

**A Modern Hero**  
**or, The Man Who Wasn't There**

Brian Allan Skinner

*Woe, whenever all men speak well of you, for things like these are  
what their forefathers did to the false prophets.*

Adoring crowds had reported seeing Lance Parker in more places — simultaneously — than even a small army of stand-ins and look-alikes could be made to account for. We might assume that Mr. Parker would have unfolded his newspaper at the table beside his swimming pool the next morning and read these various but conflicting reports with a detached, perhaps even haughty sort of amusement. But we would be wrong and, as ordinary mortals, could only hope to be forgiven for making assumptions concerning a man and a way of life few of us can imagine in any detail. We know only that we would have been amused to read such impossible nonsense. But the firmament in which a star such as Mr. Parker wends his dazzling course, is one which we can scarcely comprehend even at high magnification. The details elude us, as evidence the fact that Mr. Parker saw not the slightest bit of humor in these silly accounts of his purported bilocation. Rather, he became merely confused, for Lance Parker could not recall having even gone out. He did not, as a matter of fact, remember going anywhere in several days. For as far back as he could search his memory, he recalled only his sitting at the table beside the swimming pool reading newspaper accounts of his whereabouts. It seemed he had occupied that wrought-iron chair for ages.

Tillie's heels clicked across the tiled patio like a steady clockwork. The servants, at least, had become a point of order in his life. Lance set aside his paper. She would be bringing his breakfast.

For a moment, Lance studied his reflection in the glass table top. Yes, he was very handsome, he thought. Beholding that rather spectral image of himself, he decided he would even make quite a handsome ghost. Tillie set the tray over his reflection, and Lance looked up. He was confronted by another, more substantial image of himself — on the cereal box. He was wearing some kind of team uniform, and a ball of some sort appeared frozen in flight in the background. But Lance could not make out what sport was being suggested by these clues, and he thought it all a little peculiar, for he never considered himself much of a team player. Individual excellence — the decathlon perhaps — would have better suited his style.

The maid still hovered beside the breakfast table. “Will there be anything else, Sir?” Tillie asked.

“Um . . . Is there any mail from Mrs. Parker?” Lance assumed that the servants would manage keeping track of details — such as whether or not he were married — better than his busy schedule permitted him to do.

“I do not wish to seem flippant, Sir, but may I ask to which Mrs. Parker you are referring?”

“Well . . . um . . . any of them, Miss. Or all of them. Yes. Let me have a look at all of the mail.”

“Shall I bring it to you out here, Mr. Parker?”

“Yes, that would be fine . . . um, Miss . . . ”

“Tillie, Sir,” she said, a little annoyed that he had still not latched onto her name after three years of serving him every meal that he took at home. She repeated her name, a vain hope.

Lance nodded, and Tillie went back into the house, her heels again striking the tiles with a comforting, measured regularity. Lance wondered whether she also struck the hours.

Lance Parker looked over the mail — already opened and coded by his secretary for the files — and became dismayed to learn that there were a dozen Mrs. Lance Parkers, none of whom was the genuine article. Lance remained a bachelor — Hollywood’s most-eligible, as he later read. The mountain of correspondence came from several of his female fans who purported to be married to him by virtue of the mating of their souls — a rite that, fortunately, had not been witnessed by the State of California.

One of the letter-writers referred to the song lyrics she claimed spoke directly to her, another to the fiery glance he secretly cast in her direction during the bedroom scene in his latest movie. Still others demanded that he stop pretending to the press that he was still single, for, though they appreciated his need to entice as large an audience as possible, they found it demeaning that he would not acknowledge their union before all the world. *Are you ashamed of me, or what?* inquired one.

Lance could not finish his bowl of cereal. He did not know whether the thought of these clutching females, should they ever be unleashed upon him, had simply ruined his appetite. It was more difficult to admit that the stuff was such tasteless fodder that even a pregnant mare would have upset and trampled the bin that contained it. He could not recall having signed the document that permitted his puss to be plastered on the package in the first place. He returned to the house with the folder of letters in one hand and the cereal box in the other, intending to take up both matters with his secretary.

But Lisa had no time for him and suggested he make an appointment. Three-fifteen on Thursday would be fine. He should just make his little *X* on her calendar and allow her to get on with her work. Lance took up another couple of folders of letters and retired to the living room, intending

to occupy the intervening time profitably. He hoped he might discover from his fans just what it was that he was noted for doing.

The two files that Lance had gathered up from Lisa's office both contained correspondence from his male admirers, one folder quite a bit thicker than the other. He would be careful not to get their contents intermixed, for Lisa threatened to skin him alive if he did, and she was not given to employing figures of speech in a merely poetic manner.

The heavier folder contained the scrawled letters of teenage boys. They gushed so fervently that Lance became embarrassed for their ingenuous authors as well as for himself. He became uncomfortable in his favorite chair, which suddenly towered as a throne of hard, glittering metal, the letters scattered at his feet like the prayers of supplicants before a bored deity. Yet, while these sang his praises, in their way just as erotically as those from his feminine bacchantes, the teenagers were at least more forthright. Like young Davids, they were content to dance and sing to him, making but few humble inquiries: on what brand of weight-training equipment did he work out, did he recommend or condemn the use of steroids, and had he any special protein drink of his own concoction whose recipe he might share with them. They were initiates asking only for a glimpse of the mysteries.

The second file, of all things, contained the correspondence of male college professors and other academics, all of whom took pains to assure him that they had — to a man — never before written a fan letter. But Lance Parker's recent work moved them to a point beyond the fences of their better judgment where they gamboled like colts. As academics they were loathe to be specific, extolling rather the body of his work, in their friskiness becoming very difficult to get a rope around or to rein in.

Lance found neither clue nor comfort in any of this correspondence. Rather, it became a weight as palpable as the burden of all these files and letters had they been physically heaped upon him. It was the weight of all the hopes in all the world's hearts: an Atlas-crushing load that threatened to press him flatter than a coating of colored ink on a cereal box.

The passing of the entire morning had escaped Lance's notice until Tillie and Lisa and the other servants filed in, one by one, like the figures on the medieval clock in Hearst's summer cottage. Tillie brought his lunch; Lisa brought him papers to sign, reminding him of an afternoon session with a columnist from *Persona*; and his valet or tailor brought a selection of clothing for the interview. There followed many others: a publicist, a photographer, an elocutionist, two electricians, a decorator, a hair-stylist, a cosmetologist, and a team of contract lawyers.

Lance became annoyed by it all and grew recalcitrant. "No wonder I've got to have such a big house," he grouched. "Every room 's got to be a stage." But there was too much commotion for anyone to tune into yet another grumbling voice.

The valet motioned the cosmetologist, the hair-stylist, and just one of the lawyers upstairs, so that Lance could get dressed in private. Lance resorted to a half-remembered nursery rhyme — the only form of literature he could quote without a prompter — in order to make his point. One of the verses had to do with a butcher, a baker, and a candlestick maker confined to a pumpkin shell which they shared with twenty-four ugly stepsisters and an old woman from Hamelin whose husband had never heard of restraint. But the moral of the story went over every head in the crowd, including Lance Parker's.

The interviewer from *Persona* introduced himself to Lance Parker with a squishy handshake, his eyes flitting about the room like swallows searching for a niche in which to roost. Mr. Mallow

fawned despicably, and Lance thought to give him what every cringeling craves: a good kick. But he did not want to be so accommodating at the outset.

“It is difficult to believe,” Mr. Mallow stated, “that a farm boy from New Lisbon, Wisconsin, who began life as Lester Pankowicz, has amounted to all this.”

“I didn’t know that,” Lance said. “Would you mind spelling the last name?” Lance Parker came to the interview with his own notebook. He found that he often learned something about himself during these sessions, and the notebook ensured that he would be able to recall it without straining.

Mr. Mallow thought Lance was being humorous. He smiled and went on. Lance worried that he might acquire a reputation as a comedian in addition to his other talents of unknown size, and thereby exacerbate the situation. So he stayed carefully and resolutely with the program, nodding his head every now and again to show that he had not been put to sleep. Since Mr. Mallow’s utterances were largely statements rather than questions, Lance was left with very little to do. The remark about his having lived on a farm stirred up a few possibly genuine recollections of that time, and Lance looked down with mild surprise and saw that his doodling hand had already begun to sketch the outline of a dairy cow on the notebook page. He noted details in the drawing such as the frostbite-shortened ears, the molting hide, and the poor old cow’s flaccid udder that nearly reached the ground. But the baleful bovine’s name eluded him. “Tillie” came to mind, but that name was already taken.

Since Mr. Mallow’s infrequent questions dealt with things of a somewhat impersonal nature — What’s your favorite color? Who’s your favorite television personality? What’s your favorite dessert? — Lance found that he could concentrate on his drawing. The press release hand-out that

Lisa had devised took care of all but a few of the interviewer's "favorite" questions. Lance found the list quite helpful. He had a copy of it laminated and kept it always at hand — so that he would know how to behave and what to prefer in public. That, too, had been his secretary's idea.

Lance had somehow missed it when the interview was over and Mr. Mallow thanked him for his openness. Lance quickly covered over his sketch of the Holstein, lest he be somehow construed as an artist and find himself attending some insipid reception at the Guggenheim. He had far too many implied talents as it was.

At the end of such a hectic day, Lance Parker enjoyed just sitting at the edge of his half-acre bed, trying to gain a perspective on the day's events. He flipped back among the pages of his notebook which contained a record of all the important events in his life. He savored the anecdotes like favorite bedtime stories of which he never grew tired no matter how often they had been repeated to him. Now, tonight, he finally had a beginning for this tale. He stared at the word "farm", realizing that a humble origin was, almost magically, sufficient proof of a hero's stature. That would become a comforting thought, he hoped, whenever pestering doubts began to insinuate themselves. "Farm," he said aloud.

He came across the pages that marked the two times he had been honored at the White House, though he had forgotten for what. He had also failed to jot down the presidents' names, but anyway, it was the last two we had. He had wanted to ask for their autographs, but his secretary at the time had told him it would appear gauche to ask someone of nearly equal prominence for his autograph.

But nowhere in that little book was there a mention of what exactly Lance Parker did for a living. He knew or suspected certain things about himself that were not so flattering. For instance, he knew that he could not act his way out of a pantomime at the Braille Institute. Nor could he so much as play a radio on key. He was terrible at every sport devised by man, and the one devised by woman. He could not catch a baseball with a black hole for a mitt. Yet, everywhere, he was followed by adoring crowds, even in places he had never been. He was handsome and well-made but, surely, it would take more than that. There were dozens of Adonis-like models superior even to him. But they were not followed and adored and sacrificed to like Lance Parker. The secret of his success puzzled him, and he worried that he might as easily fall from the grace by which he had been raised above the heads of other men.

His valet, Louie or Lonnie or something on that order, came in to lay out Lance's pajamas. Lance no longer permitted his valet to dress and undress him, except when it came to sticky things like buttons and laces. Lance did fairly well with zippers and Velcro.

"Do you mind if I ask you something of a personal nature?" Lance asked his valet.

"Not at all, Sir. I'm an open book."

"Well, I meant personal in a personal sense," Lance said.

The valet nodded, but Lance detected a slight unease.

"What do I do, Louie? I mean, what am I good at, or for what, at least, am I renowned?"

Lance's valet saw this as one of the games the inscrutable play upon the unsuspecting, like Original Sin or something, but he decided to go along with it. He had discovered long ago that refusing to play did not end the game.

"Well, Sir, you're a celebrity — a true personality, one might say."

“Oh,” Lance said. “I thought it must be something like that. After all, Louie, ‘you can’t fool all of the people all of the time’. Still, it’s comforting to hear it from someone you trust.”

“Indeed, Sir. Will that be all?”

“What more could a man want?” Lance said, opening his arms wide to the elaborately-furnished room and chuckling at his own joke.

Louie smiled and nodded.

Lance Parker had been reassured, and that night he slept like a dream. We may all rest easier for that, secure in the order of things, heads nestled on our pillows, knowing that our own dreams and aspirations are as genuine as Lance Parker’s.

