

Superman is Dead

A small woman in a white uniform stood beside Clark Kent as he came into consciousness. She held his wrist and studied her watch. He realized immediately where he was and looked around him at the stark, white room.

A tall, lean man came into the room and shut the door behind him. Clark looked away from the man to the window. He saw nothing out the window but the wall of another, close building.

Clark didn't want to be touched, but the man uncovered him, flexed his limbs, tapped him here and there, and listened to his body through a stethoscope. He said, "Clark, you're in the pink of condition." The false heartiness of his voice scraped like dirty gravel in Clark Kent's ears. "You can leave in the morning." The man walked out of the room and shut the door behind him.

Clark didn't want the sympathy he saw in the nurse's face. He didn't want anything from anyone, except to know one thing, that he was almost sure of, that he didn't want to know. "What happened to... is... Did he... Did...?"

The nurse said, "The doctor is a coward, to leave it to me. There was nothing we could do. Superman is dead."

Clark Kent felt lost, like doing nothing at all, like ceasing all existence.

Early the next morning, two nurses escorted him to the front door. They opened the door for him, and he walked out of the hospital. The door closed behind him. The nurses turned and went back to their indoor duties.

Clark stood in sunshine. He knew he couldn't just stand there vacant, thinking everything was dead and grey. He must do something. He must leave the hospital behind him. He squared his shoulders. He walked. He caught a cab and went to his apartment. In the morning, he went back to the newspaper office. His hardest work was to keep going.

Clark Kent wondered why he was still here. Sometimes he said it aloud, testing the reality of it, "I'm still here." And sometimes he asked, "Why? Why am I? What is there to be here for?"

He was so lost in depression and despair, he often forgot when and what.

Thursday after work, he walked away from the newspaper

building, lost in grey depression. He knew he needed to hail a cab or catch a bus, but he did nothing about it. He just kept putting one foot in front of the other, without purpose.

He turned the corner to a chaotic scene. It took him a moment to make sense of what he saw. People fled from a muscular man in a white shirt and dark slacks, who held a meat cleaver and ran at one person and then another, cleaver raised as if to strike. People got out of his way as fast as they could, but the dense crowd made escape difficult. People who were not in immediate danger stayed to see what would happen, and they made retreat difficult for those who would.

Clark's fog of depression blew away. He leaped into a phone booth, ripped off his clothes, and stood there in his underwear, astounded, no uniform, no body of steel, just Clark Kent, aging, muscles softening, the suggestion of a paunch, of adiposity across his chest and buttocks.

There was nothing to do but go on with it. Would-be Superman in blue and red uniform and cape, actually, it was Clark Kent in his red and yellow flowered boxer shorts and yellow undershirt who emerged from the crowd and walked toward the man with the cleaver. "Here now. We can't threaten about with deadly weapons. We'll have to talk about it and come up with a better way."

"Here now yourself, mister. You're out in public in broad daylight in your underwear. Don't you see all these people looking at you? Here, take my shirt. At least it'll cover you part way, and I'm wearing a t-shirt, not one of those skimpy little shoulder-strap outfits like you got. Put it on, now. That's better. Come on. Let's get out of here before people wake up and start asking questions."

He still carried the meat cleaver, but he didn't threaten with it now. "Coming through," he said, "Excuse us. Clear a way. We've an emergency here. Give us room. Thank you. Get back to your business, all of you, and let us through. You've better ways to spend your day than gawking at some poor bloke out in his underwear."

Clark's clothes had disappeared from the phone booth. Some satisfied man had gained a \$300.00 suit and \$125.00 worth of shoes. Oh hell. Wallet, cash, keys, the works. That happened every time, of course. Superman had been used to it. He had his uniform to wear while he rounded up what he needed, and he charged it all off as an operating expense. Clark Kent slowed down and stared at the empty phone booth. The man with the cleaver pulled him along. "Come on. We'd better keep moving. There are laws, you know, and someone could decide to make trouble."

Around one corner and down the block, and around another corner. The man flagged a cab, and they got in. The driver pulled away from the curb. The man with the cleaver asked, "Now where to? We need to get you to your place and get some decent clothes for you. What address do we give the driver?"

He had Clark wait in the cab while he ran up and got clothes for him. Clark dressed in the taxi, and then they both went up to his apartment.

Clark thought, Phooey. Did my brain come through in one piece? What if I'd seen this man from the office window, 17 stories up? Would I have leaped before I thought, come down in my underwear in Superman's perfect form, one leg arched, one toe reaching for the concrete, into which so-breakable Clark Kent would slam? Surely that would have brought this man's threat of violence to an end as effectively as striding forward in underwear and argyle socks, with less continuing pain for Clark Kent than still being here tomorrow and next week promised to bring.

It had come slamming into his consciousness, the tragic, deeply bereft realization as he burst from the phone booth, "Superman is Dead." even as he moved toward what he knew demanded action from him.

Afterward, up in Clark Kent's apartment, they looked at each other in silence. The man extended his hand, and Clark reached to shake. The man said, "Thanks. From the depth of my existence, thanks to you. It worked. Totally."

"But you're still carrying the meat cleaver."

"I have to take it back. I'm a butcher. It's one of my tools, but it's only a tool. I'm okay now. The world is different now. Even if somebody jumps me from an alley just for the joy of hurting or killing someone, I'm ready for it, because in my mind's eye, at the moment of crisis, I'll see this black-haired, going to grey, medium tall, medium weight, square-jawed man in his underwear and socks walking toward me out of a crowd full of fear, saying calmly and authoritatively, 'Here now. We don't do that sort of thing. There's a better way to go about this. Let's talk it over.' And I'll know the world hasn't gone completely bad. There really is still a lot of good in the world."

Phone booths are for phone calls. Undergirding everything he deals with in an apparently coherent fashion is an intense, agonizingly insistent pain that Clark Kent hadn't before really realized that Superman, Superman is Dead.

He said it aloud, "Superman is Dead."

"I know. I know, man. That was a tough break for the people when that happened."

Tears ran down Clark's face. The man put down the cleaver,

punched Clark very lightly on the shoulder, gripped his shoulder. "We just got to keep going anyway, man. That's all there is, keep going, do the best you can. Wouldn't Superman himself have said that, if he was standing here with me and you? I bet he would. 'Keep going, you guys. That's all you can do. Keep going and do the best you can.'"

In the days that followed, part of doing the best he could was remembering, "Superman is Dead."

So that's it. He's dead. What really hits Clark, people say, or sometimes he reads in the paper, in letters to the editor or sometimes in an article, or in a t.v. special or a magazine, "There never was a superman. Such things are outside the boundaries of reality. There never was a superman." They do that, too. They don't even capitalize the name; they print it lower case.

When he hears that or reads that, sometimes he cries.

In the concrete and steel building, high in the city sky, the editor looks away, out the window, at the face of the next building, a narrow mountain of stone and glass. Clark is sure Jack, the editor, thinks he's crying out of self-pity, when really, it's unbearable frustration.

"Jack, can't they see what's real? Don't they trust their own senses, their own memories, the word of the people all around them, who were there, who saw those leaps over these very buildings, the locomotive stopped from a runaway 90 m.p.h., the tidal wave turned, always gently, without damage or danger to anyone or anything, muggers, burglars, rapists and murderers foiled in their violent intentions?

"Do people want chaos? Crime and violence rampant and no champion for the people? Our memories are so short. Our history is full of lies. Our gratitude dies in an instant."

Clark holds the newspaper out toward Jack and taps the story he's been reading. "Jack, you know Superman was real. Why don't you answer these idiotic assertions? Blast them on the front page. Tell them what you know. Doesn't anybody stand for anything anymore?"

Jack turns his chair and faces Clark. He waits a moment, obviously organizing his thoughts and then says, "Since you attack it that directly, I'll have to tell you I simply wouldn't state in a public document, in writing, that Superman ever was. We've kept you on, Clark, because we know how difficult the transition is for you. We know when you get it worked out, you'll get back to being a top reporter, but you need more editing in your mind.

"We tell the people what they will understand. There's no use trying to tell them what they won't understand."

On the verge of exploding and scattering the newspaper around the office in fury, Clark stops himself, quells his temper, swallows what he was going to say. He could lose his job if he pushed too hard. He never worried about losing his job before. There's a lot of newspapers shut down and more good reporters than jobs. He's over fifty. In this nation, you're classified as too old to hire before you've even hit your stride.

He was afraid of everything, losing his job, getting hurt, getting attacked by someone when he, Clark Kent, knew he would be unable to hit anyone, even in his own defense, because he didn't know anymore how much strength he had and could not use it judiciously.

He was afraid of getting out in high places; maybe it would be something he couldn't control, like with the phone booth, and he'd jump off, probably in his underwear, before he remembered he couldn't do any of that stuff anymore.

He walked out of Jack's office and tried to calm himself and go about his existence. He concentrated on what was real now. He kept it always in his mind. Until, finally, shot through his entire consciousness, pre-consciousness, flesh, bone, and sinew, he knew it. Superman is Dead. That part of existence is gone, finished, behind him.

He didn't read any article that mentioned Superman. He never asked anyone if they thought Superman was real or myth. If he heard any conversation about Superman, he left.

He saw the young family trapped in their car under the overturned truck. Clark prayed for strength and put every ounce of his only human power against the unyielding steel. Two policemen, who he once could have set aside as easily as paper dolls, pulled him away.

"Come on, Mister. You're nuts to think you can lift 40 tons of truck. Who the hell do you think you are? Superman?" The gas tank in the car blew up. Flame-laden air knocked Clark and the policemen to the pavement. They were gone, dead, the family in the car, the truck driver.

Clark didn't notice his burns, his torn clothing, the angry words from the policemen. They pulled him to his feet, pushed him farther away and called for help. "Get this guy away from here. He's going to get himself killed. Everybody move farther back. The tanks on the truck could blow."

When Clark got back to his apartment, he tried to face it. "All right. What I could do, I can't. That's all. I have no super-human powers. I was stupid not to see the treachery that brought me into contact with Kryptonite, but that's done with. Nothing can turn time back. Lamenting, hating myself, grieving changes nothing. Somehow, I have to go on from here with

what I have.”

He cleaned up and caught a bus across town to the butcher shop. The butcher said, “See what you showed me. There’s a lot of disorder, violence and senseless death in the world. If we give up, if we give in to that, then it has the victory it’s trying for. We have to keep a hold on the good there is. We have to keep our heads up and keep going and keep working for the victory of good.

“Do what you can, and after that, don’t torture yourself for not bein’ able to go beyond where you can go. Don’t you know? I’d give anything in this world if I could say Shazam and be powerful when I see something needs doing and I can’t do it.

“We’ll have to do it with what we got, and that’s human beings, and as a human being, you’re doin’ okay. You’re doin’ your best, and it’s a good best, so keep going. You have to believe it will turn out to be worth not giving up.”

Clark thought, cowards quit. Courage isn’t super human. It’s human. Superman didn’t need courage, not true courage that means you face what has to be faced, even when you know there’s a strong possibility you’ll lose. Superman never faced anything he couldn’t beat.

I still have courage and faith in the power of good over evil. I believe in the power of the press to bring about change in the world, and I am part of the press. I am going to go on. The butcher is right. To do otherwise would be to capitulate to the evil forces and give them victory.

Clark focused his energy as he never had before, as he had never had time to do before. He read a lot of the work he had written in earlier years, in the years of Superman. Now, he saw it lacked depth. It lacked development. He had written the facts, but not much beyond the facts. He had never really dug in and tried to make sense of the facts he reported.

He had to go on from there. What do these facts mean? What is being done about the facts? What can be done? Who can do it? Is there a moral dimension implied by the facts, that needs exploration and development?

He wrote. He rewrote. He tore everything he wrote apart and wrote it again. He read. Every writer who sparked his interest, he studied, trying to see, beginning to see what techniques worked to make the facts sensible, to suggest changes that could push a chaotic world toward more sensible possibilities. He didn’t know what the future would bring. He didn’t know if he could bring about change in the world. He knew he had to try.

He wrote a long article on ways to limit fires and explosions after wrecks. For a long time, nobody wanted it. Then a

national magazine showed interest and suggested revisions. He spent his evenings at home rewriting the article. Move over, Lincoln Steffins, Ralph Nader, he thought, there's room on your bench.

At the office, Jack brought in the article about the labor situation on the docks. "It's good, Clark. It's necessary. Sunday Special with photos, just the way you wrote it. Let me see two more special features like this, looking at issues. You could work up a daily column. Call it Kent's Ken maybe, something like that, more of this what we need to think about approach, looking at the principles in operation, or the lack of principles. Make a run at it if you want to, and we can start thinking about what that would be worth to the paper."

Going on was worth it. It still took telling himself that every day. He still felt drained. Okay, but still, deep inside, lonely to the core.

It was late, nearing dark. Clark had been so absorbed in his work, he'd let the time slip away. The little cafe on the corner where he usually ate dinner would be closed. He didn't think he had the energy to go anywhere else. It would be easiest to go on home and just forget dinner. He put his hat on, and his overcoat and walked down the hall and out onto the sidewalk. It rained lightly, from a very dark sky. It looked like heavier rain coming.

Someone caught his elbow, with strong but gentle fingers. "Clark, I've hardly seen you in months. I've missed our conversations and lunches together. I intend to talk you into taking them up again."

"Oh, hello, Lois. I... I'd love to. I've missed them too. I guess I've been preoccupied and not seeing all of what's around me."

"I know, Clark. Ever since Superman died, you've been really hard to reach."

"Lois, I... I'm glad to see you. I've wanted to talk to you. What are you doing now? Do you have dinner plans? Why don't you go to dinner with me? I just got a substantial raise, and I'd like you to help me celebrate."

They caught a cab and chose an expensive Italian restaurant. They looked at menus. For the first time in a long time, Clark felt hungry. He had been eating only because he knew he needed to eat, but now, tomato, spice, and pasta, cheese, meat, and vegetable smells weighted the restaurant air. He ordered and smelled and tasted and ate eagerly.

Lois said, "I'm glad to see you have an appetite. You've lost a lot of weight. More than you can afford to lose. Since I pushed you into inviting me to dinner, I'm paying the bill."

“No you aren’t, Lois. You didn’t push me into anything. You didn’t even mention dinner. Only lunch. We’re celebrating my raise, and I’m paying the bill.”

“I’ll at least pay for my part of it.”

“No. I won’t hear anything more about it. My raise, my bill. Our celebration.”

“Then may I pay for lunch tomorrow?”

“I think I could accept that.”

Over thick, bitter coffee after dinner, he said, “Sometimes I wonder, how can people get as far along in life as we are and still be living alone, unless it’s just absolutely their preference? It isn’t my preference, really. It’s just, well, I don’t know. Certain preoccupations, or, or, uh, well, Would you like some ice cream with your coffee? They make their own ice cream here, you know.”

Lois said, “No ice cream, thanks, but when he comes around again, I’d like a little more coffee.”

“It isn’t my preference to live alone. I think sometimes a person, some people can develop very narrow vision. They can really limit their lives by developing a-- well, a misunderstanding, really, of what they want, of what would be good for them, unreal images or ideas. Carl Jung wrote about a young woman on a ship falling in love with a crew member she didn’t even know, and, ... yes, I would like more coffee please. Thank you.” When the waiter left she touched Clark’s hand. “If we aren’t careful, we could bog ourselves down in a very weighty conversation here.”

He turned his hand and held hers. “Yes, we could. I’ve been a long time realizing it, but what’s past is past. There’s only now and the future that lies ahead of us.”

Clark went up to Lois’s apartment with her and paced about her rooms with rising energy.

He said, “Your place seems small. Maybe you should think of moving to something bigger, with more of a future to it.”

“Yes. I am thinking of it.” She squeezed his hand, and he smiled at her. They agreed they would discuss the topic more at coffee at the office in the morning, and at lunch, Chinese food brought into her office, and they would shut the world out and speak of vegetables and rice.

Clark forgot he’d driven to work that morning and walked the three miles home. Later, he would have to disimpound his car, but he would do it cheerfully, considering it money well spent.

Meanwhile, a block from home, he passed the gym he’d seen a thousand times before, and he stopped in and bought a short membership. The future was not certain, but it did seem to

be shaping up in a really good direction. Whatever it brought, it would be good to be in respectable physical condition for it.