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The Analysis of a Superhero

Walter B. Levis

1

It was approximately one year after the attack when Dr. Morris Liebowitz, a hardworking middle-aged psychoanalyst, found a message on his answering machine from a world-famous superhero. His receptionist, Bernice, had spoken to the man first. Bernice usually had a good sense about these things, so the doctor listened to the message intently.

"I'd like to see you as soon as possible. Your first available appointment, please. The name is Kent. Clark Kent. I can be reached at . . ." And there were two different numbers, one in Manhattan and one with the area code for Long Island.

Dr. Liebowitz smiled, a toothy grin spreading across his soft, full face. He was a plump, modest man with rounded shoulders and a shallow chest. His egg-shaped head jutted slightly forward, a bald spot marking the crest of his skull. By temperament, he was quiet, inward-looking, with the cultivated sensibility typical of his profession: keenly perceptive, quick to appreciate the ambiguity of emotional life. He also had an extremely dry sense of humor. Frequently, the world struck him as riddled with irony.

Now, as he stepped away from his desk, scratching the bare crown of his head, he looked out the window of his forty-third-floor office. Skyscrapers—ah, yes, skyscrapers—glistening in the morning sun. Clark Kent, he thought. There's a challenge. Superman's shrink. Able to leap tall fantasies in a single bound, interpret a dream faster than a speeding bullet . . .

Dr. Liebowitz, lowering his fleshy chin, laughed quietly.

2

I believe we can estimate our capacity for comic perception by measuring our ability to see the ridiculous in those we love without loving them less. Similarly, a genuine comic vision permits us to see ourselves as ridiculous in the eyes of others and to accept the correction that image proposes.

A story about Superman in psychoanalysis could be told as a sort

of extended joke, a well-developed gag, a spoof. However, students of popular culture will recall the widespread rumor that George Reeves, the actor who played Superman in the original television series, eventually confused fantasy and reality and killed himself by jumping out a window.

3

The next day, Clark Kent came for his appointment. He wore an outdated grey suit with a matching tie and carried a blue-grey hat like the ones gangsters used to wear. When he entered the office, he turned the hat in his hands by sliding the brim through his fingers. He said he didn't want to lie down and sat on the edge of the couch.

"I'm scared and confused. That's why I'm here."

Liebowitz, sitting with his legs crossed in a large leather chair, noted the tense metallic quality in Clark's voice. He also noticed that Clark's V-shaped nose and square, tightly clamped jaw tilted upward as he spoke. The whole manner was strangely familiar to Liebowitz, who wondered if he had met this man somewhere before.

"Scared, confused . . . I see." Liebowitz paused, nodding. "What are you afraid of?"

"That I don't know anymore how to do my job."

"Your job?"

Clark stood quickly and placed his hands on his hips, though it seemed to Liebowitz like a half-hearted gesture, fingers splayed awkwardly, one thumb catching a belt loop. "You know," Clark said flatly, "to defend truth, justice, and the American way."

Over the years, Liebowitz had developed the habit of jotting down first impressions as possible clues to diagnoses. He quickly scribbled: *delusions of grandeur*. Then he looked up from his notepad and again offered a small nod.

"People don't think I even exist anymore," Clark said, still standing. "But it's just because I can't sort it all out."

"Sort it out?"

Clark sighed, then loosened his tie and ripped open his shirt, revealing a brilliant blue undergarment with a red S sewn on a shield across the chest. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Liebowitz restrained himself, choking off an urge to smile. He forced his brow into a concentrated frown, holding one hand to his chin.

"Welllll?" Clark said. "Does it mean *anything* to you?"

"Of course. You're dressed like Superman."

4

The German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, who lived from 1844 to 1900, conceived of an "*Übermensch*" as one who, through the exercise of extraordinary creative power, embraces the failure of

religion as an opportunity for new levels of human achievement. Yes, rationalism and science make faith irrelevant; and yes, without the rewards of heaven and the threat of hell, humans are capable of terrible evil; and yes, most people are unable (too weak) to function without the ancient crutch of religion's preconstructed meanings to mitigate life's suffering. Yes, says the *ubermensch*, yes to the abyss! Because from the dark hole where God is buried a new type of person will emerge, a fundamentally more advanced human being: one who is strong, robust, and vital enough to be supported by faith in himself alone.

5

Clark kicked off his shoes, then stepped out of his trousers and pulled up the crotch of his blue tights. For a moment, he stood there brushing flakes of dandruff off the shoulders of his cape.

Liebowitz, fingering the soft fold of skin under his chin, simply watched, waiting for the moment to develop. Finally, he asked, "Where did you get the costume?"

"Costume? Oh, this — well, it's made of a fabric not found here on earth, and it is completely impenetrable. I mean, you can't cut it or burn it. It was made by my mother — not my real mother, but my stepmother. She found the fabric with me when she found me out in a field. Morris, haven't you heard any of this before?"

Liebowitz was startled by Clark's assumption of intimacy. A first-name basis? Had they, indeed, met somewhere, or was there a personal referral involved? "Mr. Kent," he said, "I realize that you have the same name as a famous comic book hero. And it sounds like the story you're telling me —"

Abruptly, Clark lowered his square chin and started to pace, rubbing the back of his neck. Then he threw his hands up and snorted angrily. "To you it's just a comic book story? Oy gevalt!"

Liebowitz glanced at the corner of his notepad and wrote: *Superman a Jew?*

6

Abba Eban, the influential Israeli historian and TV personality, once said: "When we Jews were really weak, we were relaxed and buoyant. Now that we have power there is a sense of vulnerability."

Perhaps Eban's comment explains why this story about Superman in therapy wants to turn itself into "something Jewish."

Power confuses the Jew.

7

Clark returned to his place on the edge of the couch, his red cape dangling between his blue-stockinged feet. "OK, Morris," he said, yawning irritably. "I'll show you that I am Superman. What would

you like me to do?"

"Whatever seems appropriate to you." Liebowitz replied quickly, recalling a Gestalt workshop he'd once attended.

Clark looked around the office, then stepped over to Liebowitz's desk, and picked up a long, metal-bladed letter opener. He jammed it into the side of his neck.

"Do you have a gun?"

"Excuse me?"

"A gun. You can go ahead and shoot me. The bullets bounce right off."

8

In America, Superman can be appreciated as an emblem of our national mythology. Created in the 1930s by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the character is perhaps the most widely known figure in American fiction. (In the reference book *Jewish 100*, Jerry Siegel is listed as one of the most influential Jews of all time, along with Moses, Henry Kissinger, and Steven Spielberg.) Cultural critics have understood the "strange visitor from another planet" as an invincible immigrant, one who escapes a dying planet to make something grand of himself, simultaneously enriching the "new world" he loves. In addition, the American Superman possesses a sense of justice and morality as solid and impenetrable as his bullet-proof body. And there's almost nothing he can't do. Rescue the helpless, fight criminals, change the course of mighty rivers — a half-hour's work.

The simplicity of the American version of Superman contrasts sharply with the dark complexity of Nietzsche's *ubermensch*, who rejects any straightforward, universal morality, offering instead a series of moralities, some more appropriate for dominating social roles, and some more fitting for the subordinates. In Nietzsche's view, what counts as ethical behavior ("legitimate action," as he once put it) depends upon a person's particular qualities. Are you strong, healthy, powerful, overflowing with "expansive energy"? Or are you weak, sick, and on the decline? Everything depends on your condition because all living things essentially aim to discharge their strength and express their "will to power." The strong, healthy, and powerful will inevitably rise to the top, thereby causing exploitation, domination, and injury to the weak. The inequality simply can't be helped, argues Nietzsche, suggesting we must adopt the "perspective of life" to understand the dark truth about power.

Little wonder, then, that many regard Nietzsche as "that most frightening philosopher." Power is, indeed, frightening, which brings to mind an incident in Detroit in the 1950s, when George Reeves, facing a teenage boy with a loaded gun, talked the boy out of shooting him by explaining that bullets fired at Superman might bounce off and injure someone else.

After Liebowitz explained that he did not have a gun, Clark performed a few additional demonstrations. Liebowitz took notes:

- jammed letter opener into neck — no blood, blade bent
- stared several moments at trash can — papers started burning
- gazed at my crotch and determined color and style of my underwear — claimed it was “X-ray vision”

- put ear to wall — heard Bernice on phone checking hotel rates in Hawaii; also looked “through wall” and found Bernice surfing Internet, priceline.com. (Will try to confirm after lunch)

- Lifted file cabinet with one hand — no apparent effort involved. . . . conclusions? Truly bizarre. Makes me think of the kabbalists, Rudolf Steiner, Sufis, master yogis, the whole body of literature on parapsychology and mysticism.

Liebowitz, squeezing his silver mechanical pencil, was silent, too stunned to speak. He stared at Clark, who just sat there looking bored, one elbow resting on the wide flat armrest of the leather couch. The room grew still, and Liebowitz thought of his wife, how impossible it would be to explain any of this to her, and how irrelevant it would seem. A blast of surrealism, a wacko freak of nature, a circus act — while she, on the other hand, had real life to worry about, their four-year-old daughter, pre-K applications, what to do next year with the babysitter. But this? Explain this . . . ?

The building’s ventilation kicked in, a barely audible whistle combined with a dull hum. The office, as usual, felt hot and stuffy. Sunlight poured through the windows, broad white streaks illuminating the motes of ash swirling above the trash can. The smell of burnt paper was mixed — strangely, Liebowitz thought — with a faint odor of car oil.

Clark, meanwhile, had grabbed the end of his cape and pulled it into his lap. Slumped over, he now held the corner tightly with both hands.

“Well . . .” said Liebowitz, trying to find some strand of therapeutic technique. “Tell me . . . a little more about yourself.”

“Me? You don’t want to hear.” Clark’s lips trembled; he seemed to be fighting back tears. “Oh, Morris,” he said finally, in a choked voice. “I’m so lost.”

And he wiped his runny nose with the corner of his bright red cape.

Nietzsche believed “genuine philosophers” should be stronger, more imaginative, more original, and more willing to live dangerously than most other people. They have to be this way because a philosopher’s work requires the creation of new values, new meanings, new ways of thinking and living.

The historical context for Nietzsche's heroic view of philosophy was nineteenth-century Europe's great admiration for the "rational serenity" of Greek culture. What Nietzsche wanted was to tear down the "Apollonian forces of logical order" and liberate the nonrational, the pre-Socratic, the instinctual, wild, amoral, Dionysian energy. He wanted to celebrate the pure, mysterious joy of existence. Yes, it was to be an ecstatic, life-affirming affair — to which only the strong are invited.

11

Liebowitz watched Clark wipe away his tears. Such power brought to its knees! he thought. It's somehow true. That which could only be imagined is, in fact, true. This . . . mighty, powerful creature, call him, yes, Superman — who should be standing on the edge of the globe, his chest sticking out, his cape waving in the wind — is crumpled on the couch, sniffing and whining, just another neurotic New Yorker.

What to do next? Liebowitz didn't quite know. He flashed suddenly on the last thing his wife had said to him in the morning: "Get a quart of milk." Yes, ordinary life, he thought. Outside this office, right now, ordinary life continues, or tries to continue, as if everything were . . . normal?

The word brought an uncomfortable tightness to Liebowitz's throat, and he swallowed hard. Normal — yes, the milk. I'll get the milk, he thought. But now I must practice my craft. That's all. Practice the craft, then buy the milk.

Indeed, Liebowitz believed deeply in his "craft," the analytic process. He welcomed the slow, steady work of listening to his patients' stories, interpreting their dreams, sorting through their endless memories. Day after day, week after week, he calmly pointed out the "unconscious patterns" in their banal behavior, the "latent content" in their everyday conflicts, the predictable projection of themselves onto the "person of the analyst." And when a patient improved — the transference unraveled and some sliver of neglected psyche advanced into the light of consciousness, offering a chance for genuine growth — Liebowitz was infused with gratitude, humbled by the great potential for development within us all.

In this state of hopeful gratitude, however, Liebowitz himself felt rather small and insignificant. That is, he always attributed successful treatment to the process itself, never to himself.

He was, in short, the consummate professional: detached, objective, dedicated. But now, sitting across from Clark, watching "the man of steel" pick at a loose thread in his bright blue tights, Liebowitz felt his sense of purpose waver. Analyze . . . Superman? The tightness in his throat grew worse. He swallowed hard; a thick, sick feeling dropped

into his gut; his ribs narrowed, breath shortened, then a bolt of pain shot across his chest. Indigestion? A bursting bubble of gas? Or, what — a heart attack? Now? Right now?

The surging pressure rose up from his gut and into his chest, squeezing, deepening, burrowing inward, as if the center of his body were about to implode. I can't be dying, he thought, breathless. Not now — not like this. No, no, it's just something . . . huge is happening. This extraordinary patient . . . changes everything!

12

The American appetite for superheroes is enormous. Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, Batman, Wonder Woman, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles — flip the channels, the list goes on and on. And it's interesting to note how many superheroes become stronger from exposure to radiation. Yes, stronger. Consider Spider-Man, for example, who in the original comic book developed his powers after being bitten by a radioactive spider; and the Incredible Hulk, in a similar twist, was just a regular guy before being caught in a nuclear accident.

But then there's Superman, the original and most enduring of all superheroes. He has a definite weakness: prolonged exposure to radioactive Kryptonite is fatal. In terms of story structure, this vulnerability works wonders, giving every villain at least the potential for a tactical weapon. And if we take Superman's cultural popularity seriously and extend the metaphor, we must permit a horrifying conclusion: the so-called "dirty bomb," described by the Defense Department as "ordinary sticks of dynamite strapped to a canister of nuclear waste," is America's Kryptonite, the tactical weapon of the current world drama. Yes, what a plot twist: 40 miles north of New York City, Indian Point nuclear reactor, "leak-proof" canisters of Plutonium 239, barbed-wire fences, a no-fly zone, military radar, armed guards, 24-hour surveillance, young guys with short haircuts wearing sunglasses. And suddenly: up in the sky, it's a bird, it's a plane — no, it's . . .

13

The pain passed. Liebowitz, breathing slowly, felt the cramping pressure lodge under his shoulder blades. Knotted muscles, nothing more. He breathed into the tightness, holding in his mind an image of spasmic tissue, short fibrous slabs wrapped in zigzags, a mass of muscle in a messy lump, like his four-year-old's efforts to fold her clothes. Yes, the innocent mess of a child, her small smooth-skinned fingers, smelling of soap, just discovering the world of obligations, chores, dirty laundry, her slug-sized crayons displaced now by grown-up pens, a scribbled-on piece of purple construction paper identifying the spot on the couch for Daddy's clean white socks.

His muscles continued to release. Yes, he thought, still thinking of his daughter, the sliver of her tiny tongue slipping through her tense lips as she frowned over a backward *D*. Indeed, I'm a lucky man. And there's nothing wrong with me, not physically. These are psychosomatic symptoms. Fear affecting vascular activity, constricting circulation of the blood and reducing the supply of oxygen to the tissue. That's all. A familiar anxiety reaction: oxygen deprivation. His own analyst, years ago, had explained it can cause tightness, spasms, sometimes even numbness and tingling.

It's the hugeness of it, he thought, this incomprehensible creature, this baffling and nonchalant transcendence of the ordinary boundaries of nature. And here? Right here in my office?

Power — that's the fundamental issue, he thought. What does such a powerful person do? If I could only understand it, he thought, its origin, its possibilities, the stress such power places on the otherwise normal psyche. Yes, he continued, this could be it: my Wolfman, my Dora, my Little Hans. The breakthrough case that puts me on the map!

14

Let's consider, for a moment, a question about George Reeves: did the burden and limitation of being over-identified with a single role lead the actor to commit suicide? Perhaps, although others think Reeves was murdered by someone jealous of his success. Indeed, power is a burden only to those who have it — or seek it.

In any case, the Los Angeles county coroner's report, dated Monday, June 15, 1959, contains the strange phrase "indicated suicide." Almost no one believes that Reeves jumped out a window. Rather, the story reported by various Hollywood news sources and picked up by wire services across the country was that the 45-year-old actor shot himself in the head because, although he was rich and famous, he was depressed by his inability to find interesting acting work.

Being Superman, apparently, is not a role from which one easily escapes.

15

"Can you tell me some more about this . . . fear?" Liebowitz asked, the pain in his upper back growing more faint.

"Well, I just get up in the morning and don't really know what to do," Clark mumbled, twisting and untwisting the end of his cape. "I don't know where to start. Who should I save first? Which monster should I go after? Bin Laden, Saddam — and where do I take these guys once I get them? To a precinct in Brooklyn?" He looked up suddenly, dropping his cape. "I'm whining, I know. And I've probably taken enough of your time, haven't I?"

Liebowitz glanced at his watch. The thought of seeing his next patient — Gloria Greenstein, a sad woman in the midst of destroying her marriage by sleeping with her tennis pro — made him queasy.

"Don't worry about my time," he said. "I think I'm going to cancel my appointments for today. It seems appropriate to spend the day with you."

Clark cracked a small smile. "Thanks, Morris. Hey — how about going to Italy for lunch? I'll strap you to my back. There's a great restaurant in Turin, a family place. Terrific rigatoni. Best I've ever had. You like Italian?"

16

Many people are uncomfortable with power. That's probably why Clark pushes lunch: an avoidance tactic. (Lunch, usually, is safe.) For many of us, a dangerous ambiguity shrouds the subject of power, like a strange mist concealing the mouth of a cave. Hence, the importance of Nietzsche. It was he who entered this cave, fearlessly seeking what he believed was the historical source of humanity's collective weakness.

According to Nietzsche, the ancient (pre-Socratic) Greeks had it right: strength, prowess, pride, victory — all good. The problem starts with Socrates, who overemphasized reason, using his famous method of questioning to undercut Greek society's convictions about the nature and order of reality, suggesting that, in many cases, power is merely a pretense.

Socrates, however, was just the beginning. The real trouble came with the Jews; or, more precisely, with the invention of Christianity by the Jews. Meekness, humility, poverty, sacrifice — you've got to be kidding, argued Nietzsche. Obviously, power and victory were unattainable for a group of slaves, so they cleverly set a new agenda: sex and aggression were out. Shunned, concealed, shoved through the mist and buried deep in the back of the cave. Yes, repression! The Christians perfected it, but the Jews started it.

17

"We can make it in about an hour."

"An hour?"

Clark shook his head, smiling. "Sure, I'm faster than a speeding bullet. Could be forty-five minutes, but you wouldn't believe the gales over the Atlantic."

Liebowitz looked away. A strange giddy feeling passed through him as he imagined flying through the air, the wind whistling in his ears, his arms wrapped tightly around Clark's wide shoulders. Oh, yes, the strength of those shoulders, the pure power. He felt the top of his bare scalp tingle with excitement as he thought of the possibilities — and the implications, for himself. The book I could write! The lecture circuit!

He took a quick breath. "To Italy? Just for lunch?"

"On second thought, maybe it's too extravagant. I mean, we've got work to do, right?"

"I'm not criticizing. I'd be happy to —"

"And I'm not made of money. If your meter's running, we should be working. Can you get a decent corned beef sandwich in this neighborhood?"

Liebowitz, confused, nodded.

"Fine. I'll order, and meanwhile would you mind taking a look at this?" Clark reached for the trousers he had tossed over the back of the couch. From the front pocket he took out a single sheet of lined notebook paper folded into a small rectangle. "It's a recurring dream I have — two, maybe three times a week. Been having it for years." He handed Liebowitz the paper. "You believe dreams are meaningful, right?"

"Yes," said Liebowitz, impressed by Clark's sudden burst of intentionality. He unfolded the piece of paper. The handwriting, he noted, had a careful, precise, distinctly feminine slant. He read the dream:

I'm walking through an overgrown garden with my father, or a man whom I take to be my father. Then suddenly a beautiful woman with a red wool hat appears running towards me. I push my father into the weeds and run from the woman. No matter how fast I run, though, I can't get away from the beautiful woman. Finally I get to a street and run up a staircase with the woman still after me. Breathless, I find a room and lock the door. Then I begin to practice the clarinet. I stop every few minutes, though, and look through the keyhole and see the woman sitting on a bench outside the door, weeping.

Liebowitz rolled up his sleeves. Dream interpretation, he knew, was his strength. He started to reread, underlining key passages.

Meanwhile, Clark was on the phone asking about the difference in price between lean and extra-lean corned beef.

18

The television series *Adventures of Superman* was on the air from 1953 to 1958. Most people are unaware, however, that George Reeves started his career in 1939 as one of Scarlett's suitors in *Gone With the Wind* and went on to appear in 23 movies, including the seldom heard of *Paramount Musical Featurettes* (1947). He also appeared in *Westward Ho the Wagons* (1956), *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *Forever Female* (1953), *Bugles in the Afternoon* (1952), *The Great Lover* (1949), *Pirate Ship* (1949), *Jungle Jim* (1948), *Jungle Goddess* (1948), *Hoppy Serves a Writ* (1943), *Leather Burners* (1943), *Buckskin Frontier* (1943), *So Proudly We Hail* (1943), *Bar 20* (1943), *Border Patrol* (1943), *The Strawberry Blonds* (1941), *Lydia* (1941), *Man at Large* (1941), *Tear Gas*

Squad (1940), *Calling All Husbands* (1940), *Always a Bride* (1940), and *Father is a Prince* (1940).

19

Two hours passed. All through lunch Clark spoke freely about his difficulties growing up on the planet earth. Several times he broke into tears, particularly when he tried to discuss his relations with women. He explained to Liebowitz that it felt almost impossible to tell a woman who he really was.

Liebowitz, normally able to maintain a comfortable analytic distance, was deeply affected. More than once, he was on the brink of tears. Like many patients, Clark suffered from a strong sense of isolation. But Clark was not merely clinging to alienation as an illusion of individuality, as neurotics frequently do; he really was different from everyone else.

Now, Liebowitz watched Clark stare blankly at the remains of his corned beef sandwich. There was a glob of mustard hardening on a half-moon crust of rye bread. Clark was obviously spent, talked out, exhausted from crying. Liebowitz, relieved by the silence, took the opportunity to reread his notes.

- Absence of coping strategies re: confused feelings. Basic attachments unstable and defense mechanisms inadequate to impact blocked actions. Consider projective testing and/or poss. LD issues. Could be perceptual difficulties impacting cognition.

- Re: ambivalence about "true identity." Swings between inflation-alienation. Potential for dissociation. Intimacy problems linked to inadequate mother-infant bonding/mirroring.

- "... up in the morning and don't know what to do." Repressed anger possibly exacerbating anxiety provoked by moral ambiguity. Again need to rule out LD re: Verbal Comprehension Factor and Perceptual Organization Syndrome. Could be Generalized Anxiety Disorder compounded by LD issues.

As Liebowitz turned the page, Clark suddenly stood up. "Dammit, Morris," he said. "I know what I want to do. I know exactly what I really and truly want to do."

"You do?"

"Learn to play the clarinet! I've always wanted to learn to play the clarinet, ever since I was a kid and saw Benny Goodman."

"Benny Goodman? He died years ago."

"On TV, Morris! And that must be why it's in the dream, right? Because I've always wanted to just learn to play the clarinet—nothing more. A simple desire. Should be no big deal, right? But to me it's denied. And why? Why? Because I have to go save the world. Why can't I just go learn to play the clarinet? That's what I don't understand."

The emotion in Clark's voice, the choked expression on his face, the tense, twisted lips — he looked like a child fighting off a pout. And the connection between this outburst and the recurring dream? Perhaps, thought Liebowitz, this moment marks a genuine breakthrough.

"Like Benny Goodman," Clark went on. "When I was a kid, I stood in front of the mirror pretending . . ."

Clark began to move around the office, head bobbing, fingers busy in pantomime, working the keys of an imaginary clarinet. As Liebowitz watched, he felt a release of some vague tension in his own chest and throat — a shift, a sliver of insight, an interpretation slipping into place.

He returned to the dream and scribbled notes furiously. Yes, he thought, perhaps it all makes sense. The pursuit of the woman with the red cap and the breathless climbing of the stairs represent the sexual act. That Clark shuts out his pursuer is an example of the device of inversion so frequently employed in dreams, for in reality it's Clark who feels shut out, and fears revealing himself. In the same way, Clark projects his own feelings of grief onto the pursuer, her tears representing the ejaculation and seminal fluid he cannot share. The clarinet serves as a clear phallic symbol, representing the masculinity Clark so desperately wants to "learn to play," while looking through the keyhole is an expression of his ambivalence about his sense of morality.

And at the heart of the dream's conflict: Clark's repressed struggle for power — the power to control his own life. A variation of the classic Oedipal structure, thought Liebowitz, it goes back to the circumstances of Clark's birth. By sending him away from the doomed planet of Krypton, Clark's father saved his son's life — but also burdened him with the infamous "guilt of the innocent," survivor's guilt. Upon realizing his outrageous physical capabilities, Clark developed an exaggerated sense of responsibility which was, in fact, a function of his unresolved separation from his father. As long as he was upholding honor, defending truth and justice, he could avoid feeling separate because unconsciously he was doing precisely what his father wanted him to do. However, as the world became more complex, making it difficult for Clark to fulfill his father's prescription of duty, he suffered an unconscious separation anxiety and was forced to repress his resentment for the code which his father had prescribed. These hostile feelings of resentment, being unacceptable, are censored and therefore express themselves in a compulsive concern over truth and justice, which is, in actuality, a concern over the life-project his father imposed upon him.

Liebowitz leaned back in his chair and breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction. It was, initially, terribly exciting: the notion that he understood Superman.

Students of Nietzsche have argued that the famous philosopher thought modern psychology was useless because to “understand” neurotic behavior rationally — as psychology attempts — is an almost surefire way to misinterpret such behavior. That is, the neurotic is frequently rebelling in his whole being against precisely the over-rationalization of which psychology is our last futile attempt.

True psychological health, Nietzsche believed, requires exploding the rational oppressive morality of Judeo-Christian values and replacing them with an unqualified expression of creativity and a radical acceptance of life’s purpose as “a pouring-out of expansive energy.”

With his notepad tucked under his arm, Liebowitz stood now gazing out the window, the streets below darkening as patches of shadow lengthened in the late afternoon sun. He felt himself fighting off a grey heavy feeling, his energy depleted, his thoughts slipping into a fog. It was as if he were watching thick clouds descend over the city, its glittering towers of steel and glass disappearing into an ashen gloom. Clark had accepted every nuance of the interpretation. In fact, he couldn’t have been a more receptive patient: he listened, he comprehended, he reacted with genuine emotion. At the mention of his father saving his life, Clark, yet again, wept.

Yes, Liebowitz knew that discussing the dream had been the professional, therapeutically sound thing to do, but, in the end, it left him with a shattered sense of purpose. The excitement of psychoanalysis, the inherent drama of consciousness battling repression — it now seemed absurd. Wads of wasted tissue. Endless, pointless tears. Or so it seemed to Liebowitz, who only a few minutes ago had been quietly explaining that tears begin a “psycho-digestive process,” breaking down hardened emotion, releasing the nutritious content buried beneath the painful crust of repression. And how Clark ate it up! Such huge handfuls of tissue, his bullet-proof chest heaving, the X-ray vision in his eyes useless against the power of Liebowitz’s mighty theory of tears! Finally, when he stopped crying and looked up, Liebowitz, still feeling triumphant, saw that the part in Clark’s hair had been lost, a mop of loose strands falling over one puffy eye. Yes, the mess of a successful catharsis — victory!

But now, gazing down at the cluttered grid of darkening streets, Liebowitz wondered what he had accomplished. Whom have I helped, and whom have I hurt? Nothing wrong with playing the clarinet. Of course not. Devote your life to music — why not? No puritanical arguments against art — not here. Of course we need clarinet players! But . . . able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, play the pentatonic scale

in each key in a single breath, sustain a high G longer than any creature alive . . .

"Clark," Liebowitz said suddenly, turning away from the window. And he tossed his notepad in the garbage can. "Do you actually know where Osama Bin Laden is?"

Clark sat listlessly on the couch, his thick arms hanging at his sides. "What? What are you talking about? And — are those your notes?" He pointed to the garbage can.

"If you know where Bin Laden is," Liebowitz continued, feeling his face flush with anger, "you have a responsibility, dammit. I mean, suppose you could actually eliminate terrorism — you are the most powerful — well, you — what kind of a lazy — and a Jew, too! Don't you have any sense of ethical obligation to — what kind of Jew —"

Liebowitz tasted a sudden sourness in his mouth: his rage rising. He covered his face with his hands. What am I doing? he thought, feeling his hands shake. Criticizing a patient? Calling him lazy? What's the matter with me?

He sat down on the edge of his desk, his hands covering his face. I've lost it, he thought, crossed over a line. Questioning my patient's Jewishness? What the —? Must be the valence of the countertransference. An overidentification with the patient's own problems. Yes, take back the projection, own it, claim the countertransference and turn it around, turn everything around.

His hands continued to shake, a prickly tingle in the tips of his fingers. The tightness in his upper back spread into his neck. He took a deep breath, pressing his palms against his face. What kind of Jew, he thought . . . what kind of Jew — am I?

The question was startling, and nothing came to him, absolutely nothing. His normally nimble thoughts seemed to freeze, his head and face feeling strangely brittle, as if his nose or ear might snap off if he moved too quickly. He stood there stiff as a dead dry twig.

A moment passed. Then it came to him dimly, vaguely, like a faint breeze, barely felt, a weird vision, half-fact half-fiction: he is the one dressed in the costume play-wrestling with a little girl who accidentally kicks him in the groin and runs screaming, terrified, seeking nothing but the nurturing arms of her mother, understanding only that Superman is angry and hurt.

He felt his stomach burn as the strange vision passed and the salty burped-up taste of corned beef rose into his hot stinging chest. Just then Clark got up from the couch and stepped forward. "What is it, Morris? What's the matter?"

"It's nothing. I'm fine," Liebowitz said, distracted. "I just — I'm sorry. This is really very embarrassing."

"But the notes? Why did you —?"

"I'm sorry. It was a mistake. I forgot — here I'll get them." And he

bent over the trash can, sifting through the ashes from the fire Clark had started hours ago, before Liebowitz knew who he really was.

22

George Reeves's mother, Helen Bessolo, became pregnant in 1913 in her hometown of Galesburg, Illinois. Shortly after the baby was born, she divorced her husband and married a man in Pasadena, California. George, however, didn't learn of his true birth date or the identity of his real father until he joined the army in 1942.

When he died, Reeves's mother entombed his body at the Pasadena Mausoleum, Sunrise Corridor in the Mountain View Cemetery, located in nearby Altadena, California. On the tomb, she inscribed Reeves's full name, the dates of his birth and death, and the words: "My Beloved Son SUPERMAN."

23

As Liebowitz brushed soot from the pages of his notes, he felt himself on the verge of tears.

"Morris," Clark said, "are you OK?"

Liebowitz looked up. The relaxed attention on Clark's face, the calmness in his eyes, the small circle formed by Clark's softly parted lips—such gentleness, Liebowitz thought. And he felt a strange yearning, a pang of loneliness, a sense he recognized—criticized—as vaguely adolescent. It was the feeling, or perhaps a memory, of falling in love.

"Clark," Liebowitz said, quietly, "you're Superman, right?"

A half-smile came to Clark's face as he nodded.

"Do something for me, will you?"

Again, Clark nodded.

"Is my secretary Bernice out there?"

Clark stared at the wall, and Liebowitz watched as Clark's eyes flushed out the vacancy and coiled with strength.

"Yes," he said, "she's there. She's surfing the Internet again. Let's see . . . she's on Macy's homepage."

Clark looked away from the wall, and Liebowitz felt the great energy of Clark's vision focus again on him. "Morris," Clark said, moistening his lips, swallowing, a concerned frown darkening his brow. "What is it, Morris? What's wrong?"

A chill gripped Liebowitz's chest as he stood there holding the soot-covered folder. Yes, he thought, it's over. The end of power. No gods, no devils, no pure power of any kind. Power is dead.

"I think you should meet Bernice," Liebowitz said, slowly. "She . . . well, she loves jazz music. Plays a little piano herself. And she has a cousin in the music business—could probably get you a decent deal on a clarinet."

An impish, crooked grin spread across Clark's face. "Really?" He started to reach for his trousers.

But Liebowitz waved him off. "Give her a chance to see you like that."

Clark hesitated, his arm outstretched, shoulders hunched, his eyebrows arched in puzzlement. "In my Superman clothes?"

"Why not? Just get it out in the open, and then explain — well, how, yes, you're Superman, but that you're going to give it up and learn to play the clarinet."

Clark lowered his arm, relaxing his big shoulders. Then he smoothed the back of his cape. He took a hesitant step forward, closer to Liebowitz. "You know, Morris," he said, looking down. "I don't know where Bin Laden is." He paused, picking intently at the tips of his fingers, almost as if he were trying to remove a sliver. "But even if I did, it wouldn't help. Maybe a little, sure. But — I don't know. I can't fight this kind of thing — nobody can. Not anymore."

Tears pooled in the edges of Clark's eyes, and he bit his lip. Then, after a moment, he took a deep breath and looked up. "Thanks for everything, Morris," he said, and turned around and opened the door.

24

When he was only four years old, Nietzsche's father died, leaving him to be raised by a group of women: his mother, grandmother, sister, and two maiden aunts. The family, naturally, worried that Nietzsche lacked strong male role models. How ironic that Nietzsche went on to develop one of the most masculine philosophies in all the history of ideas.

Seen from this psychological perspective of gender and identity, the following excerpt from *Beyond Good and Evil, Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* may be the strangest and most fascinating passage Nietzsche ever wrote:

Supposing that Truth is a woman — what then? Is there not ground for suspecting that all philosophers, in so far as they have been dogmatists, have failed to understand women — that their terrible seriousness and clumsy importunity with which they have usually paid their addresses to Truth, have been unskilled and unseemly methods for winning a woman? Certainly she has never allowed herself to be won . . .

Nietzsche himself never married, though we know that in 1882, at the age of 37, he proposed to a 21-year-old Russian woman studying philosophy and theology in Zurich. She declined.

What happened seven years later is the subject of considerable disagreement. Was Nietzsche's breakdown caused by a worsening

syphilitic infection? Habitual use of the sedative chloral hydrate? A brain disease he may have inherited from his father? No one knows for sure.

But the scholars do agree that on the morning of January 3, 1889, in Turin, Italy, there was a coachman at the Piazza Carlo Alberto whipping a horse. Nietzsche, horrified by the cruelty, ran to the horse and threw his arms around the animal's neck. Moments later, he collapsed, his sanity gone forever.

25

Liebowitz sat at his desk, his face in his hands. He heard the faint, muffled voices of Clark and Bernice, punctuated now and then by Bernice's throaty, hearty laugh.

His feelings and thoughts were jumbled. A tiny twinge of pain lingered in his upper back along with excitement, exhaustion, and a faint rumbling of nausea. Strangely, he felt both defeated and uplifted, the possibilities at both ends of the spectrum extending into a kind of dizziness, like the sensation from an amusement park ride, a panicked but fun feeling of falling. He wondered what long-term effect all of this would have on him. Would he now be a man around whom there's a persistent rumbling and mumbling and gaping sense of something uncanny going on? Would he view power differently? Be a different kind of father? Would the world seem to be less of a contest — a hierarchical social order in which "meaning" is determined by who has the upper hand — and more of a . . . what? What alternative is there to hierarchy?

The sound again of Bernice laughing broke his reverie. Hers was a particularly joyous, unrestrained laugh that always struck Liebowitz as distinctly feminine, though he was unable to explain exactly what that meant. A throaty, hearty, feminine laugh? No matter. He just hoped Clark and Bernice would soon be happily on their way to a jazz club.

And Liebowitz needed to leave too — the milk! Yes, he mustn't forget the milk, a half-gallon of two percent. Quickly, he lifted himself from his desk, already beginning to put the experience with Clark behind him and to look forward to getting home to his wife and daughter. The evening ritual: dinner, bath, stories, snack, the night-night hug, the one-more-kiss, the multiple tiny adjustments to the pink blanket and yellow pillow — yes, crucial assurance, all of it, that the world is, indeed, safe.