

Splitting Hairs

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Summary: Clark rejoices over the fact that he wasn't recognized at his first rescue as Superman, and prepares to give Lois the very first Superman interview.

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I did it!
I actually did it!
I can't believe it!
I DID IT!

The words spiraled around on a constant loop in Clark Kent's ecstatic mind, sending shockwaves of adrenaline shooting throughout his entire body. Every cell seemed to nearly vibrate with his joy and surprise. Every nerve ending was tingling with shock that he'd pulled it off. Even his very hair seemed to crackle with invisible lightning that pulsed through him, making his heart beat rapidly with the uncontainable thrill he was feeling.

He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs. He wanted to fly up into space and embrace the universe. He wanted to zoom out to Kansas and share his ecstasy with his parents. He wanted to double over in sheer laughter from the almost endless depths of his mirth.

He'd done it!

Needing to burn off some of his energy, Clark soared through the dark sky, punching holes in the occasional stray cloud he came across, tearing the air apart with a sonic boom. He made a beeline due north, to the Arctic. Though he wanted to share his good news with his parents, he knew he needed a little time to compose himself. He was too giddy, too drunk with the overwhelming success of the night to sit still. So he brought himself to the stark, barren, desolate snowfields of the Arctic, where no one could witness him expending some of his boundless energy.

As the world turned to ice below him, Clark slowed his speed down to land with whisper softness on the snow. Once his feet were solidly on the ground, he forced himself to take a deep, calming breath, which misted in the frigid air as he breathed back out. He smiled to himself. During his youth, he'd often pretended to be a dragon breathing out smoke when the frosty mornings had turned his breath white. But now? Now, he was so much more than a kid pretending to be a knight-fighting dragon. Now, he was already being called a superhero, as his ears had picked up while he'd flown.

"I did it!"

To his eternal surprise, the words came out of his mouth as a barely-audible whisper, not the Earth-shattering yell he'd thought it would be.

"I saved the space shuttle."

He grinned, remembering how incredible it had been to lift the compromised rocket off the ground and deliver it safely to the space station, thereby saving not only the shuttle itself, but the entire EPRAD mission. At first, he hadn't been entirely sure he would have the strength needed to lift the immense weight of the rocket, passengers, and supplies stowed aboard. He'd never in his

life attempted to lift that many tons in one shot. But, to his delight, the shuttle hadn't given him a challenge at all, and had only gotten lighter as they'd left the Earth's atmosphere – and the pull of gravity – behind.

"I introduced Superman to the world."

Another smile ghosted over his lips as he recalled the name Lois had given him as he'd set her down at her desk, then flown out through the bullpen window. It wasn't a name he would have chosen for himself – it would have felt too pompous to brand himself as "super" anything. But, coming from Lois, he would never cast the moniker aside. Instead, he would treasure it deeply. Though they had known each other only a few days, his heart already belonged to his sometimes-belligerent partner.

"Lois didn't recognize me."

He laughed, all his relief and glee bubbling up in that instant. He'd tried to hold it back, but found resistance to be futile. But he didn't mind. It felt good, knowing that Lois hadn't recognized that the flying man was her unwanted – and very much unneeded – partner at work. He'd been a total stranger to her. A total stranger in a distracting blue, red, and yellow costume. A total stranger with terrifying powers.

A total stranger that she'd trusted completely, without even the slightest hesitation or fear.

She'd let him scoop her up into his arms and fly her back to the Planet.

She'd breathlessly proclaimed him to be "Superman."

Not "the hack from Nowheresville."

Superman.

She thought he was super.

He sighed in contentment, but it was tinged with a little sadness too.

Lois was smitten with Superman, that was clear to him, even though she'd only just met him. But Clark? Clark was nothing more than an annoyance to her, a man not worth the time or effort to even get to know, let alone befriend or become enamored with. She couldn't see the man for the costume, which, Clark had to remind himself, was the entire *point* of the costume. He didn't *want* to be recognized for the regular man he was. But it still hurt, knowing Lois was besotted with the man he was pretending to be, all while ignoring the man he truly was.

It was a problem, he knew. But, he admitted, it could have been a lot worse. She could have instantly recognized him and outed him before Superman had even gotten the chance to be named. He could have hordes of scientists already chasing after him, ready to dissect and study him, armed with the knowledge of who he really was and how to get to him by using his friends and family. He really ought to count his blessings, he knew. And he was. He needed to be able to use his abilities to help people, without having to hide. He needed the anonymity of his regular life as Clark Kent, so that he could continue to *have* a normal life and all the things that went with it – friends, a job, his parents, and, if he was lucky enough, a love life.

"It's okay," he reminded himself. "She didn't recognize me. I'm safe. As for her crush on Superman... I'll just have to work harder as Clark to get her to see *me*. Somehow or another, I'll prove my worth to her, first as her partner. She'll never accept me as a friend if I can't earn her trust and respect as a partner first."

He smiled to himself. He was up to the challenge.

Days went by. Superman was a worldwide sensation.

Everyone wanted to know as much as possible about the superhero in their midst. Where had he come from? Where did he live? Was he here to stay? Was he human? Why did he have such incredible powers? Exactly how many powers *did* he have? What were his intentions – was he there to help or to hinder the human race? How long had he been on Earth? How had he known that the space shuttle had been in peril?

So far, Clark had held his tongue. He'd expected Superman to be a news sensation, but even his wildest imagining couldn't have predicted to how "in demand" Superman had become overnight. And while Clark was not an overly shy man, he'd become completely overwhelmed with the public's reaction – and almost all of it overpoweringly positive. He wasn't quite sure what to do with Superman's popularity or all the cries for him to step into the media's spotlight so the world could scrutinize him all the better. A part of him wished he could avoid the media altogether, even though he was more than aware of the fact that that would be impossible. He would have to set the record straight on who he was and what his mission was, sooner or later. And the later he did it, the more misinformation would spread first. Even if he tried to correct any falsehoods about himself, there was no guarantee that he would be able to. Once the public got hold of something in its collective mind, it was often difficult, if not impossible, to make the public forget it.

He would have to break his silence and allow himself to be interviewed.

He knew just who to give the exclusive to.

Lois would do his story justice. He could count on her to get all the facts right. Besides, she'd actually *been there* for his first rescue. Even if Clark *wasn't* able to trust her with his story, she still *deserved* to be the one he spoke to. He had his loyalties, after all. She'd been the one to "discover" him, so to speak. Courtesy dictated that he give her the very first interview.

His mind made up, Clark nervously flew to the Daily Planet, where he knew Lois would still be, hard at work. And, better yet, since it was getting late, he knew only the barest few people would still be in the building. That suited him perfectly. He didn't need or want an audience when he sat down and gave Lois the one interview every single reporter on Earth was trying to nail down. He wanted it to be just the two of them, able to speak for as long as Lois needed to ask all her questions and hear out his story.

Even still, the idea of breaking his silence was terrifying. Once this interview hit the newsstands in the morning, there would be no turning back. He'd be hounded by every reporter in the world and expected to give them all quotes for their articles. He didn't mind extending them that professional courtesy, but he wasn't entirely convinced that he was ready for the spotlight like that. And, more than that, his story would be exposed to the world – exposed and criticized and examined from every angle to determine if he was worthy of the world's embracing acceptance or the world's scorn and fear.

He didn't have time to dwell on the "what ifs." In another second, the Planet loomed before him. He squared his shoulders and breathed deeply, trying to calm his nerves and steel his determination to see the interview through. Then, before he could spare another thought for what he was doing, he flew in through the open bullpen window and landed gently by Lois' desk.

She was eating dinner when he arrived and had just taken a bite of her Lo Mein noodles. Reflexively, she sucked in a sharp, surprised breath when she caught sight of him. Unfortunately, a Lo Mein noodle worked its way down her throat in the same moment, and she wound up coughing for a few seconds while she tried to compose herself.

"S...S...Superman!" she gasped once she stopped coughing.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked in concern, taking a step forward.

"I'm fine," she said, eagerly dismissing his worry with a wave of her hand.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you'd be in the middle of dinner," he apologized sincerely. "I can come back in a bit, if you'd like."

"No!" she practically shouted. She cleared her throat. "I mean, no, that's okay. You don't have to leave. I was just about finished anyway."

Clark studied her face for a moment, but she appeared to be

telling the truth. "Well...if you say so," he allowed.

Lois pushed the cartons of Chinese food to the side. "What... what are you doing here?"

"I heard you've been looking for me," he replied with a gleam in his eye. Just that morning, Perry had – once again! – lectured his reporters about the importance of being the paper to snag Superman's first interview.

"*Everyone's* looking for you," Lois replied with a half-smirk.

Clark nodded. "So I've heard. I thought...I thought it might be for the best if I broke my media silence. I've read your work. I trust *you* to tell my story."

"You...do? Why?" Lois asked in shock. Then, as her own words registered in her mind, she shook her head. "I mean...I appreciate that. But there are hundreds of other amazing reporters all over the world who could also do your story justice."

"Maybe," Clark acknowledged with a smile. "But you discovered me, right? Isn't it some journalistic rule that you get the first interview?"

Lois favored him with a small, shy smile. "Well...sometimes."

Clark dipped his head in acknowledgement, laughing to himself. Lois had practically turned into the fabled Mad Dog Lane when Perry had told them all that Superman was too big of a story and that the interview belonged to whoever could snag it, not just Lois for having been the one to first write the Superman story.

"So...what do you want to know?" he asked instead of making any comment on her response.

"Everything," she said breathlessly. "But, um, perhaps you'd be more comfortable talking in the conference room? Where it's a bit more private?"

He nodded. "Sounds great."

Clark stepped back and let Lois grab a pen and a pad of paper. Then he dutifully followed her to the conference room. Once inside, she gestured for him to sit while she closed the door behind them and pulled the blinds down for complete privacy.

"That's better," she announced after a moment.

With Clark commanding the chair at the head of the table, Lois sat in the first chair to his right. She set down her paper and pen and regarded him for a moment, meeting and holding his gaze. He waited, patiently, for her to make the first move.

"Okay," she said after a long minute. "I guess the first question is...how long have you been Superman, Clark?"

The accusation blindsided him and he found himself sputtering instead of denying that he was Clark. He knew his eyes were bulging in his shock and he could feel his entire body go cold with fear. His skin was ashen, if his stark white knuckles were any indication of what his face must have looked like.

"I...I...I..." he stammered, cursing his frozen mind to lurch into action and deny his identity.

"Don't deny it," Lois said stubbornly, crossing her arms over her chest with a smug look. "I know it's you."

She looks like the cat who ate the canary, he thought to himself, his mother's old phrase popping into his mind.

"H...how?" he squeaked out.

What are you doing? his brain screamed at him in horror as the word tumbled out of his mouth. *Deny it!*

"How did I know?" Lois asked, as if to clarify what he'd been trying to say. "It took me about thirty seconds to figure you out in the rocket." She grinned, as wide and bright as the Cheshire Cat. "Clark, it's 1993. You're the *only* person in all of Metropolis sporting a mullet."

THE END