you snap somebody's neck with a stiff arm or knock somebody's ribs back into his heart?

"I can't, Darla," he said. "I'm out for the season."

She folded her arms across her chest. The pout was back. "Oh, just be that way, then," she said.

Judy asked: "What are you doing here anyway if you aren't going to play?"

"I came to tell the team. I'd better go do it."

"Well, don't let me stop you." Jon knew he'd heard that tone of voice in a hundred movies and TV shows. And there was something he was supposed to do now, if he only knew what. The movie heroes, they would say the perfect reassuring thing, or they would grab her right here and kiss her, or they would break into song. Or something. And it would work. It would be perfect, because it would be exactly what she had been hoping he would do.

But Jon had no idea what it was, this perfect thing. He leaned on his cane and walked on down the fence to the gate. Then he walked slowly across the grass by himself. When he had made it halfway across the field, Coach Phillips spotted him and began blowing his whistle. "OK, listen up everybody," he announced. "Jon has something to tell us."

The players formed a ring around the Coach, with an opening for Jon to walk through. *Limp,* he reminded himself. *Limp.* As he got closer, he could hear the players whispering to each other. "What's the matter with him?" "Why's he walking like that?" "Why isn't he ready for practice?" And Lenny Miller whispered to Josh Wilkens, "Look at him. Coming in late. Hasn't even dressed yet and he's the center of attention."

Other students began to filter out of the grandstand and surround the gathering of players. A few stayed where they were and continued sunning themselves and talking. Leslie was going from one group of people to another in the grandstand now, trying to raise two more students for her World Problems class. Jon could see Darla near the back of the crowd, and he tried to catch her eye, but she either didn't notice or pretended not to.

Jon wished he had spent more time thinking about what he wanted to say. Up until now he thought he'd just tell them the facts: that he was out for the season. But now that all their eyes were on him, he felt like he should say more. It was like it had been with Darla. This was another scene, maybe from a different movie. But everybody had seen it and

knew what he was supposed to say. Everybody but him.

"Um," he started. Time seemed to slow down. That *um* took forever to get out, and it hung in the air as if it were echoing back and forth off canyon walls. "The short version is: I'm hurt and I can't play. I broke my ankle."

Josh cocked his head at Lenny and smiled. One of the linebackers said, "So you're rehabbing, right? How long is it going to be?"

Jon looked around, thought *Are they buying it?* and then realized that he probably looked like he was making something up. *They don't believe me and they shouldn't. I'm no good at secrets. I'm no good at fooling people.* "It's bad. The doctors say I shouldn't play at all this season." *And next season I''ll have a complication. I've played my last football game.*

A shout of disapproval went up on all sides, and many people tried to talk at once. Coach Phillips silenced everyone with a wave, then pointed to one of the linemen. "Is that what Dr. Sorensen says?" the lineman asked

Jon cleared his throat. "Um ... I didn't see Dr. Sorensen. Mom had me go to a bone specialist she knows in Metropolis."

"Well of course," Lenny whispered to Josh, but this time Jon thought it was loud enough that most of the team heard it too, "we couldn't have a Smallville doctor look at *Jon Kent*." Josh didn't say anything, but rubbed his thumb and index finger together to symbolize big bucks.

"What about Jamal Jefferson?" another player asked. "He broke his leg last season and made it back in time for the Super Bowl. It was only like six weeks or something."

"I don't know," Jon said. "Maybe the break was different."

"Did you ask about him?"

"No."

"Doctors don't know football players. We heal fast. Guys are always coming back sooner than the doctors say. You just have to work as hard on rehab as you do in practice."

"Harder."

"I don't know."

"We're counting on you, Jon. We could win the state championship."

"Don't you want to come back?"

"It's hard, but you've got to be tough. Do it for the team."

And then everybody was talking at the same time again. Josh stepped into the center, in front of Jon, and raised his hands for everyone to be quiet. "Come on, guys," he said. "Let him be. Some of you make it sound like the season is over just because we have to play

without one little sophomore. We had a team here last year before Jon showed up, and we'll still have a team without him. If some big East Coast doctor is telling him to spend the season sitting over there with the pom-pom girls, then we've just got to go out and win ballgames anyway. Right?"

He was answered by a half-hearted chorus of "right", but he acted as if he had gotten an enthusiastic response. "That's the spirit!" he said. "Now let's stop standing around and get back and run those drills like we're supposed to be doing."

Josh looked back at Jon as if the sophomore had thanked him for getting the team off his back. "Don't mention it, hotshot," he said.

The team went back to its drills, and Jon limped over to the stands, where the rumor of his injury had reached the spectators. A clump of kids formed around him, like courthouse reporters gathering around the losing lawyer at the end of a high-profile case. They asked the same questions and made the same suggestions as the team, but (being spectators with no injury risk of their own) they could make them with even more insistence and less sensitivity. In the distance Jon could see Darla and Judy walking away, toward the parking lot. And then he could see them catching a ride with a senior boy whose name he couldn't remember. The car radio was on, playing an oldie by 3 Doors Down.

I''ll keep you by my side
With my superhuman might
Kryptonite

Jon wanted to follow, to stop them and talk, but that would have meant pushing people aside and running, which would blow everything.

As the senior's ancient pickup truck disappeared around a corner, the crowd around Jon began to break up as if a bell had rung to end class. In a couple of minutes he was standing alone with his back to the wire fence, easily visible to all the people sitting on the grandstand, who might or might not be watching him.

Jon closed his eyes, took a deep breath and realized that he could very easily start crying, right here in front of everyone. Taking his cane and remembering to limp, he made his way to the side of the collapsible stands and entered its temporary underworld. On the other side two couples were making out. They had their own concerns and would never even know he was here. Three feet into the shadows, he leaned against the crisscross scaffolding and closed his eyes again.

"Does it hurt?"

Leslie Lance was standing just outside the scaffolding, in the light. Jon clenched his teeth and quickly regained control of his breathing. He wasn't used to being surprised. Was something wrong with his hearing, that he hadn't heard her walk up? But no, now he could quite plainly hear the girl's breathing and her heart beating just a little faster than normal.

"What?"

"I was just wondering if it hurt," she said. "Breaking a bone like that, it sounds painful."

Jon leaned forward, away from the metal supports, and hobbled back out into the light. "No," he said. "The cast itches a lot, and sometimes it feels a little too tight, but it doesn't hurt."

Leslie looked down at the cast, and then at the beat-up tennis shoes she was wearing, and then back up at Jon. She had brown hair cut short in a helmet style, and big Marion-the-Librarian glasses that were a little too large for her face. She was thin in a waif-like way that made her look younger than she actually was. In some ways, Jon thought, she barely looked older than Laura.

"That must have been really disappointing, to find out that you weren't going to be able to play." Jon nodded in response. There was no way to begin to explain that he had been planning this since April. "And I thought it was really brave, to come here and explain it to everybody. I mean, you didn't have to. You could have stayed home and just had the Coach announce it."

Jon was surprised to discover that he was smiling, almost chuckling. "I guess I could have," he said, "but I would have had to think of it first."

Leslie bit her lip and scrunched her face, which Jon interpreted to mean that she was thinking. "Have you thought about, like, what you're going to do now? I mean, football must take up a lot of time. And that's free time now. If you don't fill it up with something else you'll probably get depressed or something."

You mean I could feel worse? Jon smiled at the thought. "I hadn't thought much about it. At first I thought maybe I'd be like an equipment manager or something, so that I could still be close to the team. But that might not work out so well. I think a lot of the guys didn't like me even when I was good for something."

Leslie had been nodding encouragingly, but then stopped when she realized that Jon might think she was agreeing that he wasn't liked. "Maybe you should do something completely different," she said. "You've got sixth period free now, if you're not going to practice. Maybe you could take some kind of interesting class or something."

"Like World Problems?"

Leslie blushed just a little, maybe so little that a person with ordinary vision wouldn't have noticed. "I guess you heard."

Blunder, Jon thought. *I was hundreds of feet away. I couldn't have heard.*

But Leslie didn't appear to notice any anomaly. "Yeah," she said. "I got Billy Ross to say he'd take it, so I just need one more person and it will run. You could be that person. You could make the difference."

"It looks to me like you're the one making a difference," Jon said. "The rest of us are just

kind of trailing along behind you."

She smiled a big, toothy smile that, like the glasses, seemed too big for her face. "So you'll do it, then," she said.

Jon thought about it. His Mom would be thrilled. And world problems were all so refreshingly far away. There was a war somewhere, there was a famine somewhere – at least nobody was expecting him to fix it.

"Sure," he said. "World problems. Bring 'em on."