

Down the Rabbit Hole

By Mozartmaid <mozartmaid@gmail.com>

Rated G

Submitted: April, 2011

Summary: A ficathon story about a down-and-out Alt-Clark who gets tossed unexpectedly into a world where Superman is still a secret identity, where he works side-by-side with Lois Lane, and where his parents are alive. But will it last?

Disclaimer: Characters are property of Warner Bros. Some dialogue taken from Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman, “All Shook Up,” written by Bryce Zabel

Written for fun and not for profit.

Special thanks to my GE, Classicalla, for making this story clearer and stronger.

There is not a day goes by that I don't think of when I met Lois Lane. Every day I am reminded of the remarkable woman who somehow found me across space and time and showed me how to be Superman — and then disappeared, back to her Clark. Every day I think of Lois Lane — who was lost in the Congo on a story — my Lois, who I will never get the chance to meet. I think of her with every rescue and with every story that I write. What would it be like to work side-by-side such a woman everyday? To fall in love with her? I envy that other Clark, and I feel less than myself when I allow that envy to take over. I become careless in my rescues and feel certain that the world has made a mistake in trusting a broken man like me. I'm not a hero — I'm the shell of one. I do my work at the Daily Planet, and I rescue people where I can, but I don't feel connected to my purpose. I have no true direction. I'm haunted by a pair of brown eyes, and a destiny that is equally mine as his, but I can never have because I'm on this side of the looking glass. She belongs to that Clark Kent, and I'm destined to wander the world without my Lois Lane.

I stare at my computer screen again, lost in thoughts of Lois. I know I'm not working as hard as I usually do, and I really hope Perry hasn't noticed. I haven't been the same since Lois came in and out of my life so briefly about three months ago. She helped me become Superman, and then left me — with my secret revealed to the world — to return to her Clark. I've felt the pain of Kryptonite before, but even that doesn't compare to the chasm of loneliness inside of me when I think of living every day without the one woman who should have been mine to love.

I hate pitying myself, but I can't escape the loneliness of my life. I've tried dating, and, inevitably, I compare every woman I meet to *her*, and they all come up wanting. I've even flown several times to the Congo, just hoping for a trace of her. But... she's gone... forever.

“Clark! Get in here!” I hear Perry call. I hope he has a lead, something for me to do. I feel most anxious when I'm at my desk, staring at a blank computer screen. At least with a lead to chase or a rescue, I can throw myself into my work.

“What's up, Chief?” I ask.

“I just got a call. There have been three kidnappings down at the fairgrounds. The police are already on it, but I think something fishy is going on — more than your average kidnapping. Go down there and take a look, would you?”

I move to leave, but Perry stops me. “Oh, Clark... Look, son,

I know you haven't felt like yourself lately, but Mr. Olsen told me that I need to give you warning. You need to pull in a big story soon and not just a Superman exclusive. I'm sorry, Clark. But I wanted to give you a heads up.”

I nod and head out of his office, slightly despondent — even being Superman isn't enough to please the boss. I guess not when I haven't turned in a decent story in weeks. My rescues as Superman still draw readers, but any reporter could write about them just as well. I know Mr. Olsen will do what is best for the paper, but I really don't want to fail him. My job at the Planet is all I have in the world to keep me sane. So one way or another, I need to reel in a good story.

I leave the Planet relieved that I have something to do, to focus on. When I reach the street, I take off immediately as Superman. It's three in the afternoon and to drive down to the wharf would just be impossible. I love flying around the city this time of day — the afternoon sunlight is bright on the buildings, making the windows look like gold mirrors. But there's no time to indulge in the beauty of Metropolis... not when kids are missing out there.

I land at the fairgrounds and spin back into Clark Kent. Though it's mid-afternoon, there aren't many people out playing at the fair yet. There are a few police officers checking ID cards of all the people coming in, though the crowd is rather thin. Parents hold their young kids close to their sides, even though the older kids haven't been let out of school yet and the park is nearly empty.

One vendor stops me. “Hey, aren't you Clark Kent-Superman?” he asks with a glow of admiration in his eyes.

Inwardly I cringe. I loathe the name ‘Superman’ as I feel entirely unworthy of such a moniker. Yet I can't separate them, not since Tempus revealed my secret to the world. And the worst part is, I can't remember how to be Clark Kent anymore, and I rarely feel super.

But I nod politely and ask about the kidnappings.

“Yes, sir, I heard about them. No one around here is sure what's been going on, but we all try to look out for little tykes that come through here.”

I say thanks and move on. I use my special vision to look for clues — fingerprints, signs of distress, anything that might lead me to what happened to the missing kids.

My thoughts drift to Lois Lane again, as they often do. I wonder what kind of questions she would ask the fair workers and where she would think to look. In my mind, I sometimes pretend we are working a story together. I know it's stupid and maybe a little delusional, but it gets me through the day.

Up ahead I see a funhouse. I always hated these as a kid. My reality was strange enough without having to see it through distorted mirrors. Just by the front door, I notice a kid playing with a Slinky. I haven't seen one of those in years. The boy bounces it back and forth in his hands and seems unsure what to do with it.

I walk up to him. “Hey, what are you playing?” I ask.

He looks up at me. He's probably seven at most. He shrugs his shoulders.

I see some steps nearby and gesture to them. “I used to have a Slinky when I was a kid. We always used to make it ‘walk’ down the stairs. Want me to show you how?”

Mutely he nods and hands me the toy. I roll the slinky over on itself so it starts moving down the steps of the funhouse. The boy smiles, but still doesn't speak.

“Where are your parents?” I ask, now a little bit concerned.

He shrugs.

“Are you here with friends?”

He shakes his head with a grin. Suddenly, he darts ahead of me up the short flight of stairs into the funhouse. I have a feeling this kid may know something, so I follow him. Besides, he's

alone which would make him perfect prey for a kidnapper.

I step into the dark funhouse and immediately see a room full of oddly shaped mirrors. I see the boy run past them, though even with my special vision it's difficult to follow his exact path. "Hey, kid! Wait!" I call.

I follow him in and scan the walls around me. I don't see anyone, so I keep moving through the funhouse.

Loud circus music begins playing and in spite of myself, I'm a little weirded out by the place. Clown puppets pop out at odd places and more mirrors surround the rooms. I've lost track of the boy, but I keep moving.

After passing a few more strange rooms filled with streamers and clowns and mirrors, I come to a room with no music playing. In the room, there is only one mirror, one overhead light, and no sign of an exit. I turn around and notice the door behind me has shut. I scan the curtained walls and realize I'm in a completely sealed room — even the door I came through has disappeared.

I walk over to the mirror and notice a plaque hanging above it. It reads: "Make a wish to find the door, and things will be as they were before."

I look into the mirror, and suddenly I'm struck by something. Even I can see the loneliness etched on my face. My shoulders are slumped, and I look tired. Me — who doesn't need much sleep and who is the strongest man on the planet. I look tired because my soul's sick. It's been months since Lois Lane briefly touched my life, and I haven't been the same since.

I sigh, feeling a little ridiculous, but I still make the wish that is greatest in my heart.

"I would give anything to see Lois Lane again."

I'm suddenly back at the Planet, on the elevator, on the way up to the bullpen. I don't recall anything except making the wish and seeing a flash of light...

The elevator dings open and I start walking towards my desk. I shake my head, at a loss as to how I got here, and I try to think if there may be a connection to the kidnappings. Had I blacked out? Had they realized I wasn't a kid to take for their scheme so they dropped me off once whatever they did to me wore off? And how could drugs have affected me anyway?

I pass a few workers. Usually, people are a bit cautious of me and give me a wide berth even though I would never hurt a fly. They are awed by Superman, and much to my frustration, it's impossible for anyone to see Clark Kent anymore. Perhaps it's one of the reasons I feel I've lost him; I've become so overshadowed by the super persona Lois helped me create. But as I head into the bullpen, people are friendly to me and some even ignore me, which never usually happens. There are none of the usual references to a save I did the other day and no light-hearted jokes about wearing tights to work. It's as if these people don't know I'm Superman.

I am lost in my train of thought, when I suddenly look up. My breath catches in my throat, as I am utterly unable to believe my eyes. Sitting, just a few feet away from my desk, is Lois Lane. She looks completely at home, writing, like she had been sitting there for a few hours. Her hair is longer than I remember, but she's just as beautiful, if not more so. My heart stops. How did she get here? *When* did she get here? She doesn't seem to be new to her desk or her surroundings, which only compounds my confusion. Part of me doesn't care. She's here! Lois Lane is here — working at the Daily Planet.

She sees me coming towards her and flashes her intelligent eyes at me — a look that takes my breath. "Clark, where have you been?" she says urgently. "They're holding a press conference in twenty minutes about the solar eclipse this morning, and Perry wants us down there. Pronto!"

"Solar eclipse?" I ask in confusion, though what really takes me aback is her manner with me. She seems not at all surprised to

see me again after three months.

"Look, I know you were knocked on the head this morning, but you couldn't have forgotten that strange solar eclipse! Come on, Clark. We don't have time to waste." She talks to me like I am just acting silly, like I'm some naïve farm boy who would forget to tie his shoes if she wasn't there to remind me. But I don't have the heart to resent her tone. I'm simply amazed at the gift of seeing her again.

She suddenly snatches her jacket and downs the rest of her coffee. I see her come towards me and she grabs my arm. I'm unable to believe that Lois is here and is pulling me towards the elevator as if I were to just tag along — like just another day at the office. I have dreamed of her doing just this hundreds of times — working together on a story.

"Clark, focus!" she says with exasperation. "Let's go!"

At last, I find my voice, wondering if she understands her presence here anymore than I do. "Wait, Lois! When did you get here? I mean... How? Was it Tempus?" I stammer, still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that the woman I have been dreaming about for three months is staring me in the face.

"Tempus? 'Tempus fugit,' maybe! Time flies, indeed! I've been waiting for you over an hour to head to this press conference!" she says, agitated.

"No, I mean, when did you get to the Planet?" I try again, my mind racing as I realize she has no idea who Tempus is.

"Clark, we walked in together this morning. Are you sure you're feeling okay? Maybe that bump on the head did more to you than you think," she said, her small hand suddenly reaching to feel my forehead.

I hold my breath at her touch, though it's no more intimate than a friendly pat. "No, I'm fine, Lois. I am just — surprised to see you here. I mean — I never thought I'd see you again when you went back —"

She's staring at me like I've grown three heads and I quickly shut up, realizing that however she got here, to her the situation is normal. "Clark, I have no idea what you are talking about. But we have a press conference to get to. We'll sort out your apparent confusion later."

She tugs my arm and I can't help but follow her. I start to wonder about the wish I made in the mirror, finding myself believing in magic. I have no idea how I got here or how Lois got here, but I realize two things: This isn't the woman I met three months ago, but I'd still willingly follow Lois Lane to the ends of the earth.

We find out at the press conference that an asteroid is heading straight toward Earth. They are vague on the details, but I watch Lois as her eyes light up with excitement.

She turns to me, grabbing my arm, "Clark, there has to be more to this story. There's something they're not telling us about this Nightfall Asteroid, and we're going to find out what it is!" I can see her fervor for the story and it fascinates me. This is the famous Mad Dog Lane who would go to any length to hunt down a story. She's a sight to behold, that's for sure — a force of nature.

They dismiss us and Lois rushes off to call in the story. I'm suddenly stopped by a man with a grim expression on his face. "Mister Kent, might I have a moment?" he says.

I nod, and he pulls me aside from the rush of reporters around us. "I understand the Daily Planet has a 'special' relationship with Superman."

I try to be neutral as I respond. "We've gotten our share of exclusives."

"Can you get a message to him?"

"I can try," I answer, wondering where this is going.

"I need to see him. Here. This evening." He looks desperate as he requests this and I'm wondering what exactly they want me

to do. “Please...” he adds before rushing off.

Lois comes up to me, and again I’m awed by the fact that she’s actually still here with me. “What did he want?” she asks, gesturing to the man with whom I had just spoken.

I am hesitant, as I’m still uncertain how much she knows about me. “He was, uh, saying what a fan he is of our Superman coverage.”

She looks at me skeptically. “Well, all I know is that this asteroid is going to be front page news. So let’s head back to the Planet, and I’ll show you how a real reporter does the news!”

I watch Lois as she types, captivated by her concentration and her unwitting feminine charm. I still don’t know how long this little wish of mine will last, but I can only hope that it will be forever. That I’ll always have Lois Lane by my side. I muse over how we have found ourselves in this situation. She obviously just sees me as a partner. And though I am delighted beyond words that she is here with me, I’d give anything to see that light of love in her eyes that I saw the first day I met her, even if it was for him, that other Clark. My heart races, wondering if I’ve somehow been given a second chance with her. Will we have the time to really get to know one another, to fall in love with each other?

She suddenly looks up from her keyboard and rolls her eyes. “Clark, would you stop staring into space? This story is almost ready to send to Perry. Did you get the name of spokesperson who briefed us from EPRAD? I thought I had it in my notes but — ”

“Dr. Llewellyn Mayfield,” I happily supply, glancing at my own notes.

“Thanks,” she says, as she finishes typing.

I nod and suddenly realize something. I have been so caught up in Lois that I haven’t heard a single siren or call for help all day. This isn’t normal, as I usually have to duck out of the newsroom at least a couple times of day. But I haven’t heard a thing.

I suddenly decide to listen, panicked that I might have missed something important. I strain to hear anything outside the range of the bullpen, but my hearing doesn’t intensify. I simply hear the noises that surround me: Lois’ typing, the ringing phones around the newsroom, the shuffling of papers. But nothing that would require super hearing. I’m suddenly more than a little disconcerted. I pull down my glasses to x-ray the aluminum filing cabinet, but my eyes have no x-ray vision! I try to stay calm, thinking back to if I had been exposed to Kryptonite earlier. Had the people running the funhouse known my weakness?

I stand up abruptly and Lois looks at me with a scoffing smile. “Whoa, hold your horses there, Clark. Where you headed?”

“Um...” I stammer, thinking. “I — just remembered a lead I need to follow up on. I’ll be back in a little while.”

I head to the elevator, my heart pounding. The two minutes it takes to ride to the ground floor seem interminable. At last, I arrive, and I head out the door and around the corner to a nearby alley.

I spin around — but not at super speed. I finally accept what I knew in the newsroom. My powers are *gone*.

I look at myself despondently in the men’s room mirror. ‘Was it a trade?’ I ask myself. Did somehow wishing to see Lois Lane again mean I had to give up my powers, give up being Superman?

My words suddenly come back to me, taunting me. “*I would give anything to see Lois Lane again.*” And by anything, the fates that be had chosen to take away my powers.

I realize that I am still wearing the Suit though, as I peek under my shirt to be sure. Superman hasn’t entirely vanished, but my powers having disappeared cannot be explained. I can only

hope that I *was* somehow exposed to Kryptonite and that my powers will return soon. I suddenly remember the meeting I promised to have later with EPRAD’s scientist. He expects to speak with Superman about the asteroid. My stomach drops as I wonder if they will expect me to do something about it. And here I am, as helpless as any regular man.

I pull myself together and head back to the bullpen. My eyes drink their fill of Lois Lane and I wonder how my world got so quickly turned upside down. Here I have the love of my life before me again, and yet I am lost without my alter-ego.

I’m suddenly reminded of that old adage: Be careful what you wish for. You just might get it.

Lois glances up from her work as I come back to my desk. “Clark? Your father called while you were out,” she says casually. “Jimmy put a note on your desk.”

I feel as if I’ve just been stomach-punched. My father? I lost my parents when I was ten, in a car accident. And Lois mentions my father as if he’s alive and well, and that it’s normal for my father to call me at work.

I pick up the phone, recalling the number to the Kent farm — a phone number I haven’t used in over fifteen years.

The phone rings twice, and a woman answers. “Hello?”

I know her voice. It’s my mother. I never thought I would ever hear her again. I feel tears constrict my throat and know I must say something, anything before she hangs up, thinking I’m a prank caller.

I clear my throat and say, “Hi, Mom. Um, did Dad call?” Those words feel wonderfully strange in my mouth.

“Clark? Are you all right?” she asks. I’m surprised by how she can know in just a few words whether or not I’m okay. How like my mother.

“Yeah, Mom, I’m — ” But I stop, remembering that my powers are gone. “Well, I’m all right, but I’m not — super,” I say, hopeful that she will understand the implication.

“Oh, Clark... it’s not, the K stuff again?” she asks. I wonder when and where she (And dare I say myself?) formed a shorthand for Kryptonite. I almost sigh in relief. Mom knows what Kryptonite is, and most assuredly knows I am Superman. I feel a rush of emotion, wondering what it would have been like to have grown up with parents who knew what I was capable of, and never fearing me like my fosters, but only encouraging me.

“No,” I answer at last. “It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

“Well, Clark, I’m sure you’ll be all right. Jonathan!” she suddenly calls. “Pick up, it’s Clark!”

Suddenly I hear my father’s voice say hello. I can’t believe my ears. My parents, alive, and talking to me.

“Son, what do you know about this asteroid heading to Earth?” my father asks. I try to concentrate on his words, but I am momentarily overwhelmed by just the sound of his voice.

“I, uh, well, we were briefed at EPRAD earlier. Dad, they want to see Superman later, but... I’m not feeling particularly super at the moment,” I say carefully, aware of the eyes and ears in the office. This is a delightfully novel experience for me — hiding being Superman and talking to my parents. I feel renewed energy at this turn of events, able to explore the world in a new light — even if it’s without my powers.

My father’s voice is reassuring and calm on the other end. “Clark, I’m sure everything will be fine. Go to EPRAD tonight and find out what we’re up against. And remember, son, we’re here for you.”

I hang up the phone, awed by the caring support in my father’s voice. I look up to talk to Lois, and I notice something very strange. About to step out of the elevator is *me*. His eyes meet mine and he looks just as perplexed as I feel, but he stays where he is. I hurriedly move to the elevator and step in. The door closes and he pulls the stop on the elevator and we stare at each other a moment.

“You’re —” he says, puzzled.

“I’m —” I say, equally puzzled.

Suddenly, the answer hits me. Somehow the wish I made sent me to that parallel universe that Lois had come from. The man before me is the Clark Kent that I’ve envied — the one who has his Lois Lane to love, even if neither of them know it yet. I feel sick to my stomach and look away from his gaze.

“Do you know what’s going on here?” he asks cautiously.

I nod. “Yeah, it’s pretty crazy, but yeah... Clark, have you ever heard of a parallel universe?”

“In theory, I suppose.” He sighs, “But I guess *you* being here sort of makes that theory a reality, huh?”

I nod weakly.

“How did you get here? Do you know what happened?”

I feel shame for myself — a rare emotion. I can’t confess my sin, that I wished to see Lois again, but I have to give him some explanation so he can help me get back because obviously, I can’t stay here, as much as it breaks my heart. She is not my Lois — she’s his. This is not my world.

“I made a wish... a selfish wish that I had no right to make.”

He looks at me with compassion. I see the Superman in him that I wish I could become. I see the kind man that his parents raised, and I feel that missing part of myself acutely.

“Where exactly are you from?” he asks, and he looks at me as if I’m a brother. His kind gaze is my own and I feel the urge to cry, unable to understand the injustice of my life when my doppelganger seems to have it all worked out.

“From a world much like yours... only... I — lost my parents when I was ten in a car accident. And... I never had a chance to work with Lois Lane. She was — lost in the Congo a year before I came to work at the Planet,” I say, and I can see that he understands my pain, as he understands fully what I have lost.

He grabs my shoulder and squeezes it in a brotherly gesture. “I’m so sorry, Clark.”

I accept his sympathy, even as I resist resenting it. He means well, and I know his empathy for me is genuine. He is *me*, after all.

But I suddenly recall the situation with the asteroid. Since I was with Lois all morning, I’m not sure how much he knows. And I assume that since I don’t have my powers, he probably has his.

“Clark, do you know about the Nightfall Asteroid?” I ask.

“I saw the eclipse this morning. But I’ve been off on rescues all day.”

“I went with Lois to the press conference. They aren’t saying much, but Superman’s presence is requested at EPRAD this evening. Clark, I think they want — you to stop it.”

He sighs resignedly and then looks askance at me, “Wait, do you have — powers?”

“In my world I do,” I answer wryly. “But they’ve been MIA since I ended up here.”

He nodded, “Well, at least it will help keep the myth alive that Superman and Clark are two different people.”

“You’re so lucky,” I mutter, despite myself.

“Why?” he asks.

“Because in my world, everyone knows my secret.”

He looks at me thoughtfully a moment. “I always wondered what it would be like if the world found out. How bad is it?”

“Well, I don’t have a personal life. And I don’t have a Lois Lane to help me through it all.”

“I don’t exactly ‘have’ Lois,” he says. “She practically worships Superman, and I’m just her green jeans partner.” He shakes his head despondently. “I don’t know if she’ll ever see the real me.”

I see his vulnerability for the first time — the guy who is me and who I think has it all sorted out. I realize he’s trying to figure this out as he goes, just like me. I also realize that I can help him.

“Clark, I learned about Lois because a future version of herself came to me... She helped me create Superman.”

Clark looks at me in shock. “She — what?”

I nod, “She and the writer HG Wells came to me — and she helped me become Superman — because of you. Give her time, Clark. You two are meant to be together,” I finish. Even though I envy him at times, it feels good to share that with him.

“Thanks...” He smiles. Suddenly he super spins into the Suit, and I finally get what Lois was talking about this Clark’s quick change. Spinning is much better than stepping into a closet...

“I guess I should head to EPRAD. Keep Lois company, will you?”

The other Clark came back into the newsroom a few hours later as Superman. He’s a mystery to the people in this world. They haven’t seen the connection to the flawed Clark Kent like they have in mine, and I envy his elusiveness. He strides into the room confidently and heads over to Lois. I see the look of admiration in her eyes and it hits me in the gut. It’s so strange to know I am also Superman, yet not her Clark — and yet know that *he* will end up winning her in the end. Why did I get the short end of this deal?

Lois takes his hand and pulls him into the conference room. I’d give anything to have my super hearing back to hear what they’re saying. I can imagine though. Lois wants to know what went on at EPRAD. And if they asked him what I think they asked, she’ll be there to bolster his will to get the job done. What must it be like to have an admiring Lois Lane on your side?

Though, given our talk on the elevator earlier, I know this Clark has his own issues with his alter-ego. I’ve seen how Lois ignores Clark, although there are signs that she likes him somewhat at this point. I can’t help but wonder what it takes for Lois to finally see through the brightly colored spandex to the man underneath.

They emerge a short time later. He crosses his arms to appear strong, yet I can see a vulnerability there. He’s terrified someone will recognize him as Clark. But his nervousness is allayed by Lois’ confidence in him.

She announces that he has been asked to stop the asteroid, as I had guessed. Her confidence suddenly makes me understand something. It’s not just Lois Lane that I lack in my life; it’s her belief in Superman. That’s how he holds himself together. He needs that confidence she instills in him to do what he does. And I — well, the memory of Lois Lane gets me through the day, but I wonder how much more super I could become if I had her by my side.

Lois brushes past me to go with Superman to EPRAD. I catch a whiff of her soft perfume, and as they leave through the large window, I feel a heaviness in my heart. I wonder if I can ever become the hero I am supposed to be if I am doomed to walk my path alone.

But at the moment, I am worse than alone because I am between worlds. Lois will come back to the Planet in a few hours and I can play her work partner and experience how wonderful it is to be her Clark Kent. I sigh and shake my head, wondering again how I got here and why. I can sense that this isn’t forever — and I could never steal the other Clark’s life. It’s not in my nature to even try. But I feel like there is a larger lesson in all of this, just out of reach.

I watch Superman’s send-off on television, alongside some other Planet employees. It’s a strange sensation. I feel like a voyeur on my own life. It should be me in the Suit. It should be me getting ready to save the world. It should be me —

My heart stops with painful longing at the image before me. I see Lois Lane kiss Superman. I feel the blood drain from my face and I become a bit dizzy. There is passion evident in both of them, and it’s as if a ghost of myself feels that kiss as well.

“Where is my Lois?” I ask myself and God for the hundredth time. My soul yearns for that connection, a thread that I feel is so real and tenable, and yet I know it is severed forever. My Lois is gone.

I force my eyes back to the television screen. The camera pans the crowd and comes to rest on Lois who is radiant with love as she waves to Superman. I fight it, yet I feel she is waving to me as well, encouraging me onward.

The camera moves to the sky, but Superman is already gone. I imagine what he must be going through and I wish him good luck. If it’s not me up there, at least it’s him.

I know he’ll get the job done.

Perry comes to my desk a few minutes later.

“Clark, I need you out on the street getting the reaction to Superman’s mission. Lois will be back shortly to write up the main piece, but you could do a tie-in.”

He pats me gently on the shoulder, and I remember back to the days when my Perry had all the confidence in the world in me. But I have disappointed him countless times due to my moodiness. It’s nice to see a Perry who believes in me again, even if it’s not really me he counts on.

I grab a notebook and a pencil, feeling like doing this old school. I could bring a tape recorder, but maybe having to work just a bit harder to get the details will do me some good.

I down the rest of my coffee and head out of the newsroom.

As I step out onto the busy Metropolis street, I see small crowds of people gathered around several TV store windows, watching the coverage on Superman. I tap one woman on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, I’m Clark Kent, Daily Planet. We’re covering the reaction to the asteroid and Superman’s mission. Any thoughts?”

She blinks a couple of times, surprised I want her opinion, I suppose. “Well, now that Superman has been sent to destroy it, I know we’ll be all right.”

“How do you know?” I ask, touched by the confidence she has in Superman.

“Because — he’s Superman,” she says simply with a matter-of-fact shrug. “He won’t let us down.”

She turns away and I say, “Thank you.”

I head around the corner and peer into a bar. A bunch of men in work suits are having a beer and are also watching the coverage. I step inside and introduce myself.

“Even with his super abilities, the man has courage. I mean, to face an asteroid?” one guy says.

“You know, he saved my kid once. I’ll never forget it. It was the week of Christmas, and our building had a fire. He didn’t think twice and swooped up to our seventh story apartment and rescued Joshua.” The man looks up to me with tears in his eyes. “And now he’s out there to save us all again.”

“He’s real approachable, too. He spoke at my wife’s charity luncheon — didn’t ask for a dime. Great guy, that Superman.”

“I feel safer knowing Superman is around. Metropolis used to be a dangerous city. But now — I don’t worry so much.”

Through story after story, I learn what Superman means to these people. I see a side of the city that I never get to experience in my own world. I know that people respect what I do, but I wonder if there are similar stories in my world. Have I been able to make a difference just as he has? I hope so.

I head back to the Planet, my heart lighter. I feel a connection to the city that I had been lacking before. Superman can be appreciated — and I feel hope for myself as well. Even with my secret out, if I start *acting* super, surely I can build the trust and confidence these people feel for their hero.

As I enter the elevator and push the button, I push a little too hard and crack the plastic. I pause. Have my powers returned? I

try the x-ray vision and get nothing... no freeze breath... but my strength is returning... it’s a good sign.

When I get back, Lois is in the newsroom, still glowing. I can see she’s had the best of both worlds today — a headline story and a kiss from Superman. I smile, despite myself. She is so beautiful when she is happy.

She says hello to me, and then immediately gets to writing up her story about the asteroid. I tell her I’m doing a tie-in piece, but she’s not really interested. I sigh, resigned to being the overlooked Clark Kent and begin work on my own piece.

The television is still on in the newsroom, so we all can keep an eye on Superman’s progress. I see Lois glancing up at it constantly, a look of worry on her face. Suddenly, the workers in the newsroom gather around the television again.

“Superman is approaching the asteroid,” the announcer says. “Impact in five, four, three, two — he has hit it! Wait a moment — EPRAD has lost communication with Superman!”

Lois steps forward. “His mic went out. That’s all. Superman is fine,” she says confidently. Then, in a quieter voice, “He has to be.”

I reach to gently squeeze her shoulder, and she gives me a weak smile.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” I say.

We continue to stare at the screen. I have been in space only once. I am certain Clark is all right, though there is a palpable sense of worry in the room. I wish I could fly at that moment and try to help him myself. I’m not used to sitting on this side of the action.

Lois suddenly looks up at me. “You really think he’s okay, Clark?” she asks, concerned. Her eyes are wide like a frightened child, and I want nothing more than to gather her in my arms.

But I comfort her with words instead. I think of what the people on the street had said about Superman earlier, and I draw on that confidence. “He’s Superman, Lois. He’ll be fine.”

She suddenly wraps her arms around me, gifting me with a hug. I hold her close, wanting more than ever to return her hero to her.

“Thanks, Clark.”

Before we turn away from the TV, the announcer continues. “We have confirmation that Superman has hit the asteroid, but a sizeable piece is still headed to Earth. Mission Control at EPRAD is doing all they can to reestablish contact with Superman. If he didn’t make it, the authorities will have to look into other options to deal with the Nightfall Asteroid.”

Lois gets a phone call about an hour later. She looks annoyed as she hangs up the phone. “Clark, come with me, will you? Henderson says there’s something down at the police station that I’ve got to see.”

I nod and grab my coat as I follow her to the elevator.

She fidgets as we ride down together. “Is everything okay, Lois?” I ask.

She shrugs and turns to me. She looks like she’s trying to summon a retort, but tears fill her eyes instead and she laughs self-deprecatingly. “I’m fine, Clark... just — the end of the world could be approaching! Superman is missing! It should be a great news day,” she says bitterly.

I reach for her hand and squeeze it, not daring to try and hug her again. She smiles up at me through her tears, and I can see a bit of her inner strength. I know she’ll make it through this. And I’ll do all I can to help her.

We ride in silence to the police station. People are already starting to panic, as lines grow outside grocery stores. As I stare out the window, I keep trying my special vision, as I feel like my powers are trying to return. In the back of my mind, I keep thinking that this world needs a Superman, and with the other

Clark missing... I might be their best shot. I have a little success with the x-ray and telescopic vision. I can't see through everything, but it's becoming easier. I feel a bit like I did when I was a teenager, just learning to adjust to my abilities. I suddenly have the itch to try to fly, but I can't leave the car. I glance over at Lois and realize she's still a bit shaken up.

"I really don't want to think this is the end," she says in a low voice as we make our way to the police station. "I — I want to believe that Superman is okay and out there somewhere."

"He is, Lois. I know he is," I say, including myself in that sentiment, hoping that I will be back to my old self soon.

We enter the building and Henderson comes up to greet us, only he stops when he sees me. He stares at me like I'm a freak and I suddenly wonder if he has a sixth sense about things being out of place.

"You aren't going to believe this —" he says. Lois jumps ahead of him, seeing the same man I see behind plated glass.

The other Clark is looking around the room as if he hasn't a clue about what's going on. Lois turns to me and looks back at the other Clark, utterly perplexed. I feel my palms begin to sweat as my mind races to give her a plausible explanation.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on here?" asks Henderson.

"We're — twins," I say, though Henderson doesn't look convinced.

"Well, I don't know what's going on, but the guy in there has amnesia. He can't remember a thing about who he is or why he was found wandering in Suicide Slum," Henderson says, looking at me as if I can provide the answer.

Lois at last finds her voice. "I want to talk to him. And to you," she says turning at me. "Alone," she says to Henderson.

He lifts his hands in a gesture of surrender and ushers us into the room.

Clark stares at me a moment. "Do I have a twin?" he asks. His eyes settle on Lois, "Who are you?"

"I'm Lois Lane," she answers evenly. She then turns to me, her arms crossed in determination. "I want an explanation, and it better be good. Which one of you is the real Clark Kent?"

"Lois... sit down," I suggest, though she isn't inclined to listen. "I am Clark Kent — and *he* is Clark Kent."

She looks at me and then at the other Clark, skepticism clearly written on her face.

I sigh and shake my head. "This is really hard to explain — because even I don't understand how it happened. But I come from a parallel world," I say, hearing how strange it sounds. I can see Lois isn't buying it.

"Try that again, please," she says, her defenses still up.

"Lois, I'm serious." I know I have to tell the whole truth, or she'll never understand. I sigh and try another tactic, hoping that the other Clark will forgive me for what I am about to say. I glance at Clark, feeling guilty about what this could mean for them, but I know what will get Lois' attention. "Lois, he's Superman," I begin.

She laughs. "Right, and I'm Wonder Woman."

"Look, we need Superman right now. There are only a few hours left until Nightfall hits the earth. I am telling you the truth. Clark is Superman — and so am I."

"You've got to be joking! I mean — first of all, I don't understand why there are two of you and second — *you* are Superman?"

"Who's Superman?" the other Clark asks, looking very lost.

"Look, I can prove it," I say, though I'm suddenly nervous. My powers are still a bit on the fritz, but I am wearing the Suit under my clothes still. I have been dying to try the super spin I saw the other Clark do. I realize it's all or nothing. This has to work. *I am* Superman and my powers have been returning. Besides, this planet needs me. With the other Clark having

memory problems, I will have to do something about that asteroid.

So, with more confidence than I feel, I spin into the Suit.

"Cool costume," says Clark with an appreciative grin.

I turn to face Lois, who is staring at me in shock. "I don't know what's going on here," she begins. "But how can there be two of you? Is one of you Clark and the other Superman?" she asks, suddenly sitting down.

"No, Lois, I know it sounds crazy, but what I told you is the truth. We are both Clark Kent and we are both Superman," I say, glancing at Clark.

Lois looks over at him as well. "Do you remember anything?" she asks.

He sadly shakes his head. "I can honestly say I haven't a clue what he's talking about."

Lois sighed, turning back to face me. I admire the courage I see in her eyes as she begins to speak. "Okay, I don't know what to believe or to think, but if you're Superman — then can *you* stop the asteroid?"

I wasn't expecting her to ask that, though it's what has been in the back of my mind since the other Clark went missing. Lois suddenly has hope in her eyes that I can help, and I don't want to disappoint her.

"I think I can. My powers haven't been 100 percent since I got here, but they are returning."

"Clark *can't* be Superman," she says to herself, and I realize she is confused and even hurt by this admission. She glances up at me, "So if you come from this parallel universe as you say," she says, seeming game to try and make sense of all of this, "then, is there a Lois Lane in your world, too?"

I try to hide the hurt I feel at hearing those words, but I evidently don't succeed. She puts her hand on my arm and with compassion that is nearly my undoing, she asks, "What happened to her?"

I sigh, feeling the familiar constriction in my throat when I think of my life without Lois Lane. "She disappeared in the Congo, on a story. About a year before I came to work at the Planet," I manage to get out.

"You seem as if you know her — or me. How is that possible?"

I glance at Clark, and I don't want to give more away. I feel bad that I already told Lois our secret, yet I have to say something. "I met you — in your future."

"How is that even possible?" she asks, incredulous.

"Lois," I say, raking my fingers through my hair nervously. "I know it all sounds like it's out of a sci-fi novel, but you actually helped me create Superman in my world... and then you came back —" My eyes shift unwittingly to Clark, who is watching us, utterly confused.

"For him?" she whispers, and I realize I can't keep their future from her.

I nod and Clark stares at Lois, trying to understand the implications of our bizarre conversation, I imagine.

Lois sits back in the chair, seemingly overwhelmed.

"I'm sorry if I said too much, Lois. But I had no idea how else I could explain all this," I say.

She glances up at me, and I can see she's made a decision about something. "Look, time is ticking. Go to EPRAD. Talk to Mission Control and see what you can do. I'll take care of — my Clark," she says, almost apologetically.

I give her a wan smile and then turn to Clark. "I'm sorry, Clark."

"For what?" he asks.

I look back at Lois. "Promise me when he gets his memory back that you'll forgive him for not telling you sooner."

"As long as we have enough time for him to remember," she says sadly. She suddenly makes a shooing motion at me as she

stands. “Go! The world needs you, Superman.”

That’s all I need to hear.

It feels so good to fly again. I immediately break through the cloud cover in order to get the strongest rays from the sun. I feel renewed instantly, and I know without a doubt that my powers are fully restored. I still have no idea why they disappeared in the first place. Did it have something to do with the strange mirror? But it doesn’t matter now. I have a job to do.

As I head towards EPRAD, I notice a large, ominous shadow in the sky. It’s what’s left of the asteroid that the other Superman had broken up. It looks wicked and menacing through the higher clouds, but I am confident I can take care of it.

I have to be.

Landing at EPRAD causes a stir of excitement. People immediately begin questioning me about what happened, and I explain that I lost the communicator with the first impact. I say that hitting the asteroid cast me further into space than I expected, and it took me longer to return to Earth.

They believe my semi-plausible explanation and begin explaining how the asteroid had been hit directly in the middle the first time which is why it was still on a course towards Earth. Several scientists explain how I need to approach it a second time. They suit me up with an extra oxygen tank and soon I am ready to leave.

I look around. News crews are here and several cameras — but no Lois Lane. She’s taking care of her Clark Kent, so there’s no good luck kiss for me — Superman.

I push these thoughts aside and concentrate on the mission before me. I soon leave the earth below me and head towards the asteroid in the heavens.

As I break through to the outer atmosphere, I immediately see the asteroid. It is larger than I thought it was, and I wonder how big it was before the other Superman rammed it. Again I am impressed by his courage. But I am determined to be just as brave, just as capable.

Mission Control is talking to me through a small earpiece, reminding me how I should aim to best impact the asteroid. It’s both farther out than I thought and yet dangerously close to Earth. Its craters are menacing and foreign — a large dark rock that could destroy so many lives.

I pick up speed as I aim for impact. Silently I count down to myself. ‘Five, four, three, two — ’

It’s like hitting a brick wall, yet I manage to divert it. Mission Control screams in my ear that the asteroid will miss the Earth.

All thanks to Superman.

I feel ebullient beyond measure that I made a difference. As I near Metropolis, I hear sounds of joyful celebration. People are honking their horns and homemade signs that read, “Thanks, Superman!” and “Superman saves the day!” greet me as I fly over the city streets. I head to the Daily Planet, eager to see Lois again and hopeful that Clark might be feeling more like his old self.

As I fly into the newsroom, I am greeted with applause. Even Lois comes up to me and gives me a hug. I wish I could live in this world forever. But I see Clark at his desk, smiling at me, and I know I am just the stand-in.

As people start returning back to work, I ask Lois about Clark.

“He’s starting to remember things...”

“Lois, I’m sorry about what I said. It wasn’t my place to tell — ” I began.

“But you didn’t know what else to say to get my attention,” she finishes for me. “It’s okay. I am a little shocked — but I think Clark and I will survive,” she says with a smile that reaches in

and clenches my heart.

I suddenly hear the elevator open and I see a man I thought I might never see again — HG Wells. I feel relieved, hoping that I might finally understand the strange turn of events. But I also realize that it might mean it’s time for me to return home.

Lois is about to turn back to her desk, but I reach for her hand. “Lois,” I say, “I’m glad I met you.”

She smiles that intoxicating smile that haunts my dreams and I wonder, just for a moment, if I could possibly stay in her world.

“Me, too... And about — you know. Well, I’m just glad that Superman saved the day after all.”

I smile in return and see HG Wells gesturing for me to meet him in the elevator. “I have to go, Lois. Good-bye.”

She stops me suddenly by simply putting her hand on my chest. She leans in close and I struggle to resist the urge to kiss her. But her kind eyes meet mine and she says, “Don’t give up, Clark. She might still be out there.” She then reaches up and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek.

I take those words and tuck them inside my heart as I head to the elevator.

Wells smiles at me as I step inside and the doors close. He pulls the stop button and grins at me.

“Well, don’t you feel so much better?” he asks, a little too smugly.

“What do you mean?” I ask and then an idea hits me. “Were you behind all of this?”

“Well, sort of. You see, you were so deep in the doldrums... and though your world isn’t this one, it still needs a Superman. Perhaps more so. You need to instill the optimism into the people that Tempus tried to take away. And so I talked with the Utopian Council about what to do. I had to show you that you have a purpose — that people need and respect you.” He suddenly winks at me. “And I knew seeing Lois again would do you good.”

“Then, the kidnappings and the fun house — was it all a set-up?” I ask.

Wells nods. “Yes. I knew I’d have to appeal to your instinct to want to help people. And I needed to expose you to some Kryptonite. I do hope you forgive me for that. But you need to understand, I wanted you to see yourself as Clark Kent for a while and get to know yourself again. I’ve been so worried that you have been lost in the shadow of Superman for far too long...”

I look at him incredulously. I think I should be angry, yet all I feel is gratitude. Wells is absolutely right. I suddenly reach out to shake his hand. “Thanks,” is all I can say, but it doesn’t convey what he has restored to me.

“Well, my boy, it’s the least I could do. Now, are you ready to head back to your Metropolis?”

I use my x-ray vision to look through the elevator door, taking one last look at Lois Lane. My heart sinks knowing I will probably never see her again, but her memory will remain with me forever.

I turn back to HG Wells. “I’m ready.”

Several weeks later, feel so much more myself after my visit to the other side of the mirror. My writing is better, and Superman is much more respected these days. I’ve even made some friends around the office.

Every now and then, though, I glance over at the empty desk — the one that used to be Lois Lane’s. Perry has never had the heart to give it to anyone else. I feel like she’s here with me, as I remember her perfume, and her beautiful, captivating smile. I may not have her in my life, but she will always be in heart.

“Kent! Get in here!” Perry calls, excitement in his voice.

I shake myself out of my daydreams and head into his office.

“What is it, Chief?”

Perry turns to me, a piece of paper in his hand. It’s a

telegram, which one rarely sees anymore. “I don’t believe it. I simply *don’t* believe it!” said Perry, handing me the telegram.

I’m puzzled but take the paper. It’s an old fashioned Western Union telegram dated two weeks ago. It reads “I’m alive. In Dakar, Senegal. Perry, can you get me home? Lois Lane.”

I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I stare at those two words at the end of the message. *Lois Lane*. She’s alive. She’s alive!

“Clark — would you mind getting our girl and bringing her home?” Perry asks, choked with emotion.

I don’t even answer as I spin into the Suit and head out of the newsroom. My heart is lighter than air and I know I break the sound barrier as I leave Metropolis’ shores. But the other half of my soul is just over the horizon and I can’t seem to get there fast enough.

It takes no more than five minutes to get to Dakar. I realize I don’t know where in the city she is and my excitement is making it hard for me to focus. I try to calm down, knowing I don’t want to scare her when I do find her. She has no idea who I am or what we might eventually mean to each other.

Realizing I look entirely too conspicuous as Superman, I spin back into Clark Kent. I ask a few locals about a brunette haired white woman, and I’m not surprised that they all know exactly who she is. They point me to a hotel on a desolate beach. I have to rein in my super speed as I go racing towards the hotel.

I step inside and immediately see her. She’s sitting at the bar, sipping a lemonade. Her hair is a bit shorter than the Lois I met but still in a bob. She’s wearing white slacks and a pastel print shirt. She looks radiant.

I step up to the bar and take a deep breath. “Lois Lane, I presume.”

She looks slightly startled as her eyes meet mine. I feel like she can see into the depths of my soul and my heart rejoices, knowing I’ve found my Lois.

“I’m Clark Kent. Perry White sent me to get you,” I say casually, showing her my press pass.

“Oh, my God. I can’t believe one of them got through!” she says with excitement. “You have no idea what I have been through for the last three years.

“Well, we have a long flight back. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

She pays for her lemonade and we head out the door.

“We’re pretty isolated here,” she says. “How are we getting back to Metropolis?” Lois asks, sudden tears coming to her eyes.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” I ask her, wanting more than anything to take away those tears.

“I’ve traveled through the jungle, desert... all over. I’ve sent letters and telegrams — for *three years*. I feel like — I don’t know, Alice falling into the rabbit hole, you know? So completely lost. I’ve survived a snake bite, gunmen, a whole world of trouble... But one thought kept me alive.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“I had to make it back to the Daily Planet. I just *knew* that I had to survive,” she says with simplicity.

My own heart breaks at hearing about her trials, but it also surges with joy. Selfishly I think she survived for me.

“Anyway,” she says, wiping her eyes. “About that transport?”

I figure it’s now or never. Maybe I can start my life with my Lois with the whole truth laid out on the table.

“Do you trust me?” I ask, reaching out my hand for her to take it.

“You look like the least frightening thing I’ve encountered in my time here in Africa. So, yes, I do,” she says with a smile as she accepts my hand.

I pull her to me and lift her in my arms. She laughs, and it’s a heady sound to my ears. “Smooth move, Romeo. But what now?”

“This,” I say, as I lift off the ground. She holds on tighter to

me as we begin to fly out towards the ocean.

“How — what?” she asks in total shock.

“It’s a long flight home, Lois. Just relax and I’ll tell you everything.”

She begins to settle into my arms. “I guess that just goes to show that life is full of surprises. Okay, Fly Boy, what else have you got up your sleeve?”

I begin to tell her my story as we travel across the warm ocean as an orange and purple sunset beckons us home to Metropolis — and, to our future.

THE END

Author’s notes:

This was a ficathon story with the following requests from Iolanthealias:

Three things I want in my story:

1. The revelation
2. An Alt-Clark, Alt-Lois, or Alt-somebody.
3. A Slinky (the toy that’s a long spring)

Three things I don’t want in my story:

1. Murder
2. Anything about clones, the ARGH wedding, or amnesia
3. Yogurt