

An Unpleasant Afternoon of Viewing

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Summary: Perhaps there's a reason why we can't see into the future...

Clark entered the brownstone he shared with his lovely wife, Lois. It had been her day off but for all that he'd been able to accomplish at the Planet he might as well have been off, also. He wondered what she had found to do with a whole day off and no major story to occupy her time. He'd probably find her scrubbing the tile grout or maybe rearranging all the kitchen cupboards.

Instead, he found her sitting on the couch, sobbing. He rushed to her side.

"Lois, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

His beautiful partner turned her tear-streaked face toward him. "Oh, Clark, we're doomed. It's only a matter of time." She shook her head as more tears flowed. "There just isn't going to be any happy ever after for us."

Clark pulled Lois into a comforting embrace. "Lois, you're not making sense. Tell me what's wrong."

His distraught wife pulled back and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. She sniffed a few times before she recaptured his gaze. "Do you remember the time/dimensional viewer that Herb left here?"

Clark raised his brow as he regarded Lois. "Do you mean the one where we were able to look in on the life of our counterparts from another spatial dimensions?" She nodded. "If I remember correctly, Wells didn't leave it here... you borrowed it."

"Yeah, well, you say tomato..."

Clark shook his head. "I thought you didn't want anything more to do with that viewer after we saw the Lois Lane of another dimension as a government assassin targeting a corrupt Superman?"

Lois shrugged. "You were at work. I was off... and I was so bored."

A smile of compassion for his firebrand of a partner graced Clark's face. He put his arm around her shoulders. "So you thought you'd pull out the viewer and check up on another Lois Lane. Did you see another unpleasant scenario? Is that why you were so upset when I came in?"

"Oh, Clark!" Tears burst forth again. "It was horrible. There was nothing good, only death and heartache. We're doomed!"

Clark gave Lois' shoulder a squeeze. "Come on, Lois, so you saw a few bad situations. It's just a coincidence. In the limitless alternate universes you could have tapped into, there are bound to be some that aren't what we would desire."

Lois shook her head violently. "You don't understand. There may be an infinite number of universes out there, but Herb once told me that there are only 52 separate alternate universes that he is able to see or interact with. Something to do with vibrational frequencies and dimensional intersects. He stopped his explanation when my eyes began to glaze over, but the bottom line is... I peeked in on several other worlds today and none of them were good."

"I'm sorry that happened, but what does that have to do with us?"

"Don't you see, Clark? I don't care what Herb says about some future Utopia, the evidence says that for us there is no

happy ever after."

"Come on, Lois, it couldn't have been that bad."

"Oh no, well let me tell you about the wonderful lives the several Lois Lane's I looked in on had." Lois got up off the couch and began to pace. Clark sighed, and leaned back against the soft cushions of the couch.

"The first place I saw was probably the least awful and in that universe we were criminals." Her arms began to wave about as her agitation increased. "We belonged to a group of super-powered criminals called the Crime Syndicate and we ruled the entire planet through fear and cruelty. For some reason you were called Ultraman and I was called Superwoman. I had your powers also but was cheating on you with some Batman wannabe dressed like an owl." She stopped her pacing and glared at Clark. "Don't look at me like that." He held up his hands in supplication. She resumed her pacing.

"That was the best one I watched. At least I was alive."

"Lois, that wasn't you. Don't confuse the people you saw with us just because they resemble us."

She was still pacing. "Yeah, well they are supposed to be 'us' of those universes. How can I not see them as you and me?"

She turned to face him. "Do you remember when Kyle Griffin had that thingamajig that froze people with the flash of that bright light?" Clark nodded. "Well, we were able to eventually foil his plot, but the Lois I saw wasn't quite so lucky. Do you know what else he did? Every time he froze me, or her; he thought it would be a funny prank to cut her hair. After the first time in the apartment, she woke up with her hair trimmed several inches shorter. Then there was the time, later, at the Planet when he took my dress and put in on Jimmy. Well, when she snapped out of the trance, her hair was cut up past her ears. Then, that last time, I — she - woke up in that penthouse set-up in front of a chess board. Her hair was cropped to within an inch or two of the scalp." Lois' arms were flying about in earnest. "But that wasn't the worst. You remember that he froze you, and then dumped you over the balcony to fall fifty stories to the sidewalk below. Of course, you weren't hurt. Then he tossed me over the side."

Clark nodded gravely. "I woke up just in time to catch you."

Lois pursed her lips tightly and shook her head. "Not this time."

Clark closed his eyes for a moment as he remembered how close a thing it had been for him and Lois. If he'd hadn't snapped out of the trance when he had... "That is a terrible outcome, Lois, but that Lois wasn't you."

"No, *I* lucked out that time, but there's more."

She paced some more.

"You remember the Clark we met from the other universe, the one that I helped turn into Superman then he, in turn, helped me find you when you were lost in time." Clark nodded. "Well, we'd always hoped that he'd eventually find his own Lois who was lost in the Congo years earlier. Now, I'm not so sure that will ever happen. I never went to the Congo because my lead didn't pan out, but I viewed four separate Lois Lanes who did make the trip." Lois turned toward Clark; a few tears strayed from her eyes. "None of them survived." She counted them off on her fingers. "One was shot by a sniper as she got off the plane at the airport. One had her disguise penetrated and she was tossed off a boat and killed and eaten by river crocodiles. Another one simply had her neck broken by some thug and one..." Lois' voice broke before she could continue. "One was hacked to death by a machete. I'm going to hear those screams in my nightmares for a long time to come."

Clark stood up and pulled his distraught wife into his arms.

"Oh, Clark, I don't think any Lois Lane who went to the Congo ever made it out alive, and I swear I saw a Lois shrunken head sitting in a trophy case in Luthor's penthouse."

“Shhh,” Clark murmured into her ear as he rocked her gently. “You have to let it go, Lois. With all the danger you and thus your counterparts have put themselves into over the years there’s bound to be those instances when escape wasn’t in the cards. It’s just a matter of odds, but, Lois, those people aren’t you. You are here. You are fine. And I’m not going to let anything like that happen to you.”

She pulled back from his embrace and viewed him through a curtain of her tears. “You didn’t always come out unscathed either, Superman.”

She used her palms to wipe her face again. “I saw one of your counterparts having his atoms scattered across the cosmos by that vile Lord Nor, but there was never any challenge raised to force them to bring you back. You... he... was just gone. She clenched her fists. “I saw another Lois find that kryptonite cage in Lex’s cellar, but Superman had never escaped. She found a lifeless body. I cried with her.”

Clark pulled Lois back down to the couch, keeping his arm tightly around her. “Lois, you have to realize that no matter what you saw, those people are not us. Even if they experienced incidents similar to what we have, the fact that they failed where we succeeded shows that our lives are different. Their actions have no relation to ours. We are living our own life and what happens here... to us... is uniquely ours.”

Lois laid her head on his shoulder. “I understand what you’re saying, Clark, I do. But how can I feel confident that we will have a happy ever after, if I didn’t see even one alternate Lois and Clark sitting in front of their fireplace, together, well into their golden years.”

Clark gave his wife a squeeze around the shoulders. “I don’t know, Lois. Maybe it was just a miraculous coincidence that you saw so many bad outcomes without seeing any good ones... maybe not.” He looked into her mist-veiled eyes. “But it doesn’t matter what happens in any of those other dimensions. There are no guarantees in life, Lois. You know that as well as I do. But I’ve told you before, it isn’t about the future, it’s about the moments. It’s about you and me, here and now. If the world ended tomorrow, I wouldn’t curse all that I would be missing, but I would thank the fates for allowing me the time I’ve had with you.”

“God, I hate when you do that.” Lois buried her face into her husband’s broad chest.

“Do what?”

“Disarm me with your feelings for me. You have to be the most romantic, caring, individual in all the universes.”

“Are you complaining?”

Lois couldn’t keep a slight grin from her face. “Nope. I’m just constantly amazed that all this love you have is directed at me.”

Clark kissed the top of Lois’ head. “And it always will be.”

Just then there was a knock at their door. Clark gave Lois a confused look as he disentangled himself from her, rising up to answer. “Are you expecting anyone?”

She shook her head. “No, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it wasn’t Jimmy. He does seem to have a knack for interruption.”

Clark gave her an answering grin as he reached the outer door and opened it. “Herb?”

Lois got up from the couch as the short, dapper, Englishman came into their living room. She and Clark had both had their share of encounters with the supposedly long dead science-fiction author. As it happened, some of the fiction that Herbert George Wells had written wasn’t fiction at all, but contained more than a grain of truth. Most particularly, his novel “The Time Machine”. The time machine was real, and Herb was a time traveler.

In his travels, he’d seen many wonders of the future, including what he called a Utopian society based on the ideals

put forth by Superman, Lois, and their descendants. Whether these so-called descendants were physical progeny or just ideological followers Lois was never quite certain, but she had assumed it meant that she and Clark had grown old together and had children to carry on for them. After her afternoon of viewing she wasn’t so sure anymore.

Clark ushered Wells over to a chair opposite the couch. He and Lois sat back down on the couch. “What brings you here, Herb?” Lois bit her lip. Whenever Wells showed up it was because there was trouble for her and Clark.

Wells took his bowler hat off and fiddled with the brim. “Ah, it’s kind of embarrassing, but I seemed to have mislaid an important piece of Time Bureau technology. The Head of the Bureau is quite vexed with me and I need to find it and return it. I’ve looked everywhere that I can remember being since I checked out the machine in the first place. This is the last possible spot that I visited.” He looked up at them, a hopeful expression on his face. “Lois, you remember the dimensional viewer I showed you the last time I visited?” She nodded, not letting on that she knew exactly why he was there. “Well, that’s the device I seemed to have misplaced. Is there any chance that I left it... here?”

Lois glanced over at Clark, hiding the slight smirk she had on her face. Clark shook his head at his wife and stood up to retrieve the machine from where it lay - still on the kitchen table. He brought it over and handed it to Wells.

“Is this what you are looking for, Herb?”

Wells gratefully took it from Clark and placed it into a bag he’d brought with him. “Oh, yes, thank you so much. I can’t imagine how I came to leave it here.”

Lois couldn’t hold herself back. She knew that Herb used that viewer to look in on the other dimensional versions of her and Clark. He had to know of the worlds she had seen. Of the death and heartbreak she’d been subjected to. She had to know.

“Herb, answer me something would you?”

The older gentleman stopped his walk toward the front door, turned and looked at Lois. It was obvious from his look that he’d guessed that Lois had used the viewer. “If I can, Ms. Lane.”

“I’m sure you realize that I’ve peeked at some of the worlds that your little gizmo can show. In fact, I’ve looked in on several of them.” She noted the grim line that the time-traveler’s lips formed as he nodded. “So, tell me. Do any of the couples get to live to a ripe old age, or are Clark and I doomed to this brief period of happiness together before fate catches up with us. Are there any happily ever afters?”

Wells seemed to consider his words before he spoke them. “You and Clark are very special people. Whether there is a Superman, an Ultrawoman, or just the dynamic investigative team of Lane and Kent, you two are special. Individually you are both incredible people, but together you can change history.”

“Most of the histories that I saw were quite short.” Lois folded her arms over her chest as she glared at Wells.

He nodded. “No doubt. I once told you that where there was a Lois Lane there was a Clark Kent, and vice versa, and that is true. But it doesn’t mean that the two of them will automatically come together and march off into the proverbial sunset arm and arm. Actually, it’s quite difficult. In the 52 worlds I’ve observed, only 18 Lois and Clarks eventually got married.” He walked over and knelt in front of Lois, taking her hand in his. “In nearly all the dimensions, whether they are together or not, Lois Lane and Clark Kent are crusaders. They stand for and fight for something greater than themselves and history is never very kind to crusaders. Most wind up as martyrs to their causes.”

Lois pulled her hand away from Herb. “So, that’s my destiny? To wind up a dead martyr sometime soon.”

Herb shook his head, sadly, as he backed away from her. “I didn’t say that. Haven’t I told you both that this future timeline -

your future timeline - begets a Utopian society? That is very rare, and very special.”

Lois clenched her fists. “But you can’t tell us if it’s our continued actions, and the actions of our descendants that bring this Utopia about, or if it’s merely the ideals which our martyrdom might inspire.”

Wells shook his head. “No, and you know why I can’t tell you that. I’ve already told you too much about your futures as it is.” He walked toward the door, then stopped. “Let me ask you two a question. Clark, do you love Lois with all your heart and would you gladly lay down your own life for her?”

Clark nodded. “Of course.”

“And, Lois, do you love Clark with all your heart and would you, without hesitation, lay down your life for him?”

Tears began to leak from the corner of Lois’ eyes again. “Yes.”

“Then know this - you two are very special. Only 11 other couples in the alternate worlds I’ve seen have reached the level of love and happiness that you two now share. You’ve gone through a lot to get to where you are, and you will go through more before your time is done. But this is life, and no one gets out alive. Treat each moment you have together as precious and you will have a life well spent, no matter how many days, weeks, months, or years it may last.”

Lois stood up from the couch and rushed over to Wells. She put her hand on his shoulder to stop him from leaving. “Please,” she said, as her voice choked up. “Can I see just one dimension where that Lois and Clark have a happy ever after? Just one?”

Herb stood still for a moment, and then nodded. They all moved over to the couch and Herb flipped the view screen to the upright position and punched a few buttons and turned a couple of knobs. Soon the picture showed a static wave, then cleared up to show an obviously older Lois and Clark sitting in a living room similar to the one they were in now.

They all leaned in to watch what unfolded. The elder Lois and Clark were sitting comfortably on the couch, she was tucked against him, her head on his shoulder. A doorbell rang, and Clark seemed to get up rather slowly as he moved to open the door. Once the door had been opened, a flood of small children came rushing into the room, followed by two sets of adult couples.

“Gramma, gramma.” Five young children, two boys and three girls, rushed over to Lois on the couch, immediately inundating her with their excited shouts and climbing all over her.

The two young women each gave Clark a kiss on the cheek. “Hi, Dad,” each said in turn.

One of the young men clapped Clark on the shoulder. “Sorry for barging in on you like this, but we didn’t know where else to drop the kids.”

The other young man joined in. “Yeah, the sisters decided that tonight, come what may, we were going to get together and have dinner and see a show. Unfortunately, neither of our babysitters was available at such short notice.”

One of the young women came over and swatted the young man. “Oh, shush. Mom and dad are more than happy to take the kids for a few hours... aren’t you dad?”

The Clark in the viewer just stood there with his mouth open, looking over at the overwhelmed Lois on the couch. Her expression was one of near panic.

Wells closed the lid on the small machine and made his way back to the door. “There you go, Lois. Not all the Lois and Clark’s meet an unhappy end.” He placed his derby back on his head and gave each of them a nod. “I’ll be going now. It’s been nice seeing you two again, even under these unfortunate circumstances.” He quickly slipped out through the door and was gone.

Lois was still looking at the door, her face a blank stare. Clark came up and put his arm around her. “Well, you see, Lois,

not all the outcomes are bad. You got to see one happily ever after.”

As if coming out of a trance Lois turned her gaze toward Clark. Her eyes refocused as her lips began to tremble.

“Happy ever after? Happy ever after?” Her voice rose a notch. “Babysitters! We’re reduced to being babysitters. And did you see all those kids? My god, I’ll bet that poor Lois hasn’t had a moment’s piece since those girls were born. First taking care of her own kids, then a bunch of grandkids.”

Clark rolled his eyes and looked heavenward. Lois continued her rant. “Do you believe that Herb thought that was a happy ever after?” Lois’ hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, no, you don’t think that what he showed us might actually have been us?” Lois began to pace around the room. “Omigod, the room did look a lot like this one... Clark, where are you going?”

She watched in confusion as her husband just moved toward the stairs and up to their bedroom.

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THE END