

Night Shift

Superman Fan Fiction

By Colt Skinner

I like night shifts. The hustle and bustle of the day is over and the work of a security guard becomes relaxed, almost monotonous. There are fewer calls for service; less requests to open doors because someone forgot their keys, or to take theft reports for items that will later be found in the bottom of a drawer. Managers and looky-loos aren't around to breathe over our shoulders while we are working, so we have the chance to engage in our real duties. One of my favorite tasks is conducting patrols. I do what is called a floor-by-floor every two hours, where I touch every single door handle in the building to make sure that it is locked. After that, I do a perimeter check, which can be a little daunting in the middle of the night. Since we're downtown, I usually find a street-involved person hanging around. Unfortunately, I have to then perform one of my least favorite duties which is to move these people along. Since I am alone however, I can handle the situation with more tact and grace than I can when someone from middle management is leering over my shoulder and quietly whispering into my ear "get that bum outta here!". Usually I'll buy them a coffee and have a chat about their day as I am asking them to leave, and if I really have the time I'll try to get them a bed at one of shelters in Suicide Slum.

The calmness of being on night shift allows my mind to wander at a leisurely pace. I can focus, and if the night is slow enough I can even get some school work done. I don't rely on that time for school work, but it's nice to be able to review a chapter here and there. Of course, the best part about being on night shift are the other staff members. Everyone on my crew at the Daily Planet is laid back and at ease. We have a really nice rhythm. They're all a lot older than I am, but I don't mind that. The front desk guard, Uri, has been really helpful in showing me the ropes, Preeta, who is the overnight custodian, treats me like one of her own kids, and our Supervisor, Mr. Maurice Romero-Obando, takes really good care of all of us.

When I worked at the Museum of Natural History I could go four or five night shifts before seeing someone who wasn't a custodian or another security guard, but the daily Planet is different. It doesn't matter what time of day or night it is, there is always someone around. Mostly it's the fulltime paper staff I see scurrying about after hours. Jimmy Olson regularly arrives at work before dawn, spends the day hopping around town taking pictures, and then stays well into the night editing them. If there is an important sporting event in town, you can almost be guaranteed that Steve Lambard will pop by afterwards to start his draft. Lois Lane sleeps in her office probably once a week, usually so she can be the first one at some big press conference. Perry White is a night shift staple of course. When I was being trained, Uri told me that Perry White never leaves, that he's always here. "One time I even see him on Christmas," Uri told me, with a boisterous laugh, "and Mrs. Perry White come down and yell at him. 'What are you doing, Perry? Why you no come home, Perry?'"

Mr. White is not even the worst offender though. Hands down, the award winner for most active reporter on night shift is Clark Kent. Mr. Kent pops in and out of the Daily Planet the same way most people pop in and out of their refrigerator on a boring Friday night. One minute I'm waving goodbye to him as he walks through the lobby, and forty minutes later I

find him in his office typing away. I see that man in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, in the middle of the night, and again the next morning. The strange thing though is that I rarely see him come through the lobby, unless it's when the other nine-to-fivers are passing through. I asked Uri about it once, and he told me that Mr. Kent usually takes the back stairs, but I patrol there and have only ever seen him once.

Reporters are amazing people, they are hustlers who are half detective and half artist. A lot of people these days don't like journalists, they think they are part of some vast medical conspiracy, that they are in league with massive corporations or worse yet the government, but I don't feel that way. A few years ago, back in my hometown, a journalist named Guari Lankesh was murdered by a group of extremists. She had been covering the dangers of far-right terrorists in government, and wouldn't back down when the extremists tried to intimidate her. One night, as she was returning home after a long day at the office, a group of men ambushed her. They killed her because she refused to be silent.

I am in awe of the people who work at the Daily Planet, and I admit that whenever I get a chance, I like to watch them on the CCTV cameras. Now monitoring the cameras isn't my usual job, but if Mr. Romero-Obando and Uri are both busy, they let me take a crack at it. It's fun to watch people when they don't think anyone is looking at them. I don't mean that in a creepy way, at least I hope not, I mean it in a really casual, fun, kind of way. I like the things people do when they are alone, especially amazing people like the reporters at the Daily Planet, it tells you a lot about who they really are. Lois Lane for instance, such a hard-nosed walk-the-walk reporter, burps when she is alone and then giggles about it. Ron Troupe dances. He dances really well actually, but only when no one else is looking. I once saw John Corben steal Jimmy Olson's lunch straight from the refrigerator. I was going to mention it to Mr. Olson, but Clark Kent showed up with an extra lunch and gave it to Jimmy. I know it's weird to spy on people that way; but there is something incredible about watching the reporters who call out captains of industry, expose the scandals of famous artists, and even look dictators in the eye and hold them accountable, when they are relaxed and just being human.

I find Mr. Kent to be the most fascinating though, and it is in no small part because he is a little mysterious. That's why I was watching him that night. It was about 10 pm, most of the other staff had gone home, including Mr. Kent's wife, Lois Lane. Cat Grant was in the kitchenette, and when she saw Mr. Kent approach, she adjusted her...um...brassiere, and then sauntered over to him. Ms. Grant gave Clark a big hug, and then tried to hold his hand, but Mr. Kent skillfully avoided the hold by placing a warm hand on Cat's shoulder and using it to create a respectable space between them.

The two reporters chatted for a little bit, and Cat said something that made Mr. Kent blush, then she trotted away with a sly smile on her face. Mr. Kent went to the sink and began pouring himself a glass of water when all of a sudden he became still. He cocked an ear upwards, and put the glass down on the counter. Then, as if someone had shot off a starter pistol, he raced across the newsroom. Mr. Kent grabbed at the collar of his shirt as he ran, and when he was about three steps from his closed office door he suddenly vanished.

I shot up out of my seat, and pointed at the screen. The textbook I had been reading collapsed shut underneath its own weight. For a full minute I just stared at the screen in utter disbelief. With my heart beating against my chest, I took hold of the controls and rewound the camera to twenty seconds before the anomaly. Again, I watched as Mr. Kent cocked his head, ran out of the kitchen and then vanished when he was nearly at his office. I checked the system for errors, but there were none, no lags, no lost time.

“Everything okay Rishi?” said the calm melodic voice of Mr. Romero-Obando. All five-foot seven inches of him stood in the doorway of the main security office, where I had been monitoring the CCTV. My supervisor wore the same uniform as I, and had a kind face.

“Something very odd has just happened.” I said with a rapid cadence. “I was watching the cameras and Clark Kent just vanished. He’s gone I think. I don’t really know, but he might be in trouble, maybe.”

A warm smile grew across Mr. Romero-Obando’s face. “Oh, these darn cameras. They lag, you see. Nothing to worry about, it happens all the time.”

I shook my head. This wasn’t a simple lag. “No, sir, I checked the system, it’s fine. Mr. Kent just vanished, sir.”

A joyful laugh joined Mr. Romero-Obando’s smile. “My boy, no, not the system. The system is always fine. It is the cameras themselves. I don’t really understand it, but it has something to do with how the cameras speak to the computer. Sometimes they just cut out. It is a known problem, but not one that causes any real issues. It only happens from time to time. I appreciate that you caught it though, and brought it to my attention. I will put in another work order, but I think it is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. You go back to your patrols now, I’m here.”

That was the end of our conversation. Abrupt, simple, no cause for alarm. What Mr. Romero-Obando was saying didn’t make a lot of sense to me, but I didn’t know enough about computer systems to argue the point.

About a week later there was a leak in the basement. Mr. Romero-Obando and Uri were in the basement helping the firefighter and contractors fix the issue, and Preeta, the overnight custodian, was busy trying to contain the water damage that had happened to the lobby. I was once again confined to the main office, monitoring the wall of CCTV screens which cycled through the building’s nearly two-hundred cameras. I was focused, as I usually am when I am not people watching, on the perimeter cameras. The front entrance was inhabited by a couple of smokers, and the west entrance had someone peeing on it, which was not something that could be addressed with two-thirds of the security staff managing a flood.

The roof camera cycled through next, a straight shot of the helipad and fire door. The helipad is a throwback to the ‘80s when the Daily Planet had the budget to send reporters by chopper to accidents and emergencies all over town. Back then you had to be first on the

scene, but in the age of smartphones being first on the scene is an impossibility, and the Planet doesn't bother commissioning choppers for such dalliances anymore.

I was just about to switch to the basement camera, to check on the flood, when Clark Kent suddenly appeared in the middle of the helipad. He stood there in a full suit, adjusting his tie, as if he hadn't just appeared out of thin air. My jaw flew open, and a rush of electricity tingled my skin. Mr. Kent crossed the rooftop, reached the service door, swiped his key card and walked into the building.

Immediately, I reviewed the recording; at 23:47:32 hours the rooftop was completely empty, at 23:47:33 hours Mr. Kent stood in the exact middle of the helipad and adjusted his tie. I checked the card reader, and sure enough, at 23:48:05 hours, Clark Kent swiped in on the rooftop card reader. There had to be a problem with the system, this time I was sure of it. So, I ran a full diagnostic, and you know what came back? Nothing. There had been no loss of footage, the entire system had been running at 98% efficiency, with the only possible lag occurring on the basement camera ten minutes before Mr. Kent had appeared on the roof.

My hands were trembling something awful. I felt a boiling in my stomach that begged to be purged. Scenarios began to race through my head, of meta-humans hiding in plain sight until the time came for them to tear the city apart. It had happened before.

"Okay Rishi! We have returned!" exclaimed Mr. Romero-Obando, who had both Uri and Preeta in tow.

"Mr. Romero-Obando, sir, something is very wrong!"

"No my boy!" He exclaimed with wide open arms. "The flood is all under control, the fire department just left. Even Preeta is finished. We were going to have some tea, would you like some? I am partial to Earl Grey, but I have Chai and Apple-Cinnamon if you'd prefer herbal."

"No sir, it's not about the flood, there is something wrong with Mr. Kent!"

Uri chuckled. "Nothing is wrong with Mr. Clark. Mr. Clark is always fine."

"Oh yes, he's a lovely man." added Preeta.

"Yes, he's very kind, but there is something wrong. Mr. Romero-Obando, sir, I know you think it's the system, but I am pretty good with computers, so I ran a diagnostic on the system. The problem I spoke to you about the other day, is NOT a problem with how the cameras speak to the computer. A moment ago I saw Clark Kent appear on the roof, out of thin air."

"So?" Mr. Romero-Obando laughed, "These reporters, they go wherever they please. He probably went up there to clear his head and get some fresh air. Have you spent much time up there? It is very beautiful. You know, don't tell anyone this, but one time I brought my wife in and snuck her up there. We had a very nice picnic."

“No, sir.” I insisted. “When I say he appeared on the roof that is exactly what I mean. One second the helipad and the rest of the roof was vacant and the next moment Mr. Kent was just there. He appeared, out of nowhere. I am worried. With all the crazy things that go on in Metropolis, I think we should contact the police and let them know that something fishy is happening.”

“I see.” said Mr. Romero-Obando, in a tone that was so calm and so kind that it almost infuriated me. “You are concerned that Mr. Kent could be dangerous.”

“Yes.” I snapped. “Very concerned.”

My supervisor looked around the room. Both Uri and Preeta had coy smiles on their faces, and when Mr. Romero-Obando looked at them, they each gave a little nod. Then, he stood, went over to the electric kettle and turned it on. “Let’s have some tea.”

“I don’t want any tea.” I grumbled. My cheeks felt hot, and I was reminded of being a child in a room full of adults who somehow always knew better than me about things pertaining to my own existence.

“Tea is good for the soul as well as the tummy.” Said Mr. Romero-Obando. “I’ll make you some nice chai, that’ll warm you right up.”

“I don’t want any tea. I want to call the police and let them know what is going on.” I was indignant now, flooded with resentment. They didn’t believe me, and I was being treated as a fool, disrespected and patronized. I was ready to run out of the office and call the police myself when Uri began to talk.

“The first time I saw Mr. Clark vanish was only about six weeks after he started working here. He was so young back then, and a little careless I think, or maybe he just didn’t know where all the cameras were. Anyways, Mr. Clark walked out of the west entrance, took one step outside and POOF! He was gone.”

I was dumbstruck, truly and utterly speechless. I wanted to probe more, but my mouth wouldn’t work, and my mind wasn’t able to snap out of my daze.

Preeta shuffled her feet, and with a beautiful smirk she told her story. “I saw him disappear right in front of me once. He didn’t know I was there. He was on the roof, just like how you saw him, he came racing out of the door, took a look around and then disappeared. He must have missed me ‘cause I was sitting behind the air conditioner, but I saw him.”

“You’re joking?” I whispered.

Preeta laughed. “Oh no, it happens all the time. I think us night-shifters are the only ones who ever see it though. We don’t tell any of the others about it but, if you’re here long enough, eventually everyone sees it happen either on camera or in person.”

I blinked a few times, and my jaw hung loose and wide. "So, this just happens, and none of you say anything to anyone? Not to the cops, or Perry White? No one?"

Mr. Romero-Obando sat down beside me, and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Now that you've noticed that Mr. Kent disappears, you might start to notice something else Rishi." Then he laughed in a charmingly nervous and excited way. "The first time I saw Mr. Kent vanish was during his first winter at the Daily Planet. There was a terrible storm. The power was going out all over town, and the transformers were bursting left and right. Half of the reporters were in the office and the other half were out in the field. Mr. Kent is usually the type to be out in the field, but on this night he was up on the forty-third floor. News8 broke the story first; a transformer had burst, and set an entire apartment building on fire. It was one of those Lexcorp buildings from the '90s with cheap insulation. It caught fire very quickly."

"Everyone on the forty-third floor stopped what they were doing and stared at the television. There were all these people trapped inside of that building, some of them were screaming for help. I remember watching this mother trying to give a fireman her child, but the ladders couldn't get close enough because the flames were so hot. I had the story on inside the office here, but I couldn't take my eyes off the people on the top floor, they were all so scared."

"Then I noticed Clark Kent sneaking away slowly. He walked backwards a few steps, turned toward the fire exit, the one that leads to the roof, and then...gone. The funny thing was that the door to the roof went from being closed to open all of a sudden. Strange no?"

I nodded, spellbound and fixated on the mellow face of my supervisor.

"Somehow," Mr. Romero-Obando continued, "everyone in that building ended up on the street below, safe. Even the pets. No one knew what had happened. One minute they were in a burning building and the next they were safely on the street corner near the paramedics and firefighters. A few folks had breathed in too much smoke, but not a single life was lost. It was a miracle."

"Two minutes later I saw Clark Kent walk out of the bathroom on the forty-third floor and adjust his tie."

Mr. Romero-Obando paused, and looked deep into my eyes, searching for a hint of understanding. I knew the story he was telling, most people living in Metropolis do, so I let him know that I understood what he was saying to me. "That was the Tashiba Heights fire you're talking about, right? A little girl said a blue man rescued her and her cat, carried them to safety. It was before Flight 137, but most people assume the little girl was talking about Su..."

"Nobody knows where Mr. Clark goes when he vanishes." Interrupted Uri. "He just disappears, and usually when he does, good things happen."

Preeta playfully jabbed Uri in the ribs, and then gave him a quick side hug. The kettle finished boiling, and Mr. Romero-Obando walked over to the pot, placed tea bags in four cups, and then poured steaming hot water into them. While he poured he shared glances with my colleagues, glances filled with a glistening mischief. Finally, he shared the cups around, including placing one in my trembling hand.

“Did you know that Preeta has been here for fifteen years? Uri’s been here for eighteen. Me, I started working at the Daily Planet in 1997.” Said Mr. Romero-Obando. “Do you know why we are all still here?”

I shook my head.

“It’s not the pay, I can tell you that.” Everyone except me laughed. “It’s because of the things that happen in this building. Not just the vanishing Mr. Clark Kent mind you, but everything. Journalism. Real, honest, journalism, I have come to believe, is the most important check and balance that any society can have. The reporters in this building, like Clark Kent, or Ron Troupe, or Lois Lane...”

“She’s my favorite!” Preeta exclaimed.

“They hold the government accountable. They probe into those big companies that sack away money in off-shore accounts. They stand up for the unabridged truth to be revealed, they champion a justice that the courts can only aspire to, and they fight for the American dream that brought so many of us to this country in the first place.”

“I know you are a smart boy. I see the text books you read, and I know you are in school. You will probably only be with us for a short time, but while you are here, and since you have already figured everything out, I would like to invite you to keep a secret with us. It is a very important secret, at least we think so. The secret is this Rishi; Mr. Kent, sometimes, vanishes. When he does, as Uri said, usually good things happen. So, we don’t ask questions about where Mr. Kent is going, or what Mr. Kent does when he vanishes. We accept that he disappears into thin air, and we keep that secret for him. And, the only other people we ever talk to about his comings and goings are each other.”

Preeta chuckled. “My husband doesn’t even know, and I swear I tell that man everything.”

“It is up to you though.” Mr. Romero-Obando continued. “Up to you if you want to keep the secret with us or not. You don’t have to. I am sure there are many people, right here in this building even, that would pay you a lot of money for the camera footage you have from tonight. If you asked them to, they would mention your name and even make you a little bit famous. So, you could do that, or you could be boring and keep our little secret with us.”

“Does he know?” I asked through watery eyes. “That we all know about his... ‘vanishing’?”

“Sometimes I think I see him wink at the camera.” Uri said confidently.

Preeta rolled her eyes. “Oh Uri, Clark Kent isn’t looking at no camera and winking. He’s too smart for that.”

Uri blushed a little, but looked over at me and gave a wink anyways.

They continued chatting about various times they had seen Clark Kent vanish, and how those times overlapped with important historical events. Briefly, they discussed the time that Doomsday beast came to Metropolis and Clark Kent vanished for weeks. Uri got sad thinking about that though, so they switched topics to football and never returned to the case of the vanishing Clark Kent.

After my tea, I went back to my patrols, and nothing happened for the rest of the night. Near the end of my shift I found Uri at the front desk and he was still interested in talking about the previous evening's Meteors/Knights game. Uri made sure I was aware of his unwavering belief that “our boys” would make it into the play-offs this year.

At about six thirty I excused myself from the front desk, and began my final floor by floor for the shift. I took the lobby elevator to the forty-third floor, and when the door opened he was there; six-foot-four inches tall, with well-groomed black hair, designer glasses that looked just a little bit un-chic, and a pleasant smile. My heart dropped to my knees.

“Mr. Kent!” I almost shouted.

“Oh hello there.” He politely replied. “It’s Rishi right?”

I was floored. I had no idea that he knew my name. “Yes, Rishi.” I said, again at a volume that was too loud. “That’s my name!”

“You know,” he began, “I haven’t had the chance to say this to you yet, but I really appreciate the work you and the other night staff do. This place wouldn’t be able to run without you folks, by-golly.”

I nodded vacantly.

“Anyways, just my way of saying thank you.”

The elevator door began to shut, and Clark had to put his hand out to stop it from closing with me still inside. I suddenly realized what a fool I was being, and hopped out of the elevator. “Sorry, I was just.... It was a pretty wild night.”

“You’re telling me!” exclaimed Mr. Kent enthusiastically. “Did you hear about the train wreck outside of town?”

I shook my head, and couldn’t muster any words.

“A whole freight train went toppling. Nearly plowed into a hockey arena as the beer leagues were getting out. Could have been pretty bad.”

“What happened?” I asked, surprising myself.

“Oh, you know, the usual. Superman showed up and saved the day.”

“Wow...” I said, gobsmacked.

“I got there a little later, and got some really great interviews. This father of five saw the train coming and drove his pick-up truck in between it and the front door, hoping to soften the blow. If the train had crashed into the building he might have saved some lives. It’s important to be able to tell stories like that, about real everyday heroes. I think it’s a duty, a responsibility, and you know what Rishi, if it weren’t for people like you I’d never get the chance to do that. So, thank you!”

I blushed, and Mr. Kent gave me a firm pat on the shoulder. Then, he excused himself as he brushed past me onto the elevator. I turned around and looked at him. My face felt slack and tears were once again swelling in my eyes. As the doors closed he gave me a glorious smile and I swear I even saw him wink.