

Just the Way You Are

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Rated: PG (somewhat graphic description of dissection)

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Summary: As a young boy, Clark has some adjustments to make that he's not particularly happy with.

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I really wanted to write something seasonal, but this is what the muse was willing to give me so I just went with it. NostalgiaKick and Folc4evernaday graciously agreed to beta it for me.

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Martha sighed at the mess in the kitchen that had been spotless when she'd stepped out to hang the wash on the line. Clark had pushed a chair up to the counter and had mayonnaise all the way up to his eyebrows as he smeared a huge glob onto a slice of bread. Crumbs were scattered everywhere, and an open package of ham hung over the edge of the cabinet next to a somewhat squashed-looking tomato, dripping juices onto the floor.

"Clark Jerome Kent!" she snapped at her almost-six year old son. "What on earth do you think you're doing?"

"Making some lunch for us, Mama!" He gave her a gap-toothed grin and turned back to his 'sandwich-making.'

She hated to scold him when it seemed like his mood had finally turned around, but rules were rules. "I see. Clark, what's the kitchen rule?"

He muttered something under his breath as his shoulders slumped.

"What was that, son?"

"No messing around in the kitchen without a grownup," he grumbled in a sullen tone as he hopped down from the chair. He reached out to grab it and drag it back to the table, but Martha stopped him.

"I'll move the chair, you're filthy." She turned him toward the bathroom and gave him a light push between the shoulder blades. "Go get ready for a bath; I'll be there in a minute to run the water."

His small frame stiffened with obstinate stubbornness. "Don't want a bath, baths are for bedtime and I'm not sleepy!"

She gave him another push. "Baths are also for when you've covered yourself in enough mayonnaise to make potato salad! Now you mind me, young man! Get in there and get ready for a bath!"

She shook her head at his departing back as Clark finally stomped off in the direction of the bathroom. Hopefully he wouldn't manage to destroy anything else before she got a chance to go run his bath. He wasn't allowed to stomp in the house, either, but she decided discretion was the better part of valor as she neatened up the mess he'd left and made a quick lunch for them to eat once he was clean.

Clark had woken up in one of his rare bad moods that morning, after having been told the night before that he'd be staying home 'sick' for a few days. He hated missing school and he hated having to lie, and the combination had brought out behaviors that she and Jonathan didn't usually see. She wasn't

fond of lying either, or of having a cranky five year old underfoot all day, but when they'd noticed last year that Clark literally *never* got sick they'd realized that there just might be something about their son that was more special than how and where they'd found him. What had really put the cap on things though had been the previous summer, when he'd fallen clean out of the hayloft and scrambled up from the floor laughing once he got over having the wind knocked out of him.

That was when she and Jonathan had realized that the lie about being the orphaned son of a cousin might not be enough to keep their boy safe. Clark hadn't liked it when they'd started putting band-aids on him from time to time and telling him that he needed to tell people about 'owies' that he didn't have, but he'd grudgingly gone along with it after Jonathan sat him down and explained a few things. Today was the first time they'd kept him home to feign sickness.

Martha had gotten away with claiming luck when Clark missed catching the usual schoolroom rounds of colds and assorted illnesses during kindergarten, especially when they seemed to skip the other farm kids too. This time though, half his class was out with a bug and she was worried that her excuses might be getting a little thin. She and Jonathan had discussed it and decided to keep Clark home 'with a fever' for a few days. They had tried to frame it as a treat, a few days of sanctioned hooky, but Clark absolutely loved going to school and wasn't making things easy for them. Jonathan had finally had to have another talk with him the night before.

Martha settled her newly-clean and dressed son in the living room with his sandwich, along with the rare treats of a soft drink and some potato chips. "There we are," she said cheerfully. "Now, what do you want to do this afternoon after you've eaten?"

Clark scowled at her. "Go to school."

Martha put her hands on her hips and stared him down. Part of her was proud that he was so stubborn about having to lie, but she was his mother and she was tired of the lip she'd been getting from him all morning.

"Too bad," she said flatly, "you're not going back to school until Monday and that's that."

He drew in a breath to protest.

"I *said*, that's that. Do you understand me, young man?"

Clark nodded stiffly.

"Your father and I don't enjoy telling these fibs and making you miss school when you don't want to either, but we're *all* going to do what we have to to keep you safe, and I don't want to hear another word about it." She gestured around the room. "You have paints and crayons and colored pencils and a whole pad of art paper, and an entire box of toys to play with; I suggest you find something to do that interests you."

Clark pushed his lower lip out and went for broke. If this was supposed to be a treat, he'd take it as far as he could stretch it. "Can I watch TV?"

Martha paused. She and Jonathan tried to limit Clark's television time as much as they reasonably could, but if it kept him in the house and out of the way of her chores, she was willing to make an exception. She finally nodded. "Fine, but only PBS."

"PBS is for babies!" Clark protested in outrage.

Martha arched an eyebrow at him but didn't say anything, and after a few moments Clark mumbled a 'yes ma'am' and walked over to the television to turn it on and turn the dial to the local PBS affiliate. Martha headed back to the kitchen as her son settled himself on the floor behind the coffee table to lean against the front of the sofa and eat his lunch.

Clark ate a chip and picked listlessly at the crust on his ham, tomato, and cheese sandwich. He hated being so different from other people, almost as much as he hated having to lie about it. All

he wanted was to go to school, learn new things, see his friends, and be *normal*. Having to remember what to lie about, and when, and who to lie to was complicated and awful... but the talk he'd gotten from his dad the night before had been even worse.

He'd seen how the other kids treated anyone different, even if they were just a little different like Lana Lang being the shortest girl in their class or Jimmy Thompson having a lisp (although privately he thought Jimmy's lisp was kind of funny).

Although he didn't like to think about how they might treat someone who was *really* different, before last night, he'd been able to tell himself that his friends would like him anyway and the teachers would stick up for him just like they did for Lana and Jimmy.

That notion had been put paid to last night though, when his Dad had come in to talk to him after he informed his Mom that no, he was *not* sick and yes, he was *so* going to school in the morning, and that the band-aids and fake injuries were bad enough but he was sick of lying and wasn't going to do it about anything else no matter what they said. He didn't want to think about that conversation anymore, but he couldn't seem to stop.

Jonathan pushed Clark's bedroom door open, letting the light from the hallway spill in and fan across the foot of his son's bed.

"Clark? Son... we need to talk."

"No we don't," came a small, stubborn voice from the darkness near the pillow, "I told Mama I'm done lying, and I am."

Jonathan sighed heavily. "Son—"

"No, Dad!" Clark's voice was a plaintive near-whine. "Lying's wrong! Ya'll have always said so, and so does Miss Jenkins at school, and Reverend Peters too! I hate lying! How can you and Mom make me do something so bad?"

Jonathan eased his way into the room and sat down on the edge of his son's bed. "Listen, son—"

Clark sat up, further protests ready on his lips.

"I said listen."

Clark closed his mouth, but continued to glare sullenly at his Dad.

"You remember that talk we had after you fell out of the hay loft?"

Clark nodded silently.

"You remember how we told you then that we found you, and that you're not really Cousin Jerome's son?"

"Yes sir, but—"

"There's more we haven't told you yet." Jonathan looked down at his lap, where his hands had woven themselves together into a double fist of white knuckles and tension.

"Like what?" Clark leaned toward his Dad, his overwhelming curiosity temporarily driving their argument out of his head. Like most adopted children, Clark was filled with questions about where he came from. Why was he abandoned? Hadn't his birth parents wanted him? Had he been taken, or given away? Did he have other relatives that he might meet someday?

Jonathan frowned. He had hoped not to need to have this conversation with Clark until the boy was a little older; but events had ambushed him before he was ready. 'Later' had become 'now,' as it tended to do, and here he was faced with having to tell his son about things that he wasn't terribly sure of himself.

"Dad?" Clark prompted quietly. He hoped his Dad hadn't changed his mind about whatever he'd been about to tell him.

"Sorry son, it's just hard to know where to start. You remember that we told you we found you, right?"

"Yeah—I mean yes sir, I remember." Clark was doing his best to be quiet and still, not wanting to distract his Dad from the coming story although it was hard since he was all but vibrating with impatience.

"Well..." Jonathan paused. "We didn't just find you. You

weren't exactly on the doorstep in a basket."

Clark scooted closer to his father, "Where was I?"

"You were in a ship that your mother and I saw crash in Shuster's Field." Jonathan stared down at the clenched fists in his lap, but watched Clark from the corner of his eye.

Clark's jaw dropped in outraged amazement at the line he'd just been fed. "That's dumb! How could a boat crash there? Shuster's field is nowhere near the lake!"

Clark's retort surprised a momentary chuckle out of Jonathan. "No son, not that kind of ship." He paused and lowered his voice as he leaned toward the boy. "A spaceship."

Clark gasped. "A spaceship? You found me in a spaceship? Honest?"

Jonathan nodded. "It was just big enough for a baby, and you'd better believe your mother and I were sure surprised when we found one inside it!"

Clark leaned back into his pillows. "I don't understand though, how'd I get inside a spaceship? I mean, did aliens steal me from my real mom and dad?"

Jonathan tried not to wince at 'real mom and dad,' then realized what direction his son was running in with this new information. "Uh, actually son—"

Clark grabbed a wad of his Dad's shirt sleeve in his small hand and shook it. "Omigosh, what if the aliens stole a bunch of kids and shot them into space! Dad, we have to find them and help them!"

"Clark, wait," he interjected. He watched the small boy watching him, both of their brows furrowed with different worries. "Clark, we don't think anyone stole you, at least not the way you mean."

Clark crossed his arms and gave his Dad a look that said 'this had better be good. "How did I get in there, then?"

"Well, we're not exactly sure, but we figure there are a couple of possibilities. See, about ten years before we found you, the Russians were shooting dogs into space to see if a living thing could survive up there. Some of them didn't make it back, and they shot at least one up there knowing it would die, but they didn't let that stop them."

Clark gasped. "That's awful! Those poor dogs!"

Jonathan nodded. "Yes, and we thought it wouldn't take all that much for the kind of people who would do that to a helpless dog to do it to a helpless baby."

Clark's eyes widened in horror. "Someone shot me into space so I'd die?"

"Well, we thought someone might have shot you into space and not cared much one way or the other as long as they found out what they wanted to know."

Clark lurched up from the bed and into Jonathan's lap, clinging to his father's neck and trembling wordlessly. Jonathan rubbed his back and held him for a few minutes before scooting the boy down onto his knees.

"You alright son? Remember, your mom and I found you and we love you very much." He brushed a few tears from Clark's cheeks with his broad thumbs.

Clark gulped and nodded "I love you, too."

"Remember I said there was another possibility?"

Clark nodded again.

"There's a chance that you might be from somewhere a little farther away than Russia." Jonathan watched his son carefully and waited to see if he'd connect the dots on his own.

Clark, who loved the globe in his classroom and had spent a lot of time finding Kansas and then seeing how far away other places were from it, hazarded a guess. "Um, China?"

Jonathan chuckled. "Good guess son, but no, not China. Your mother and I wondered if maybe you came from space."

Clark stiffened and pushed against his father's chest, suddenly sure he was being made fun of. "Lemme go."

Jonathan shifted his grip to keep his armful of suddenly rigid and squirming child on his lap. "Hold on a minute son, I'm not funning you. I can see why you'd think so, but I promise I'm not."

Clark didn't relax any, but he did stop struggling to get away as he gave his Dad a wary look. "Promise?"

Jonathan nodded solemnly. "Cross my heart."

Clark watched his Dad carefully for a minute, alert for any signs of teasing, before he finally relaxed and allowed himself to be cuddled. His arms crept around Jonathan's neck as he muttered something against his Dad's shirt.

Jonathan sighed. "I know, son. I hate the lying too, but we have to."

Clark leaned back in his father's grasp and crossed his arms over his narrow chest. "How come?"

Jonathan shifted Clark back onto the mattress and pulled the quilt over his son's lap. "Wait here, I need to show you something." He got up abruptly and left the room, returning with a large book before Clark had a chance to get restless. Jonathan reached over and turned on the lamp on Clark's nightstand, then he sat back down. "Come here and look at this, Clark."

Clark scooted close against his father's side and looked at the book. "Gray's an... anat... ana-tomy." He looked up at Jonathan for confirmation.

"That's right, son; it's called 'Gray's Anatomy.' Anatomy is the study of bodies and how they work." He flipped the book open to a color plate that showed structures of the leg and included cross sections of the bones. "This page is about legs." He flipped a few more pages. "This part is about back bones." Finally, he found what he was looking for. "And this part is about the immune system."

"What's a 'mune system?'"

"The immune system is the part of your body that keeps you from getting sick, or that helps you get well again if you get sick anyway."

"Wow," said Clark as he reached over Jonathan's arm and flipped through a few more pages. Like many small boys, he was fascinated with the gorey and the gross [delete comma] and found the brightly colored images in the book deeply interesting. "I must have a really good one of those."

Jonathan put his hand over Clark's, stilling his son and getting the boy's attention. "Yes, we think you do. Maybe even a little *too* good." He flipped back to the diagram of the femur. "Remember when Pete Ross fell out of his tree house and broke his leg?"

Clark nodded.

Jonathan flipped back to the diagram of a spine. "How about when you fell out of the hay loft and landed flat on your back in the barn?"

Clark nodded again. "I 'member. It knocked my wind out!"

"Remember how upset your mother and I were?"

Clark nodded a third time. "Mama was cryin'."

Jonathan frowned, remembering that day and how terror had shot through him when Martha screamed. "She thought you were dead."

Clark's jaw dropped. "Dead? Why would I be dead?!" He shook his head. "Dad, you're being silly."

"Clark, I've seen grown men fall from only half as high and not been able to walk away." Jonathan tapped the spinal diagram with a work-hardened fingertip. "It broke their backs, and they died."

"But... but it barely stung!" Clark objected. "How could that kill anybody?"

"You'll just have to take my word for it that it can, son."

Jonathan closed his eyes for a moment. He wasn't looking forward to the next bit, but he needed to keep his son safe, and he was out of ideas. Nothing else they'd said to Clark so far had worked.

"Clark, I want you to listen to me now, alright son?"

"Sure dad, what is it?"

"They had to study hundreds and hundreds of people over a long, long time to be able to make a book like this, about what's inside people and how it all works."

Clark looked at the thickness of the book and nodded. "Yessir, that's a lot of pictures."

Jonathan leaned toward his son. "If anyone found out that you can fall from higher than Pete did and not have so much as a bruise, don't you think they'd want some pictures of the inside of you?"

Clark swallowed.

"And if they found out that you never, ever get sick, they'd want to know why and how and see if maybe other people could stop getting sick too."

Clark looked up at his father. "Wouldn't that be a good thing though, if people could stop getting sick?"

"It would son, yes, but not if it cost us you." Jonathan cleared his suddenly tight throat.

"Cost you me? I don't understand." Clark's brow crinkled in confusion.

"Clark—" Jonathan stopped, unable to speak for a moment. "Son, do you think they'd be able to get all these pictures of your insides if you were *alive*?"

Clark blanched in sudden terror. "No. No, Dad, nobody would—"

"Yes, son. Yes, they would. They'd take you away from us and do whatever they needed to to find out how you tick. They'd dissect you like a frog, little boy or not. That's why we can't ever let anyone know that you never get bruised or scratched or cut or burned, or catch a cold. We lie about how special you are and make *you* lie about it to keep you safe, because we love you. Do you understand now, son?"

Clark nodded slowly and stared at his Dad with wide, dark eyes.

"Good son, that's... that's good." Jonathan only hoped he hadn't done more harm than good, and that Clark really did understand as well as a child his age could understand such a terrible thing. After a minute, he patted the lump under the quilt that was Clark's knee and stood up, clasping the book under one arm. "Let's get you settled, alright? You can stay home with your mom for the next day or so and do whatever you want as long as you stay in the house."

Clark opened his mouth, but closed it after a moment and simply nodded his head as he scooted down under the blankets and laid back on his pillow. He watched his father silently as Jonathan drew the covers up and tucked him in.

Jonathan turned the light out and moved toward the door, pausing as a small voice broke the hush in the room.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Clark?" He held his breath, wondering what was coming.

"I love you. And Mama, too."

"We love you too, son, never forget that." Jonathan stepped out into the hall and pulled the door closed, then headed downstairs to find his wife.

Alone in his room again, Clark turned over and faced the window. He wanted to forget the things his dad had told him, but he just couldn't. He watched the stars over the fields of their farm and wondered, but it was a long time before sleep came.

Clark scrubbed his sleeve across his suddenly-damp eyes and sniffled. He didn't want to cry like some baby, even if he had to watch baby shows. He picked up the bottle of Coke that his mom had set out for him and took a big swallow to wash away the lump in his throat, then belched. Suddenly somewhat more cheerful, he took another big drink and belched again, wondering if his mom could hear him and was about to come scold him for being rude.

At least burping is normal, he thought, and just like that his good mood was gone again.

Normal. What a fine word. It sounded so much better than *different* or *weird* or *alien*. He had a sudden fierce wish to be able to break his leg like Pete, or get itchy from poison ivy like Susie Mason, or even just to get the sniffles like all the other kids he knew seemed to be able to do on a regular, frequent basis. He bet none of them were ever forced to lie about who or—ugh—*what* they were.

He flipped his pad of paper open and picked up a colored pencil just as *Sesame Street* came back from commercial. Blech, what a baby show! Why couldn't his mom let him watch something good, like *Mission: Impossible* or *Hawaii Five-O* or *Mannix*? Even *The Brady Bunch* would be better than this—he scrambled for a swear but couldn't think of a good one—*hogwash*. He turned his head and eyed the kitchen doorway speculatively. Maybe if he turned the volume down real low, he could change the channel without Mom noticing. He shifted indecisively on the carpet and started to get up, then settled back down onto his butt with a sigh. *Better not chance it*, he thought. Mom was just sneaky enough to catch him, and then he'd be stuck in his room until Monday. At least he had the run of the house for now, even if he was only allowed to watch baby shows.

He turned his attention back to the TV. *Sesame Street* may be stupid, but at least the puppets were easy to draw. Big Bird: done. Snufaluff... Snuphaluph... *Snuffy* was a little more complicated, but basically just a big brown blob with a trunk: done. Bert and Ernie: done. He sighed. This was boring. Oscar the Grouch: done. Clark thought for a little while about what it might be like to live in a trash can, with a lid to keep people out if they tried to make fun of you or call you names or take you away from where you belonged because... well, enough of that. No one was taking *him* anywhere, that was for sure. Not once they saw the heap of band-aids plastered all over him or heard about the 'bad case of the flu' he was busy pretending to have.

Clark flipped to a new sheet of paper and drew a big circle. *Kind of blah*. He added some rings and a moon to turn it into a planet. *Better*. He drew a big 'blobby' continent, then colored it in with red and orange. Satisfied, he picked up a gray pencil and drew a saucer-shaped ship with a big domed center section zooming away from his planet. "Planet full of *weirdos*," he muttered, "I'm *glad I left*."

He changed pencils again and drew a pilot for the saucer—something green and nasty-looking, with big black eyes and a pair of long antennae like a cockroach. He bit his lip and stared at what he'd drawn for a few seconds before reaching out and ripping the paper out of the pad, crumpling it into a wad and throwing it toward the trash can in the corner.

Dad's probably wrong anyway. Clark jerked upright, shocked by his own childish blasphemy. Dad? Wrong? No way, José, Dad knew everything! Dad knew how to fix a tractor, and help a cow birth a calf, and when to plow and when to plant, and where the fish were biting in the lake, and the best way to hook a worm or build a tree house or carve a turkey or rescue a bird that fell out of its nest, and what Dad didn't know, Mom did! He cut off that train of thought in a hurry and reached for a black pencil.

This time he filled the page with a bulging cartoon rocket with a large round porthole window in the nose cone. He spent a few minutes adding fins and doodads and a big white plume of smoke coming out the back. He didn't even notice when the hated *Sesame Street* ended and a new show started as he almost unconsciously switched to a brown pencil and started drawing a dog in the window of the rocket. He worked on the dog for a minute, then leaned back against the front of the couch and studied his masterpiece.

He liked how fast the rocket looked and reached out to add some more smoke to the plume. He looked at the dog in the

window. It looked friendly and happy. Maybe a little *too* happy for a dog that was getting shot into space. He picked up the black pencil again and viciously drew two heavy Xs over its eyes before letting his forehead hit the coffee table with a thump.

"Ow," Clark said a few moments later, when he remembered that hitting things with your head was supposed to hurt. He sighed. Another lie. He understood a little better about the lying after talking to his dad the night before, but that still didn't mean he liked it. He didn't want to have to hide things from his friends and pretend to be something he wasn't. He just wanted to be *normal*. Suddenly, the man on the TV caught his attention, and Clark looked up.

Mr. Rogers was talking about being different. He talked for a few minutes about everyone having different looks and talents and abilities and everyone being special in their own way, then he started singing.

Singing wasn't a talent that Clark had, but he appreciated it in other people. Mr. Rogers seemed to be looking right at him as he sang:

♪Some are fancy on the outside.

Some are fancy on the inside.

Everybody's fancy.

Everybody's fine.

Your body's fancy and so is mine.♪

Clark allowed as how he was maybe a little more fancy than most people, but he supposed the gist of it was right.

♪Boys are boys from the beginning.

Girls are girls right from the start.

Everybody's fancy.

Everybody's fine.

Your body's fancy and so is mine.♪

Ew, girls. Cootie carriers, the lot of them. Clark tilted his head and thought for a minute. He guessed Lana was okay, sort of, and her hair was kind of nice, but she was still a girl, so *yuck!* He'd definitely never tell her so.

♪Girls grow up to be the mommies.

Boys grow up to be the daddies.

Everybody's fancy.

Everybody's fine.

Your body's fancy and so is mine.♪

So far so good – the song seemed to be nearly over and Clark hadn't heard anything yet that sounded like a lie.

♪I think you're a special person

And I like your ins and outsides.

Everybody's fancy.

Everybody's fine.

Your body's fancy and so is mine.♪

Kiddie show or not, Clark was hearing things he desperately needed to hear from someone other than his parents. Since he couldn't talk to any other grownups about what was bothering him, he was apparently stuck with Mr. Rogers.

There was some goofy business with a trolley and some puppets, although the trolley itself was sort of cool, then Mr. Rogers came back and talked some more about people being different but still wanting to be their friends.

♪It's you I like,

It's not the things you wear,

It's not the way you do your hair

But it's you I like

The way you are right now,

The way down deep inside you.♪

Clark was spellbound. How did the host of some stupid baby show know about the things inside him? He was a big enough boy to know that Mr. Rogers wasn't really singing to him specifically, but it sure felt that way.

♪Not the things that hide you,

Not your toys

*They're just beside you.
But it's you I like
Every part of you.
Your skin, your eyes, your feelings.♫*

Even Clark with his hurt-proof skin? Even these awful feelings he'd woken up with that made him act so bad to his mom?

*♫Whether old or new.
I hope that you'll remember
Even when you're feeling blue
That it's you I like,
It's you yourself
It's you.
It's you I like.♫*

Well, alright then. That made three people who liked him just the way he was; Mom, Dad, and Mr. Rogers. Clark guessed he could live with that, even if no one else knew about him. Maybe he could work on liking some of the special things about himself, instead of just thinking of himself as a weirdo. He flipped to a blank sheet of paper and started drawing something for his mom.

Martha finished mopping the floor, then made a snack for Clark and put it on a tray. Eating in the living room was usually against the rules, but she knew he was having a tough time today and felt like an exception was warranted. She stopped in the doorway and tilted her head curiously as a tuneless warbling met her ears. Her poor son could do a lot of things, but he couldn't carry a tune if it had handles.

*♫It's you I like,
It's not the things you wear,
It's not the way you do your hair.♫*

She cleared her throat and stepped over to the coffee table to set down the tray. "Having fun, Clark?" she asked hopefully.

He tore a sheet off his pad of paper and held it out to her with a grin. "Yes, ma'am. I drew you something!"

She took the sheet of paper and examined the somewhat blobby flowers. "Thank you, Clark; it's lovely. I'll put it right on the refrigerator." She paused for a beat. "You seem to be feeling better..."

"Yes ma'am." He paused and watched her thoughtfully for a moment before dropping his gaze to his lap. "I still don't like the lying, but I guess I sort of understand why we have to, and I guess I'll do it."

She ruffled his hair affectionately. "Thank you Clark. I know it's hard, but we just want what's best for you. We love you, and we'll help you as much as we can."

"Thanks, Mom. I love you, too." Clark turned his attention back to drawing and after a moment Martha returned to the kitchen. An off-key rendition of *Won't You Be My Neighbor* followed her.

THE END

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