

# From the Outside

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: What could a clumsy nine-year-old boy possibly have in common with Superman? A companion piece to "Looking In." (This story will make a lot more sense if you read "Looking In" first.)

My thanks, as always, to Corrina (Female Hawk) for her willingness to lend me her time and talents by reading through several renditions of this story and offering suggestions which greatly improved it each time. Thanks, too, to my terrific General Editor Nancy (Classicalla) for her eagle eye and her patience.

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When will I ever learn? Going to visit Lois as Superman is like getting a fix for a crack addict: I pay for my few minutes' high with a subsequent low, and I only end up craving more afterwards. I'm flying home from her apartment after having paid her just such a visit. As usual, she spent her time fawning over me. But it wasn't really me she wanted -- it was the blasted Suit and the powers it symbolizes. I would give anything to have her look at me -- Clark -- the way she was looking at Superman tonight. But, of course, she barely tolerates Clark's presence.

I've reached Clinton Street and am only a few blocks from home, when the sight of something -- make that someone -- falling breaks me out of my musings. I change directions to catch him and am dismayed when I get a closer look. It's a boy, perhaps nine or ten years old. Old enough to know better than to be playing near the edge of a roof. My suspicion that his plunge was deliberate is confirmed by his silence and his grim visage during our ascent. Children who fall by accident almost always start to babble their thanks as soon as I save them and to explain the circumstances of their mishap.

My heart is heavy for him. He is so young to have a death wish! I realize that my catching him and returning him to the solidity of the building's roof is only the first part of rescuing him. If I were to leave now, he would probably just jump again as soon as I am gone. He clearly needs a sympathetic ear, and I am more than willing to lend him one.

I have spent the past few months cultivating my Superman persona to be intimidating to lawbreakers. I have to remain in character, but I want the boy to think me approachable. I deliberately sit down on the roof to make myself seem smaller and therefore less threatening, and I invite him to sit beside me. I ask him if he wishes to talk about what made him want to end his life.

He answers. "How could *you* possibly understand? What do you know of rejection and loneliness?" The bitter tone of his reply, even more than his words, reveals the depth of pain that fills his young heart.

I ponder for a few minutes how best to respond. I have worked hard to develop Superman's facade of calmness and confidence. As far as the public is concerned, Superman is a being removed from all genuine emotions. How far from the truth that appearance is! I debate with myself whether to let the boy see a little of the emotional turmoil that is hidden by the Superman mask. I quickly decide that it is worth risking damage to my facade in order to be able to "reach" him. He clearly needs someone with whom he can relate.

"You'd be surprised. Try me." I lean forward and look at him encouragingly.

At first he seems hesitant to talk, as if he isn't sure where to begin or whether I would have a sincere interest in him. When he sees that he does indeed have my full attention, his words start to come faster. He stares at the city skyline while he talks; his emotions are too raw for him to look me in the eye as he paints the portrait of a lonely young man who is gifted with intellectual abilities, but who has yet to learn how to interact well with others.

Actually, he reminds me a lot of Lois. Both appear starved for love and acceptance, and both seem to have sublimated that need into a determination to be the best at what they do. In their desperate attempts to earn respect, they end up intimidating other people instead. Their tendency to rub everyone's noses in their superior abilities and achievements results in them being resented. Sometimes, I think that in addition to having my regular x-ray vision, I have a sort of "spiritual x-ray vision." Where most people are turned off by the abrasive exterior which Lois and Jeff (as I have found out the young boy is called) present to the world, I see through that exterior to the warm but wounded soul inside.

My heart goes out to them both, and I want to do what I can to help them heal. (If Mom were here now, she'd probably mention my childhood penchant for bringing home stray and wounded animals, and she'd probably smile proudly at me as she proclaimed that some things never change.) My first step in helping Jeff is to let him know that I can relate to him.

"Believe it or not, Jeff, I understand you."

"How could you understand me?" he demands with evident disbelief.

I decide that to convince him, I will allow him a glimpse under Superman's facade.

He continues, "We're nothing alike. *Everyone* likes you."

He is clearly implying that *no one* likes him.

I decide to steer away from that for now. I tell him a little about my own loneliness and lament that although people respect my powers, they don't befriend me as a person.

In an effort to relate to him, I even mention having to play ball by myself. My conscience accuses me of lying. After all, I do sometimes shoot hoops with Chen Chow. But I firmly remind myself that at the moment I am Superman, not Clark. And it is Clark, not Superman, with whom Chen plays. Conscience assuaged, I decide on my next move with Jeff.

I think he has heard enough to know that I can relate to him. Now for the more delicate task -- he needs to be reminded that his intelligence is not what will make him happy -- that no matter how smart he is, or how much better his grades are than his peers, he will be miserable if he has no friends. And flaunting his intellectual prowess is not the way to make friends. I am sure that at some level he knows this already, but until he really thinks about it and, more importantly, acts on it, he will likely remain lonely and miserable.

I have to come up with a way to do this without him feeling like I am criticizing him. I decide that the best approach is to comment on my own life. I hint that having the friendship of other people would be so much better than merely having their grudging respect. "Sometimes, I wish there were even just one person who would invite me to dinner -- not to hero worship me, not to demand anything from me, but just to be a friend." I think of Lois when I mention hero worship and pretty much the rest of Metropolis with the demands made of me.

His response is to ask me whether my ability to fly makes a difference. This is a perfect opportunity to emphasize that it is OK to take pleasure in one's special abilities, but that one should not expect them to be the source of happiness. I reply to his question with, "I do enjoy flying, but it's just as lonely up there as it is down here."

I can tell by the look on his face that he doesn't fully believe me, nor does he really get my deeper meaning. I try a slightly more direct approach. "Does having a terrific vocabulary and being able to do math in your head make a difference in gym class?"

This time, he obviously "gets it."

He answers forcefully, "I wish!"

I bring home the point more explicitly by stating, "Nothing we can do ever replaces having friends. But you already know that -- isn't that why you're so upset about your friend Jeremy moving away?" When he nods that it is, I ask him whether he now believes that I understand him. He finally does.

What he says next surprises and delights me.

"Would you like to have dinner with a new friend?" he asks.

I would never have anticipated an invitation, and I can't imagine him saying anything that could please me more. I find myself grinning; I realize I am breaking character, but I can't help it.

"Sounds perfect," I respond. "Thank you." The invitation shows me that he has listened carefully to what I had to say and has taken it to heart. It tells me that the danger of his committing suicide has passed, at least for now. And, of course, he has given me a precious gift by fulfilling my stated desire to be asked to dinner by someone who has no ulterior motive in doing so. I gladly join him and find myself looking forward to the repast. I have already started to grow fond of the lad.

I want to do what I can to help him improve his situation. I plan to stay in his apartment at least until his mother gets home. I intend to take her aside and talk to her about her son and his needs. And I am going to keep a watchful eye on this family. If Jeff's mother proves to be as neglectful as she appears, I'll be giving Child Protective Services a call. And if Ted or Neil start to play keep-away with anything of Jeff's, I think a "super" rescue might be in order; that would undoubtedly deter them from trying such maneuvers again in the future.

Although it would be dangerous for Jeff to be known publicly as Superman's friend, I don't think it would be too risky for me to stop by on occasion to see how he is doing. I hope this evening's meal proves to be the first of many that we will share together.

THE END