

Belonging

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Summary: In a parallel universe, Clark Kent strives to find his place in the world.

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Where do I belong?
I'm not sure anymore.
I belong with my family, that's true. I love them. I know they love me. But, I'm not like them. I'm not like *anyone*.

I've always known that I'm not a Kent by blood. Mom and Dad have always been very upfront with me about that. I'm not ashamed to be adopted. To be honest, I'm *proud* to know that two people loved me so much, even though I was a stranger to them, that they brought me into their home and lavished their love on me. Every time I think about it, it makes me smile and fills my heart with so much love, that I can't believe it hasn't burst open.

But, it makes me wonder.
Who gave me life? What woman gave birth to me? What man was my father? Are they alive? Are they dead? Why did they give me up? Didn't they want me? Didn't they love me?

It makes me feel...abandoned. Rejected. Like I don't belong, somehow.

Especially now.
I'm learning scary things about myself.
I'm learning that I'm not like anyone else on this planet.
I'm different.

I don't belong. A square peg trying to fit into a round hole.
Someone playacting at being a normal person.

I have these abilities. These...powers. I'm getting really, really fast. I'm getting frighteningly strong. I can already outrun the local trains. I don't even get out of breath or sweat or anything. I can pick up my father's beat-up pickup truck without straining. I shouldn't be able to do that at all. I'm realizing that I've never been sick a day in my life. Looking back, I can't ever remember getting so much as a paper cut. I tried, the other day, to nick my skin with my mom's sharpest knife, when she wasn't around. I didn't really want to hurt myself, but I had to test my suspicions. The knife couldn't pierce my skin, no matter how hard I tried.

I'm a freak.
My parents keep telling me that I'm not. That I'm just special. That I have these abilities for a reason. I'm not sure I believe them, as much as I want to. Especially after tonight.

Tonight, they told me the truth. The real, full, unvarnished truth about how I came to be their son. For my entire life, I've believed that I was left on their doorstep, the discarded child of some anonymous couple. But now I know the truth. I wasn't left on their doorstep. I was found out in a field in the burning wreckage of some kind of craft — extraterrestrial or some kind of as of yet unseen Earthly technology, we're not sure. I was alone — no note, no explanation, no plea for someone to love me and keep me safe, not even a stuffed animal to give me comfort. Nothing that indicated who I was, where I came from, or if I still had living

family somewhere or not. My parents only found me through sheer luck. If they had passed by that stretch of road a few minutes earlier or later than they did, who knows what would have happened to me. I could have been found by someone else. I could have died, alone and hungry, in a strange new world.

It scares me, knowing how close I came to not having my parents.

It makes me happy, to see how much my parents did for me, more so, in a way that I can't explain, than when I thought I was simply just an abandoned baby in a basket, left on their porch.

It makes me feel...lost, in a way.

My past...it's always been this...this unknown void. But it never really mattered to me before. It was just something that happened a long time ago and which helped me find my true family. But now? Now it's this unknowable mystery, shrouded in questions I will never have the answers to.

And two questions keep nagging at the back of my brain.
Have I ever belonged...really, truly belonged...anywhere?
Will I ever belong?

Gone.

Just like that.

In the blink of an eye, I was left alone — orphaned — for the second time in my life.

I tried. Oh, God, did I try. I saw the car when it lost control. It was far away, but my enhanced vision could see it in every stark detail. I thought I could make it. I really did. I was fast but I wasn't fast enough. The car left the road, hit the ditch, flipped, and rolled down the embankment. My powerful hearing heard the sickening splash as the vehicle hit the river.

The heavy old pickup truck sank like a stone. By the time I got there, it had already landed on the river's sandy bottom. I dove in, ignoring the frigid water, heedless of the current. I swam for my life — for *their lives* — but it was already too late. The medical examiner said that they'd died before the truck ever hit the water.

It should have made me feel better, to know that my slowness didn't cause their deaths. But it didn't. I blamed myself. They were my *parents*. I should have been able to save them. What good were my powers if they couldn't even help me save the two people who meant the most to me in all the world?

Orphan.

A chill ran down my spine the first time I heard it used to describe my new, parentless self.

It's just not something any kid thinks about. It's not something most kids ever have to experience. Especially not twice in their life. It's weird. I've known all my life that I was a foundling child, adopted by the Kents when I was no more than two months old. It never mattered to me whether or not my biological parents were alive or dead. I was a child without parents — an orphan — who was lucky enough to be taken in and loved by two of the best people in this world.

And now those sweet farmers are gone.

I really am an orphan.

Twelve years old and on my own.

Well, not *totally* on my own. I've been shuffled into the system, awaiting word that a foster family is willing to let me into their home. For now, I'm just down the road with the Irgs — Wayne and his wife Janice. I've known them my entire life. They are good people, don't get me wrong. But I don't want to be here. This isn't my home. It isn't where I belong. I should be in the farmhouse I grew up in, with my dad working out in the barn and mom cooking up something delicious in the kitchen. I should be sitting at the kitchen table, doing homework, while my mom asks me how my day at school was.

But, I'm not.

And it's all because I couldn't save them.

It's all because of a patch of black ice on the road.

It's all because these stupid powers of mine weren't enough.
I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere. Not in this town.
Not in this state. Not on this planet.
I never have. I never will.

Family number six, in just three years.

I've been here for just over a month, and I hate it here, just like I've hated the other five places I've been shipped off to. I haven't had a say in any of them. I've simply been told to pack my few possessions and be ready to move to the next place. I've never been asked if I'm okay with that. I've never been asked how I'm doing, as I still go through the motions of everyday life.

The first three families were nice enough. But they had children of their own and I felt like I was getting lost in the crowd. I'm not proud to admit it, but I ran away from those homes. Living on the streets felt preferable. The fourth family handed me back a little less than six months after I came to live with them. I guess I can't really blame them. It turns out that my speed and strength are only two of the weird abilities that I have. Apparently, I can set fires with my eyes. After the eighth unexplained or suspicious fire — all small ones, I swear! — they thought I was a problem child with pyromaniac tendencies.

The fifth family was promising. I really liked them, but then the husband got really sick. Dealing with a sulky teenager who'd recently been branded as a problem kid was more than they could handle, on top of the new cancer diagnosis. I guess I can't blame them too much either. But I'd be lying if I said that rejection didn't hurt. Because it did, more than any of the other failed matches. Still, a part of me hated even that home and family, because they weren't *mine*. It was just a stark reminder of what I'd lost.

So now I'm here, stuck with family number six, a bunch of self-absorbed, unwelcoming people. I'm nothing more than a government paycheck to them. I'm completely overlooked, but maybe that's a good thing. As much as I hate being invisible, right now, it's been a blessing. More of these bizarre abilities have continued to manifest. Being able to slip away, unnoticed, for extended periods of time has been incredibly helpful as I've worked to control them.

Those are some of the moments when I miss my parents the most. Though they only saw a scant few of my powers, their patience and guidance during those first, frightening moments has stuck with me. Every time I feel on the verge of having some breakdown, every time I want nothing more than to run off into the woods or some remote island or the Arctic Circle or something, I think of them. I remember their steady, unwavering resolve to help me find ways to keep control of my abilities.

I don't know if it's one of my powers or just the way my brain is naturally wired, but I rarely forget anything. I have vivid memories stretching back to my toddlerhood. I can remember everything — every word, every nuance — about every conversation. Once I see something, I have a hard time banishing it from my mind's eye.

It's a blessing, and a curse.

A blessing because at least I have the memories of my parents. Real memories, that won't fade or tarnish over the years. I'll always carry my mother's calming voice with me. I'll always be able to feel phantom hugs from my father. I have but to picture the kitchen in our tidy little farmhouse and I can smell Mom's buttermilk pancakes. I can still smell Mom's favorite perfume and Dad's old standby cologne. Alone at night, in my bed, I can still recall how they used to tuck me in as a little boy. How they'd push my hair aside and kiss my forehead. How they'd wish me sweet dreams. How "I love you" was the last thing they would say before they closed the door to my room, no matter how many times they'd already said it that night.

A curse because I'll never be able to forget the sharp details of the day they died. The sound of their truck as it left the roadway.

The crunch of metal. The shattering of glass as the windows broke. The pounding sound of my sneakers on the asphalt as I tore down the road. The way my breath misted in the frigid air. The shock of the icy water on my skin as I dove into the river. The sounds of sirens echoing in the air as the sun slipped closer and closer to the horizon. The way the lights from the emergency vehicles seemed to grow brighter as the world darkened around me.

I remember all too well the day when I stopped belonging to this world.

I yearn for the day when I once again finally feel like I have a place on this planet. For when I stop looking for a place to call home. For when I finally feel whole again. I hate this feeling that's clung to me for the past three years. This feeling of disconnection, of isolation, of not belonging anywhere. I want to put the past behind me, to move on, to feel like my old self again — before I was orphaned, before my freakish powers came erupting into my life, throwing everything into turmoil.

But time machines don't exist. Stars don't grant wishes. God's turned a blind eye to me. Or maybe He is deliberately making me suffer — the trade-off for these stupid abilities that I don't even want and which scare me half to death. But like it or not, this is my lot in life. I'll have to do the best that I can with the hand I've been dealt. And maybe, just maybe, one day my heart won't ache for acceptance and belonging anymore.

Lana.

I've known her all my life.

As kids, we played together. We went to school together. We labored over homework together. We had the same friends, went to movies together, shared ice cream sundaes at the local soda fountain, even went to school dances together.

It was only natural that we started to date. Wasn't it? Isn't that what happens... with normal people?

After the turmoil of the last years, it felt good, to have someone welcome me into their life with open arms. For a while, I felt almost whole. Almost complete. Almost like I belonged somewhere. I felt like I had a chance at living a normal life.

I guess I still feel that way.

But...

Something's missing.

Something I can't put my finger on.

I want to know what it is. I want to know why, when I should be the happiest I've been since the death of my parents, I still feel so unhappy. So lost. So incomplete. Especially since things have really been falling into place for me lately. I've secured my dream job, reporting for a world-famous newspaper. It's amazing. All my life, I've wanted to help people. And now, I am. My investigations for the *Daily Planet* are changing people's lives for the better. Criminals have been put behind bars. Corrupt politicians have been exposed. Good people have been helped when the rest of the world has turned its back on them. For the first time in my life, I'm finding some meaning in my life. In my *powers*.

I used to think that these abilities of mine were nothing but a curse. Some cruel joke being playing on me by God or the universe or fate. But now, as a reporter, I've learned to channel those powers into uncovering leads no one else can. Of course, I'm always careful to make sure that no one knows what I've done. I take great care to make sure no one can peg me for anything more than an average Joe. There's no way anyone can prove that I'm anything less than human.

Of course, Lana knows of my abilities. She's known for a while now. I had to tell her. She suspected something was up and kept questioning, kept asking, kept prying until I told her everything. What I can do. How I discovered each ability. What age I was when each one manifested. I thought for sure that she'd shun me. That she would turn away. That I'd be abandoned, just as

so many foster families did when they grew uncomfortable with me, even though none of them discovered my powers.

But she surprised me. She stayed by my side. She wasn't revolted by my extraterrestrial roots. That was something extraordinary — finding out that I'm an alien. For years, I've kept that little globe with me. It's been the one thing that survived every uprooting in my life — and only because my parents told me when I was a child that they found it with me and that they believed it was somehow important. All that time, it was silent, until one night when it lit up and the image of my biological father told me about my origins and why I was sent to Earth.

Yes, Lana stayed with me. She said all the things I needed to hear. She made me feel like my origins don't matter. That I'm human no matter what. But my powers? She's encouraged me to keep them under wraps. Like my parents, she's afraid for me. If word got out that I'm not an average human like everyone else on this planet, there would be those who would seek to destroy me at worst, or lock me in a lab and experiment on me at best. She's right about that. I know it in my heart. So she constantly asks me not to use my powers. Not at work. Not to pick up authentic takeout from Mexico. Not even to clean my apartment at super speed.

And maybe she's right. Maybe I shouldn't even use my abilities in little ways in the safety of my own apartment. If I get too comfortable doing the little things — heating my coffee with my heat vision, chilling a soda with my icy breath, floating above my couch while watching television — it could get too easy to slip up in public and do something I shouldn't be doing. I don't want people to know that I'm different from them. I should be doing anything I can to maintain my facade of normalcy. But...I do those little things anyway.

There's nothing quite like a leisurely flight up way above the limits of human vision, above the space where aircraft dare to go, out past the barriers of the atmosphere and into the dark void of space. Somehow, up there, in the absolute quiet of space, I feel free. I feel at peace, even in my isolation. I know I don't belong there. I don't really belong anywhere. Not amongst the stars — Krypton is gone, exploded into dust and debris in a single, violent moment. Not on Earth — I'll never really fit in.

I've tried. Oh, how I've tried. I've done everything imaginable to belong and fit in here on Earth. I have my job. I pay my taxes. I shop and eat and go to movies and take walks through the park in my spare time. I read books. I visit museums. I have an apartment. I ride the subway or take a cab or walk to work. I have a fiancée.

It still seems so weird to me, to think of myself as a soon-to-be-husband. I guess I'm happy about it. Lana's...familiar and comfortable. She's the one person I can almost totally be myself around, even if she hates when I use my powers in her presence. She cares for me. And I care for her. I can make a life with her.

I think.

There are times when I wonder. Times when I question. Times when I'm not so certain of the happily ever after that I should be heading toward. Times when I feel like...like is this really all my life has to offer me?

Lana...for all that I know she loves me, I can't help but acknowledge that she can be a bit...overwhelming. Bossy. Overbearing. Controlling. I mean, we're engaged mostly due to her persistence. I wasn't necessarily ready to commit myself to anyone. But we'd been dating for a few years and she started hinting at wanting a ring, then she turned to flat-out ultimatums when I ignored those hints. I guess I caved to her demands because I was afraid of losing her. Of losing the one real link I have to this world. So I bought the ring that she picked out, even though it was more than I could comfortably afford. I asked her to marry me in the manner than she wanted — on the beach, at sunset, while we were on vacation last summer.

Now, here I stand, planning a wedding with her — the

wedding *she* wants. Oh, she asks for my opinion, but there's very little that I desire from either the ceremony or the reception. After all, it's mostly her side that's invited. I have precious few people in my life that I'm going to ask to come, when the time comes to send out the invitations. My heart just isn't in the planning, partly because my parents — the two people who should be at my side as I take a wife — are gone, partly because I've felt so pressured into this wedding, and partly because I'm not sure if I'm truly happy or not.

But, what choice do I have?

Connection.

I don't know how else to describe it.

I took one look at a stranger and felt something I've never felt before. A stirring in my soul. An awakening of my heart. My pulse quickened. My head swam. Something called to me, deep within, though I was wary of this strange woman who seemed to know me, though I'm positive I've never met her before in my life.

She's beautiful. I saw that right away. Next to her, Lana is a pale shadow, a candle being held up next to the sun. But it was who she is, *inside*, that made me fall in love. It didn't take long. Just a few short hours together in my apartment, where I got to see who Lois Lane is, and I came to several conclusions. Discovered multiple truths.

Chief among those new truths?

I don't love Lana.

Not the way I thought I did, anyway.

Oh, I care for her. I always will. And I guess I *do* love her, as a friend. But *love her*, love her? No. And that means, I can't marry her. I can't bind my life to her. Meeting Lois has awakened something inside me. A hunger. A *need*. A *purpose*.

I have to find her.

My Lois.

Because the one who was here with me was never mine. Or, she is. Or...I'm not sure how this works. She belongs with me...or, rather the *other* me. The Clark Kent of a different universe, if I'm understanding the dynamics of the situation properly. But the Lois Lane of my universe...she's dead.

How can I long for a woman I've never met? Will never meet?

I know I belong with her. I know she'll mend all the broken pieces of my heart and soul. I know she'll banish all the lingering sadness and isolation I still carry with me. If only she were alive, that is. Still, that time traveler — H.G. Wells — has promised me that he'll look into the situation. That if there is a way to save my Lois, he'll help me find it. So I have to trust him, because it's the only option I have.

The other Lois — the one who was here, with me — made me realize other things as well. Contrary to what Lana always demanded, Lois encouraged me to use my powers. She celebrated them instead of trying to find ways to hide them. She devised a costume for me, so that I could, in theory, use my talents in public without overly endangering my true identity. It wasn't a unique costume. It's the same one my other self wears in that alternate dimension — a place where Jonathan and Martha Kent are alive and well and looking forward to their son's imminent wedding.

At first, I thought the outfit was ridiculous, both in the way it looks and in the way it fits my body. But, well, it grew on me, and fast. I was nervous, to be seen in public wearing that blue, red, and yellow costume. Would people laugh? Would they reject me? Would they scream and run in fear of the alien flying around before their waking eyes? When I stopped Tempus from killing Perry White, would the public merely remember how some freak ate a bomb, and wonder what would happen should he ever decide to turn on the human race?

But, Lois was right.

The reception Superman got was overwhelmingly positive.

For the first time in my life, my alien roots belonged on Earth.

For the first time, *I* was accepted — all of me. True, I wish I'd been able to keep my two identities separate, like the other Clark does. Although, if I'm being completely truthful, I can't imagine how difficult that has to be. But the situation spiraled out of my control — out of everyone's control — and I was exposed to the entire world. There was no going back from it. I admitted to who I really am, fully anticipating a backlash from the public for having deceived them for so long. Instead, I saw and heard more messages than I could have imagined, all of understanding and admissions that, had they been in my shoes, many of them would have chosen the same route I did — to hide and try to be as unremarkable as much as possible.

I belong here.

On Earth. In Metropolis. At the *Daily Planet*. In my humble apartment on Clinton. Away from Lana. Helping the citizens of the world in two very different suits.

We had a heated discussion, Lana and I, after the dust settled. Perry was elected mayor and Lois left to go back to her own world and to her own Clark, who, no doubt, was going out of his mind with worry for her. Lana begged me to stop being Superman. I told her that I would absolutely *not* stop. *I love* being Superman. There was yelling, there were threats, there was an engagement ring that was flushed down my toilet. I didn't try to appease her. I let her rage as much as she wanted. Meeting Lois and becoming Superman had changed me. I found a reserve of courage inside that I never imagined I could have. I did what I should have done from the start. I stood up to Lana. I refused to allow her to push me around, manipulate me, belittle me.

She left in a huff and I haven't heard from her since.

That was three months ago.

Three of the most freeing months of my life.

I never noticed before, how much Lana was holding me back. I never realized how claustrophobic she'd made my life. With her gone, I feel like a man freed from a dark, windowless prison, finally able to breathe the fresh air and soak up the sun once more. She's not a bad person. She's just...controlling. Too much to be compatible with me.

I need a woman like Lois.

No.

I need *Lois*. *My* Lois.

Without her, the world's acceptance of me means nothing. Without her, there is no true, complete belonging for me in this world. Not as Clark. Not as Superman.

So, if and when H.G. Wells comes back, I will be ready. Ready to do whatever it takes. Ready to make any sacrifice. Because I am in love with her, even though we've never met.

She's here.

She's here and alive and with me.

I don't cry much. Never have. The last time I did was when I buried my parents. But right now? Right now I could cry an ocean in my happiness. My heart is so full, I can't believe it hasn't yet burst.

I had almost lost hope. Had almost given up. Had stopped expecting every knock at my door to be H.G. Wells, come to give me some good news. As the months passed, the idea of finding my Lois, the other half of my soul, faded. I stopped dreaming about the other Lois. Instead, I lost myself to my work. As Clark, I wore myself thin, working on investigation after investigation. As Superman, I burned the candle at both ends, making rescue after rescue, public appearance after public appearance.

I nearly killed myself from exhaustion.

I didn't know how to balance all the aspects of my life. I thought it was best to keep myself busy. If I kept myself constantly occupied, I wouldn't have time to obsess over thoughts of Lois. No time to wonder how I could save her. No ability to worry about what would happen if I *did* find her and she rejected me.

Then, suddenly, I found myself completely burnt out. Living became a chore. I had to force myself to slow down, to take a step back, to find a balance that worked for me. It saved my sanity. It saved my *life*. I pulled myself back from the abyss and reclaimed my life. I still work for the *Planet*. I can't imagine life without the paper. And I still play the part of Superman. Oh, but how I owe the Lois of that other world, for bringing the superhero to life! Being Superman is incredible. The feeling of being able to help people in life or death situations is indescribable.

It was difficult, but I forced myself to cut back on how much time I was spending working — both as the reporter and the hero. I made myself take time away from my responsibilities and pursue other hobbies, to live like any other, normal man. Instead of focusing only on trying to better the world, and beating myself up over the moments when I failed, I turned some of my attention inward, finding things that gave me pleasure. A quiet night spent reading. Going to a sporting event. Watching the sun set from the shores of a remote, uninhabited island. Stargazing out in the countryside, away from the glaring, eternal lights of the city.

Still, there was an incompleteness, a yearning, I could not quench.

Then, one night, Herb appeared outside my door. My heart stopped beating for an instant. He'd found Lois. I just knew it in my heart. Excitedly, I ushered him into my apartment, firing questions at him with super speed. Gently, he shattered my dreams.

He hadn't found my Lois.

He needed me to leave my world and defend the one that belonged to the other Lois and Clark. Clark, he explained, had been sent through a rift in time and space via a time travel window. With no exit for him and the original window destroyed, he was stuck and with very limited time before his little "pocket" crushed down on him, killing him. I immediately agreed to go with Herb. After all, I owed that other Clark. Because of his decision to become Superman, *I* was able to become Superman too. And, I'll admit, I owed Lois too, for freeing me from the invisible chains of fear and uncertainty that had always weighed me down.

Seeing her again...it broke my heart.

She was there in front of me and more inaccessible than ever. She was married now, to that other me. And every time she looked at me, I saw hurt in her eyes. Not because I was there, but because I looked just like the man she loves, the man who was missing and whose time was running all too short. It must have been torture for her. It was torture for *me* too, because it was a stark reminder that my Lois still remained missing.

Still, I did my duty. I posed as that world's Superman. Even after the other Clark was brought back from a close call with oblivion, I lingered in that dimension, helping set things right again — notably, appearing in public as Superman alongside that world's Clark Kent, to prove to the world the lie that Clark and Superman are *not* the same person. It was the final defeat for Tempus — at least, for the time being. But when all was said and done, I wished Lois and Clark well and let Herb take me back to my own dimension.

The cycle began anew. Soaring hope that soon Herb would find my Lois. Fading dreams as days and weeks and months passed with no word. Scouring the globe in my spare time, looking for some clue as to her whereabouts or fate. The crushing feeling of giving up as hope finally died.

And then, as before, Herb's unexpected visit, this time with promising news. He'd found a lead with the help of his time machine, and, what was more, if we played our cards right, we had a chance to go into the past and save Lois before she could die a violent death in the Congo. I don't think I asked a single question. I simply went with him, did what he asked, and found myself stepping into the past and forward into my future. A long,

draining, desperate series of events followed, all of which are unimportant now. All that mattered was that it worked.

Lois Lane lived.

When I got back to my own time, I collapsed in relief. I could scarcely wait to get to work the next morning and find her there. She knew who I was — Herb had made sure that she would remember us — and so began our friendship. But we didn't stay as merely friends for long. A love blossomed between us and, before we knew it, we were dating. Waiting to propose to her was agony, but I didn't want to push too much too fast. So I waited half a year before offering her the ring I'd bought after the first full week I had her in my life.

A whirlwind of events, to be sure.

But I wouldn't trade a second of it.

For the first time in my life, I'm truly, completely happy. It's almost as if a veil has been lifted from the world. Colors are more vibrant now. Sounds are more complex. Every nerve ending feels every facet of the things I touch. Food tastes richer than I've ever remembered them to be. The world even smells different to me, in the best of ways. It's like I was living inside a black-and-white bubble that suddenly burst, spilling me out into the real and colorful world. And in the center of that world is Lois. *My Lois.*

It's incredible.

I'd felt a connection with the Lois of that other world. I'd even started to fall for her, despite my efforts not to, knowing that she would never stay. Knowing that she belonged with her Clark, not me. I still let my heart get hurt though — a brokenness that persisted well after her departure from my life.

Until my Lois.

What a world of difference there is between the Lois who visited for such a short time and the Lois who is now permanently in my life. I can't even begin to describe the difference between the two. Though they are twins in every way, there's a quality to my Lois that the other didn't have. I don't know what it is. Maybe it's simply the fact that my Lois belongs to this world, whereas the other was a stranger in every way. But all the rest is the same. The fire and passion. The drive to be the best. The total commitment to righting the wrongs of the world. The brilliant flashes of humor. Looks that could kill and a smile more radiant than the sun.

The acceptance of my alien self.

When I told Lois about myself, shortly after pulling her away from certain death, before she could be tossed into a world where everyone knows that I am Superman, I saw no hesitation in her eyes. No fear. No immediate, knee-jerk reaction to try to cover up and hide my abilities. At first, I could see a little speculation in the way that she looked at me, so I gently proved to her that I wasn't lying about the things I could do. Determination settled over her features and she declared herself to be my ally and friend.

It was a refreshing change from the way Lana had handled it. When I eventually told Lana, it was in hushed, embarrassed tones. I was fearful. I was uncomfortable. And she still freaked out on me, despite my every effort to keep her calm. With Lois, I had no fear, no embarrassment, no hesitations. I spoke confidently and comfortably, once I had ensured that her life was no longer in danger. And while it was a shock to her, she handled it well. She accepted what I was telling her. She didn't freak out.

It was as though she was hearing the news from a long known, completely trusted, and well-loved friend.

And, just like that, we clicked together in a way that goes beyond words, securing my link to this world.

This is where I belong.

In this house.

In this family.

With my wife, Lois, the other half of my soul.

With my children, the products of the love we share.

It's amazing, what the years can change. Especially when we

aren't really paying attention, and are, instead, simply just enjoying the moments. That's what it's been like for me, anyway. I've been aware of the huge changes my life has been undergoing, of course. I've known on a deep, instinctual level that each event has altered me and that I'll never be the person I once was. And that makes me happy, because I *never* want to be that lost, lonely, disconnected man ever again.

The day I married Lois was one of the happiest days of my life. I know that some men — and women — are afraid of taking that step. There is, after all, a certain amount of uncertainty that comes along with binding your life to that of another. At least, there is for a lot of people, from what I hear. But not for me. For the first time in my life, I took a bold step toward my future without the slightest moment of doubt or hesitation. Exchanging vows with Lois was as natural to me as breathing. Our two lives and two hearts merged into one and I felt a peace in my soul that I've never really known before. It went deeper, was more total, than the peace I felt upon saving Lois' life in the Congo. Because this union of ours was now truly the forever kind.

Then came the births of our children — each one unique and miraculous in their own ways. And each time, when I saw that tiny person exit my wife's body, I thought to myself, *I'm a father*; in such wonderment and absolute awe. Each time, I knew my life was about to radically shift — be it from no children to one and all the responsibilities of having a newborn, or the adding of another new life into the family and routines we'd established, and all the ways the dynamics of our family would have to change and adapt. Each time, I looked forward to the changes and the challenges that were to come. Each time, I felt this indescribable sense of renewal — that the bonds of belonging to this world had been strengthened a thousand-fold.

This is where I'm meant to be.

This is where I've *always* been meant to be.

I belong to my family.

I belong to the world.

I'm a husband and father. My family needs me. And I need them. I'm no longer an outsider looking in. I'm no longer an alien. My genetics might be, but in my heart, I'm just as much of a human man as the next guy. In all but blood, I'm an Earthling. All of my perceptions, all of my emotions, all of my thoughts have been shaped though my interactions with other human beings. I've never known what it's like to be Kryptonian. I've never experienced life with others who are like me, who share my DNA. I've known only what it is like to be an Earthling. And for that, I am thankful.

I'm no longer the square peg trying to fit into the round hole. And, for the first time, I'm learning that I never was. I've *always* belonged on this planet, amongst its inhabitants.

I'm also Superman. I'm meant to be on Earth, with these incredible powers, helping where I can. I often wish I could do more for the people of Earth, but Lois has helped me come to terms with the fact that I'm only one man. There's only so much that I can do, even with the abilities I possess. I can't split myself in two, in order to be present at different crises. And, even with my powers, sometimes, even when I'm there, at the scene of an accident or emergency, things can happen. Sometimes, I can't save a life. I used to beat myself up over those moments, when a life is lost because I simply can't get to them fast enough or because I've been busy helping another person. I used to wonder what good my powers were, if I couldn't help everyone. I used to wonder if I truly belonged in the role of a hero.

But Lois has changed all that. Her encouragement of me as I continue to don the costume made by her otherworldly twin has made me change my mind. What I *can* do as Superman is enough. That doesn't mean that I don't grieve for all the things I can't do. But it *does* make the burden a lot easier to bear. *She* makes being Superman easier to do. Going home to her loving arms after each

rescue — successful or not — recharges my spirit and lightens my soul. Without her, I'm not sure if I'd be able to continue on as the Man of Steel, as the public has dubbed me.

Because of Lois, I belong in that blue, red, and yellow suit.

Because of Lois, I belong in this world.

THE END