

Editorial Discretion

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet, world-renowned newspaper, Perry White is in possession of the world's biggest story. But what is newsworthy? And what should be withheld, for both the good of the world, and the privacy of one humble man?

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When did I first know?

I mean really *know*, beyond a shadow of a doubt?

When did I first have to make one of the hardest decisions I've ever been faced with?

From the beginning.

The night was already abuzz with expectation and anticipation. It's not every day that a space shuttle full of colonists leaves the Earth behind to spend years in a space station. It's even rarer still for there to be children aboard, whole families, ready to brave the dark, cold, uncertainty of space. But there we were, all crowded around the bullpen's television screens, ringing phones forgotten, beeping pagers ignored, faxes abandoned, computers idly cycling through their screensavers, each of them either displaying a migrating Daily Planet logo or that God-forsaken endless maze that was all the rage back then. Every eye was affixed to the televisions, every breath was held, almost no one spoke as the countdown commenced. Every heart raced as the count grew closer to "three...two...one...liftoff."

Only, we never got there.

The count stopped. The shuttle didn't move. Something had happened to the already compromised space program. Further sabotage seemed the most likely culprit. I roared at my staff to find out just what in Elvis' good name had happened. But then, something unexpected happened. Something that has rarely happened before. Something that has almost never happened since.

No one moved a muscle.

My orders fell on deaf ears.

A few fingers pointed at the screens. More than a few mouths gaped open. Even I stopped, frozen, as I watched the screens, my hand hanging in midair above the phone I was about to commandeer. I had to blink several times, assuring myself that I wasn't seeing things.

A man in a cape, flying toward the unmoving shuttle.

It had to be a joke. Someone had to have hijacked the television station — some bored, rich, teenage hacker, if I had to guess. But then we heard the newscasters reporting on the same delusion I was seeing. There really *was* a man in some kind of clinging, skin-tight suit, flying through the air as though it was the most natural thing in all the world. We all watched in awe as the man — at least, he appeared to be a man — flew right up to the shuttle door, pulled it open, and disappeared inside.

And then, we waited.

Waited to discover what would happen next. Waited to see who the man was. Waited to learn why the shuttle had failed to

launch in the first place.

It felt like years before the unidentified newcomer exited the shuttle again. I expected him to fly off, just as silently and mysteriously as he'd arrived. I never could have guessed what he'd do next. The cameras focused in tighter on him, showing that he held someone in his arms — someone that he deposited a safe distance away. Then he flew back to the shuttle, grabbed hold, and lifted the hulking mass of metal right off the ground, as though he were picking up a child's plaything.

The cameras tracked him as far as they could, until he disappeared behind a bank of clouds. No tell-tale streak of fire burned in the night to mark his trail. No rumble of noise gave evidence to the shuttle's passing. Even the newscasters were silent. It was as though the entire world had collectively lost its ability to hear and speak.

Then, suddenly, the reverence of the moment was broken. Information started pouring in. Lois, of all people, had snuck on board the shuttle to get the inside story — after all, she and that newcomer, Kent, had been the ones to save the shuttle from the first round of sabotage. I wanted to be surprised at her brashness, her lack of forethought — had she even bothered to think about what would have happened once the shuttle blasted off into space? — but honestly, I'd already known Lois for too many years to be surprised at all. I was more worried for her, and angry too, since I'd nearly lost my best reporter to years among the stars.

Reports rolled in from the authorities on the scene that a bomb had been discovered. Discovered and, apparently, been eaten by that very same mystery man. A man who hadn't even identified himself beyond the words, "a friend."

I hoped, rather than believed, that this "friend" would return, so that the world might get another glimpse at him. After all, we hadn't gotten much of a look at him yet, at least, not his face. I needed to know who this person was. It was the biggest news story of the decade! I had my responsibilities as the editor-in-chief of the Daily Planet. We're not a world-renowned paper because we do half a job in reporting the news. We're the ones who relentlessly work to give the public all of the facts, no matter how much time and effort it takes to uncover the full truth about any given piece of news.

I couldn't have been happier when the caped figure descended again from the heavens, looking unfazed and no worse for wear from his ordeal of lifting a few million pounds into orbit. It was reported that the shuttle had communicated with EPRAD and confirmed that all was well, that the secondary rockets had functioned normally, and that they were on their way to rendezvous with the space station. But my eyes were on Lois. The unknown figure scooped her up into his arms and flew off into the night with her.

Fear coiled in the pit of my stomach, flavoring my mouth with a coppery, metallic taste that I just couldn't shake. No one knew who this guy was. And, even though he'd saved the entire EPRAD mission from being scrubbed into non-existence, I worried about Lois. Was this flying phenomenon friend or foe, really? Would he hurt Lois? If he did, I swore to myself that I would find a way to ensure that he never hurt anyone ever again, I didn't care what it might take. Lois is all but a daughter to me.

But then, suddenly, the high window of the bullpen blew open and in flew the news story that the entire world was already chasing, Lois still dreamily nestled in arms that I instinctively knew could crush her like a bug, if he wanted to. I couldn't imagine the strength it had to have taken to lift a rocket. And I wondered, if he could fly and lift impossible amounts of weight and digest explosives...what else could he do? But my thoughts were cut short as the still-unnamed hero of the night gently alighted on the floor, directly before Lois' desk. I watched as he exchanged a few words and then took to the air again and flew

right back out into the darkness beyond the Planet's walls.

And that's when I knew.

The way he held himself. His features, down to the distinctive mole on his upper lip. The look of longing and love shining in his eyes as he looked at Lois. The way he knew, seemingly without any guidance, what desk belonged to Lois.

That was no mystery man standing in the bullpen.

That was Clark Kent.

Now, I had to make a decision. To print the story with my suspicions? With my *knowledge*? Or to leave off a huge piece of the story?

What was my obligation? To expose to the world all of the details, and potentially — no, definitely — wreck a man's life? Or to use my editorial discretion to defraud the world into thinking that we, at the Daily Planet, were just as much in the dark as to who this new and instantly iconic new hero was? Did I have an obligation to the world, to hand them the man's alter ego on a silver platter? Was it the story that I *should* write? Or did I owe it to Clark to prove himself, to see if he deserved some privacy, to protect him from the lion's den that the world would become if they knew the truth? Was I supposed to withhold such earth-shattering news from the world at large? Kent was a newcomer to the Planet. The world had been loyal to the paper for ages.

Where did my loyalties stand? Where *should* they have stood?

Ultimately, I chose the paper.

I didn't print the Clark Kent is Superman story.

I had no hard proof. My suspicions weren't enough. If I printed the story with nothing to back it up, I would have destroyed not only my career, but the entire Daily Planet. I couldn't do that. This place runs in my blood after all these years. I eat, sleep, and breathe this paper. And, selfishly, I didn't want to lose Clark. He was so fresh, so eager to make his mark on the world. I couldn't take that away from him, or from the paper. So long as he didn't suspect that I knew the truth, I could trust him to keep bringing in other Superman stories. And, I wagered, he would likely go out of his way to give the Planet exclusives, if he had any shred of loyalty to his place of employment.

I was right. My gamble paid off. Superman and the Daily Planet became almost synonymous, almost overnight.

I had other reasons for holding my tongue, though they were a little slower in developing. Almost as soon as Superman flew onto the scene, he became a target. We had wackos like Trask trying to hunt him down. We had sudden strings of crime and "accidents" which felt like they'd been contrived to test the abilities of the new resident superhero. And once it began, it never, ever stopped. Oh, the criminals were different from month to month or even week to week, but it was a never ending cycle of attempts made on Superman's life, or the lives of those he was perceived as being close to. Hell, even I had a close call or two over the years.

Some wanted to kill him. Some wanted to expose his secrets. Did he have a secret life? Was he ever *not* Superman? A few came damn close to outing Clark to the world too. Each time, I quietly prepared a special editorial piece defending Clark and his dual identity. Each one of them was both more difficult and yet easier to write. More difficult because it became harder and harder to think of Clark's life being torn apart like that. Easier because, as time passed, I grew to know more and more about the man who orchestrated the puppet-movements of the cardboard cutout hero. He became a son to me, and I became determined to protect him at all costs.

The first scare we had was with Task. That nutjob thought it was his job to find and destroy Superman, and he was eager to use any means necessary to lure Superman into his traps. The first time, when Trask and his zealots stormed into the bullpen, it

was also the first time I knew, without question, that my initial suspicions about Clark were right on the money. I also knew, in that moment, that even the strange, new, flying hero could get scared. No, not just scared. Deathly terrified. I don't think I'll ever forget the way Clark froze with terror, or the way his tanned skin instantly drained of all color. In that moment, it became crystal clear to me that I would do whatever it took to ensure that Clark's secret *stayed* a secret. I wasn't thinking of the Planet or its reputation or the Superman stories we could sell. I knew that if I didn't protect the bombshell secret I was sitting on top of, that Clark would lose his life.

He almost did as it was. A second encounter with Trask — now more Superman obsessed than ever, from the tales I was told — proved to be worse than the initial search for Superman ever was. Instead of trying to locate Superman, he was trying to find some mysterious — and, as I later learned, all too real — stone that could kill the Man of Steel. I'll never know for sure, but the detachment in Clark's voice when he related the story of fighting with Trask on the Kent family farm makes me almost certain that Trask had been successful in finding a piece of the meteorite and had weakened Clark. I think that, had Trask managed to get off the shot he'd been aiming at Clark before that sheriff-woman killed Trask instead...well, I think Clark would have died that day and Superman would have vanished just as unexpectedly as he'd first arrived in the public's eye.

But Bureau Thirty-Nine and the lunatics who ran it weren't the only ones hell-bent on exposing Clark's secrets and ruining his life. Top Copy's Diana Stride announced to the planet that Clark Kent was Superman. She even broke into his apartment and broadcast to all the world the hidden closet full of Superman's uniforms, though she never aired any such damning evidence as him shedding his civilian clothes for the blue and red. She didn't get any, I'd bet my last dollar on that. Clark would never allow her to get close enough, though I do still wonder how she figured it out to begin with. I did what I could to cover for him, even volunteering to talk about Superman for that fake "Superman Appreciation" piece she swore she was filming. I'd seen how close she'd come to finding Clark in the newsroom, and I wanted to give him a little breathing room, so I jumped in with an offer to be interviewed first, tolerating her huge ego and obvious fakeness, all in an effort to allow Clark to get out of the area and to someplace where she couldn't find him.

These weren't the only instances. Others followed. Some others accused Clark of being Superman. Others merely tried to smear his good name, to the point where I worried if it might not just push him to the breaking point, where he might just reveal his true identity in order to preserve Superman's integrity. Or Lois', as the case sometimes was. You know, if I were to be perfectly honest here, I'd say that it was during the times when Lois' reputation was on the line that I most feared that Clark might do something rash and come clean to the world.

In every case, I silently wrote my editorial pieces, praying they'd never get used. And in each case, somehow, that man managed to sidestep the issue and find a resolution without having to outright lie to the world, and without having to expose his secret to all those who would use it against him. I don't know how he did it. Unless he's got a twin brother, I still can't figure out how I saw him standing next to himself at more than one press conference. Boy, let me tell you, it was like something right out of a science fiction movie. Again, if I'm being honest, it sent a chill down my spine when I saw that, although I couldn't say why.

Regardless, each time Clark managed to brush off the accusations that he was Superman, I silently breathed a sigh of relief and beamed with hidden pride that he'd once again kept his identity intact. And then I'd promptly set the paper I'd written my article down on aflame. I never did trust that things written on the

computer could ever truly be deleted. But a pile of ash could never be used to out Clark.

Anyway, to get back to what I was saying before, as time went by, my suspicions only grew more and more solid. Little things he said and did, that some might mistake for quirks. Disappearances with no explanations. Showing up with Superman stories almost as they happened. Miraculous breakthrough leads on stories that were quickly turning cold. I used to shake my head in wonder and amusement that I could easily see through the Spandex costume and down to the man beneath, but Lois, the person he worked closest with remained blind for years, until, at last, one day Lois came storming into my office complaining that Clark had lied to her. She didn't need to elaborate for me to know that she'd figured out — or maybe been straight up told — Clark's secret.

I knew it had to be difficult for her to accept that she'd missed so many obvious clues as to the duality of the man she loved. Well, the *men* she loved. It was no secret that she'd fallen in love with the alien hero from the moment he set her gently down at her desk, the night of the space shuttle launch. It hurt even more, I'm sure, given her status as a top investigative reporter.

I worried, when she found out.

I worried about her. I knew she'd take the revelation badly. And given the fact that she's been lied to and manipulated by so many men in her life...I can't say I would have been surprised if that had been the end of the road for those two.

I worried about Clark — the boy wears his heart on his sleeve, and a rejection from Lois would have devastated him, possibly beyond repair. On the outside, he may be invulnerable, but on the inside, he's as fragile as a piece of thin glass. Uh, at least as far as his love goes. There's also an inner strength to him that goes beyond words.

I worried about the Planet. What would happen if the greatest reporting team in the paper's history broke up? Would the very bullpen become a battle-zone? Would the tension force one — or both — to quit? What would become of us, as a paper, if we lost either one of them? People were loyal to us. Subscriptions shot up once the pairing of Lane and Kent became permanent on the byline. Would we lose those readers, if we lost the Lane and Kent team?

Still, there were always benefits to knowing that Clark was Superman. I never had to worry about getting the Superman story. I never had to worry about having usable quotes in the articles Lois and Clark churned out. I rarely had to worry about leads running dry for those two. Surely, Clark could just use his abilities to crack the case if they got in a tight spot, right? I never pried, of course, into *how* they got the impossible leads they did. All that mattered was that they got them at all. But I suspect that a large percentage of those leads were attained with a little bit of super help.

He also keeps Lois safe. That was always the biggest draw for me. I could usually breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that he was with Lois, especially on the most dangerous of assignments and investigations. If Clark can't keep her safe, well then, no one can, not even the Lord's finest, most elite angel. Unless, well...unless Clark *is* God's most elite angel. And honestly, sometimes I'm certain that's the case.

Having Superman as a close, personal friend of the paper as a whole did wonders for our image. Of course, the Daily Planet always had it's own prestige, but there was something invaluable about publicly being acknowledged as Superman's go-to paper if he needed to call a press conference or get the word out about something quickly. It gave us a certain, indisputable reputation as being the *most* reliable news source out there. Even those who'd never picked up the Planet before in their lives switched loyalties — in some cases — from the television channels, radio stations

and/or newspapers they'd trusted all their lives.

Of course, as with most things, knowing that Clark was Superman had its drawbacks too. Because Superman and the Planet became somewhat synonymous, it meant that we, unfortunately, were targeted, on more than one occasion, in calculated — or desperate, as the case may have been — attempts to get to the Man of Steel. We're tough and we weathered the hard times better than anyone could have hoped, I think. At least, we did for the most part. We had a few causalities here and there — people who decided that they'd seek safer employment someplace else or those who sought earlier than anticipated retirement. Not that I can blame them. A bombing will do that to people. Most, I was sad to see go. A select few couldn't have gotten out of the door faster, for my taste.

Mostly though, it was my worry for Clark, every time I'd see Superman off to save the day in some dangerous situation or another. Oh, I didn't worry about the forest fires and the earthquakes and the planes with faulty landing gears. My concern was always when he fought against very human criminals, especially once it became known that Kryptonite was not just the figment of Trask's deranged imagination, but a real thing that could, honest to Elvis, kill Superman. Thinking about losing the bright young man, so hungry for the world and so willing to sacrifice his time and powers to the betterment of the world, tore me apart at times.

There were times, late at night, when the Planet was mostly a ghost town or when I was home and Alice was asleep, when I shed actual tears, wondering where Clark was and if he was okay or not. It wasn't often. It was only during the most stressful of times — like when Superman went missing after heading into the lonely dark of space to try and destroy the Nightfall asteroid, or when he said his dry-eyed, but heavy hearted, emotionally crumpled goodbyes to the world when he headed off to attempt to save New Krypton. In those times, I wrote up, with shaking hands and rattling, tear-drenched breaths, the stories I prayed I'd never have to publish — the death of Superman.

It killed me inside, to see the long-winded and yet still too short obituaries I could easily write up for the hero, and the short, unbearably incomplete ones that I could write up for Clark, knowing that the world would forever mourn the suit but not the man inside. To know that the cheap imitation would be venerated, but the original would be forgotten by most of the world. I say most, because there are those of us who will carry Clark in our hearts forever. He isn't a man who's short on friends, but I doubt more than a handful of us know or suspect the full truth about him.

It was always a constant balance, though. My feelings — very much paternal — for the man. My responsibilities — professionally — to the paper and the world at large. It was always an internal war for me to decide what to print and how much of it. Did the world need to know when Superman was left beaten by some scientist's crackpot experiment of a cyborg? Should the world have been given a glimpse of the hero on his knees, defeated, torn, and bleeding — even if Lois *hadn't* prevented Jimmy from getting the shot? Was it really something that needed to be publicized, when Kryptonite was discovered to be a very real, and deadly, thing? Or when a second, red variety kept causing unpredictable, dangerous side effects — everything from apathy to out of control, super-charged super powers? Did the world need to know that Superman had survived his encounter with Nightfall, only to suffer from amnesia so bad that he didn't even know his own name? Did the public have a right to know that the real Superman was missing, and that an imposter walked among them? Oh, yes. I knew it when that fake Clark was here for a brief period of time, shortly after Lois and Clark finally married. Where Lois got him from, I'll never know, but I know Clark, and that man, whoever he was, though he looked and

sounded just like the real deal, was phonier than a lock of Elvis' sideburns on an online auction site.

Too often, I would sit and contemplate, trying to maintain a perfect, or near-perfect, balance of getting out the relevant information while doing my damndest to ensure that Clark's identity stayed a secret, and that the information I was disseminating wouldn't panic the public or give criminals anything they could use to target the Man of Steel. In some cases, of course, the decisions of what to print and what to omit were easy enough. In others, well, those judgment calls were some of the toughest ones in my entire career. I couldn't even bounce ideas off of another close colleague. Not even Jimmy, for the most part, even when I was training him to be my replacement. So long as the secret was a secret, I carried the weight of my decisions alone.

I couldn't even allude to my dilemmas with Alice. That was always the hardest, of all the people I had to hide my knowledge from. She'd get angry — even after we made up and remarried — that I'd spent yet another long night at the office or at my computer at home. She couldn't understand the depths of my thoughts as I tried to imagine every possibility and attempted to weigh every consequence, knowing that things could always be even worse than I could ever possibly construct in my mind. I did what I could to appease her, but I know she still went to bed, alone, far too many nights.

There were times when I tried to clue Clark in that I knew about him, and that he shouldn't worry, that his secret was safe as gold in Fort Knox with me. I'd say something that was vague or held a double meaning, but he never rose to the bait. Either he's so good-hearted and naive as to believe that no one other than Lois knows his secret, or he's perfected the art of remaining calm and maintaining an air of total ignorance to any and all hints at what he does in his spare time. In the beginning, after the initial excitement over Superman's debut and once his presence in Metropolis — and the world — became commonplace, I was hurt that Clark wouldn't come to me after one of my innumerable dropped hints. But, after a while, I came to admire the strength he had, to carry a secret like that alone. I understood his hesitation to approach me about it, and, after a while, it became more of a game for me to drop the hints and see if he'd say anything about it.

I was so relieved when Lois found out, and even more relieved to know that Clark's identity was safe. He was a changed man, once the dust settled from the fallout of the truth coming out into the open. He was more relaxed, less tense, even quicker to laugh than ever before. His already winning personality took on a whole new shine and his posture itself changed, as though a great weight had been lifted from his impressively strong shoulders. It wasn't that he had one less person to hide from. It was that he didn't have to hide from the woman he loved — the only person that ever really mattered to him, from what I could observe from my position as their boss and friend.

Ah, the power of love.

There have been times, ever since they met and learned to be friends, when I've thought of their story as being right up there with the timeless, classic tales we all know and love. The kind that gets told and retold over countless generations, which little boys hate for the love and love for the action, and little girls swoon and daydream over. It's been my extraordinary privilege just being able to observe what I've been able to — watching them fall in love, marry, raise a family — let alone to be a part of it, even in so limited a role as I have. Oh, it hasn't always been easy, balancing the fine line I've been forced to walk, always having to exercise my editorial discretion, but let me tell you something:

It's been the greatest joy of my life.

THE END