

Through My Eyes (Jack Olsen)

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Rated: PG

Submitted: May 2017

Summary: No one sees you quite like your family does. Jimmy Olsen reflects on his father, super-spy Jack Olsen.

Story Size: 3,061 words (16Kb as text)

Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise. The first two and a half lines came from a "Complete the Story" book as a story prompt.

It was odd to be in a room full of people who all seemed to look up to my dad like he was some kind of hero. A part of me wanted to see him through their eyes just for a moment. I tried to picture him as they did — a man who'd spent his life saving the world, one mission at a time. But try as I might, I failed. To me, he wasn't this super hero, this pillar of truth and justice. Because, for most of my life, he was barely even my father. For so many years, he'd been almost a stranger to me. A stranger who I'd only just begun to finally get to know.

Still, on that day, he was, at best, an acquaintance.

To everyone gathered at his retirement celebration, Jack Olsen was the best of the best. He was a super spy, the one they called in for their most critical missions. He was a man's man — rough and tumble, never one to shy away from getting his hands dirty, and who could charm the pants off anyone. He was brave, calmly accepting any and all missions without so much as a glimmer of trepidation in his eyes. He was strong. Nothing seemed to ever get under his skin or bother him. He was loyal. He completed his missions, no questions asked — a trait which he would later come to regret, as it turned out. He was meticulous. No loose ends were ever left hanging.

To me, he was a lousy father.

In hindsight, of course I understood why he'd kept such a massive secret from his family, about what he *really* did for a living. His life depended on secrecy. If it had gotten out at all, that he was a spy, his enemies would have sought him out and killed him. There was no room for error, no forgiveness if the information had leaked. And, let's face it, it could have easily gotten out. I was, for lack of a better word, a chatty kid. It wouldn't have taken much for me to accidentally make an off-handed comment to a friend — some moment of beaming pride — to show off how cool my dad was. And that would have gotten him killed, and likely tortured for his secrets beforehand. I would have been responsible for my dad's death.

But ensuring his own safety meant making sacrifices.

Jack Olsen, spy extraordinaire, kept the free world together as his personal life and family crumbled under his own feet.

The nature of his job demanded that he travel a lot. So much so, that it felt like he was *never* home. And when he *was* home, he was often withdrawn and thoughtful, choosing to be on his own in his personal study. I know now that he was preoccupied with preparing for missions or coming back from ones that had been more difficult than he'd anticipated. The more they were apart, the more that communication broke down between my mom and him. They stopped sleeping in the same room. They barely spoke with one another. The few, fleeting conversations they *did* have were

strained and full of anger and accusations. Mom grew depressed, thinking my father had lost interest in her, or was having an affair, or was involved in crime. I know that at one point, she even wondered if he'd gotten hooked on drugs. I think she would have kicked him out of our home if it didn't already feel like he didn't live there anymore.

As a result, my relationship with my dad deteriorated fast. How could I have a close relationship with someone who was essentially a ghost? It's not that I didn't *want* to be close with my father. It's just that it was impossible. Either he wasn't home or he and Mom were fighting. I was just a kid, so I dared not try to break up their arguments. I hid, alone, in my room, tinkering with my electronics. Or I left the house with my camera, hoping to photograph something beautiful to take my mind off of what was going on at home. At first, it was a way for me to find some peace, but before long it became a passion. And, eventually, it became my career.

It was no surprise when Mom and Dad finally called their marriage quits. I remember thinking that I should have been upset or shaken up by the divorce. Instead, I felt a mixture of relief and anger. I was glad that the fighting would stop and hoped Mom would find someone else who treated her the way she should have been treated. And I was angry that Dad forced her into a position where she felt she had no choice but to file to dissolve their marriage.

Still, I wanted to be a part of my father's life. And, more importantly, I wanted him to be a part of *my* life. So I tried — *hard!* — to keep the lines of communication open. But it was difficult, since I never really knew where he was at any given time. Mostly, I had to wait for Dad to contact *me*. I'd look forward to his sporadic phone calls, and try to keep him on the line as long as I could. But, eventually, those phone calls grew strained and I found myself struggling to keep the conversation going. Once in a while, Dad would be in town, and we'd try to get together. But those times weren't very often. With Dad being newly unattached, he threw himself into his work with fervor- taking on more time-consuming, more difficult missions. Years would pass between his visits. I felt forgotten. Discarded. Unloved.

Oh, Dad tried, in his own way, to make sure I wasn't *completely* abandoned. Sometimes, a gift would come for me in the mail. It was usually something he'd come across "in his travels" and would come with a short note attached, saying that he missed me, that we'd talk soon, that he'd seen whatever the item was and thought of me. In retrospect, I guess those packages were mailed after he'd moved on from those areas — I'd never actually looked at the postage on them.

Dad's attempts to stay a part of my life backfired. Instead of feeling closer to him or like I really meant something to him, I felt ever more distant. The gifts felt like buy-offs, like he was trying to purchase my love. I wasn't ungrateful. Not at all, I swear! But the truth was, all I really wanted was to see him, in person, more than once every few years. I wanted a genuine conversation with him, where he took interest in me and didn't appear to be preoccupied with other things. I wanted one holiday spent together. I wanted him to pat me on the back and tell me that he was proud of me.

I wanted him to show me how much he loved me simply by being there.

But, he wasn't. He *couldn't*. He had little to no say in the assignments he was given. He took them without knowing how long he'd be gone, or how dangerous things would get, or if he'd ever come home alive. He spent every day he wasn't on missions not knowing when the next one would come in — if he'd be able to relax for a month, a week, mere hours. His life hadn't been his own in those days.

I wish I'd known, back then. Once I was old enough to understand and appreciate the gravity of the secret, I wish I'd known the truth about my father. I would have guarded it with my

life, as I did once the truth accidentally spilled out during that NIA scandal. Dad could have trusted me. Instead, he chose to keep me at an arm's distance — to protect me, I know now. But at the time, it felt like the coldest rejection, particularly when he appeared to take more of an interest in Lois and Clark than his own son.

I would have been able to see past my Dad's actions and been able to embrace the way he tried to keep Mom and me safe. I wouldn't have harbored quite so much resentment and anger in my heart. Oh, I'm not naive enough to believe that I would have been able to keep *all* of the bitterness out of my heart. After all, when it came right down to it, he still chose a job over his family. I would have wondered why he couldn't just walk away from such a high stress, demanding, potentially deadly job. I would have wondered why his family didn't rank higher on his list of priorities. *But*, I also would have been able to — I hope! — talk to him about it. And yeah, maybe we would have fought about it. But at least I would have known that it wasn't my fault or Mom's fault that our family fell apart.

It would have helped, even if it wouldn't have cured the hurt I would have inevitably felt.

As it was, I didn't find out about Dad's spy work until I was grown up, living on my own, and established in my career. I'd already had my heart hurt too many times by my father. So the resentment was already there, and it made forgiveness harder than it might have otherwise been. That's not to say that I didn't work on forgiving him, just that it wasn't as easy as it might have been. Still, we both acknowledged that we had a long way to go before we could consider our relationship mended. And that made all the difference. Because there was Dad, the hardened super spy, admitting that he'd failed in his role as a father, and humbly asking for the chance to make things right. It wasn't a me versus him thing. It was both of us, working together to mend all the scars in our relationship.

It took time, but, eventually, we did it. We got to a point where I could genuinely forgive him for the toll his job had taken on our family, because I understood how vital he'd been to protecting our country. We got to the point where Dad felt comfortable and easy in his role as a father to me, because we'd both finally let down our guards around one another. We learned how to trust each other and respect each other as men.

Still, Dad kept up his work as a spy. And part of me resented that, even though I agreed that he would never be able to be the guy who took a desk job and defended America from an office. Though I encouraged him to keep doing what he was doing, out there in the field, there'd been a part of me that had hoped he'd at least consider backing off just a bit, so he could spend more time with me. More than that, I was terrified for him. Every day that passed when I didn't hear from him, I wondered if he was safe, if he was on assignment, if he was still alive.

I was never so happy as when he announced his retirement. At last, I could breathe easy. I could stop worrying so much if a couple of days passed without a text or email from him. But for all of that, we still had a long way to go, in terms of really connecting with each other. We were still mostly just amiable acquaintances. With him being gone so often, we hadn't gotten much of a chance to really get to know each other.

So his decision to retire was, for me, an opportunity to really, truly, get to know Jack Olsen — as a man, as a friend, as a father.

As it had been before, the process was slow. Dad didn't want to live in Metropolis. He said he'd had enough of bustling, overcrowded cities. He chose, instead, to move to a quiet little community in Connecticut. He bought a modest, comfortable home on a decent plot of land, where the deer wandered in the early mornings and on golden evenings, and where he had neighbors to keep the loneliness at bay without them being suffocatingly close. And against all odds, he genuinely became happy there.

It was weird, to see my dad staying in one place, instead of jet-setting his way across the globe.

I visited as often as I could, now that he was always in one place, and close enough that I could drive up and back home to Metropolis over a weekend. And Dad came in as often as I went to visit him, giving us ample opportunity to begin to get to know one another on a deeper level than had ever been possible up until that point. Eventually, even Mom started talking to him again, once the truth of his former life as a spy came out into the open. That was something — to see them both getting along without yelling or slamming doors or slinging accusations at each other. It was a long time in coming, to be sure, but it meant the world to me, the first time we were all able to peacefully coexist at a nice dinner out one night when they both happened to be in town. When it was all over, and I was back in my own house, I had the chance to really absorb what had happened that night. I felt like I was living in a dream — it just felt so unreal how far the three of us had come in repairing our relationships with one another.

By then, I was a father myself, to a happy-go-lucky little girl and studious, yet goofy not-quite-teenaged boy. For so long, I'd done my utmost to be exactly the kind of man my father hadn't been. I stretched myself thin to ensure that I could provide for my wife and children, enough to give them the most comfortable lives they could want, while making sure I was as involved with their lives as I could possibly be. Sometimes, it was overwhelming. After all, being a photographer for a newspaper — even one so prestigious as the *Daily Planet* — wasn't exactly going to make me a rich man. My wife had to continue working as a paralegal, and took courses at night to become a divorce lawyer. You know, I still don't know how she does it. I would find it depressing to watch couples fighting it out over everything from their bank accounts to their kids, but she's always said that it's easy for her to tune out the negativity and leave her work in the office at the end of the day.

Everything we did, we did for our children. We made sure that one or both of us was always there, front and center, for every school play, sports game, honor ceremony, or Cub Scout/Girl Scout event. I wish I could say that I, personally, made it to every single event, but that would be a lie. The truth is, as much as I tried to schedule around their events, it wasn't possible for me to be there for everything. At first, having to admit that to myself, I felt like a failure. I felt like I was becoming my own father, the man who was never around for his son. I panicked, and I'm not even ashamed to own up to that.

It was my wife who made me realize that I was nothing like my father. Though I couldn't make it to every single event, I was doing my best. And when I *was* able to go to something for my son or daughter, I made the most of it. Quality over quantity, she often reassured me. That was what was most important. I wasn't making quick, barely-there, cameos at the events I attended. I was *there* — fully invested in what was happening, my attention focused on my children, doing what I could to make it memorable for them.

More than that, we spent time together every day. Family meals. After dinner walks. Weekends spent at the park. Day trips to the zoo, or the aquarium, or a museum. Visits to the local ice cream store for no reason at all. Bedtime stories. Vacations.

All things I had missed out on doing with my dad.

All things I cherished doing with my kids.

So, that night? The night when my parents were able to sit down to a civil meal together and begin to repair their well-damaged relationship with each other? It made me look at my father differently than I'd ever viewed him before. Suddenly, I could see why his peers looked at him like he was a hero.

But that hero-worship was different for me. I knew, of course, that he was a hero who'd saved the free world time and time again. But that wasn't what made him a hero in my eyes. Instead,

it was the way he humbled himself, seeking our forgiveness for the sins he'd committed against his family, and his willingness to do whatever it took to make amends. That was what *truly* made him a hero in my eyes. It shifted everything in my mind. For the first time in my life, I found myself looking toward him as an example of what a man should be like, instead of what a man should strive not to be at all costs.

For the first time, I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jack Olsen was a hero in his own right.

THE END