

Together

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Clark has always taken solace in that space between Earth and the stars, and not just during the most difficult times of his life. Sometimes, he chooses to seek out that perfect isolation to reflect back on all the wonderful things in his life. A companion/flip-side piece to “Alone.”

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Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise.

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Note: Please read “Alone” first.

Together.
 Just like I was always promised we would be.
 Together.
 A team.
 The three musketeers.
 A veritable triumvirate, all guarding one of the most frightening secrets imaginable.
 My parents.
 I could not have done this on my own. I could not have found the strength to wrestle with the weird and terrifying array of powers that have so recently swallowed up any idea that I was just an ordinary child.
 Fearless.
 That’s what they are.
 Fearless.
 Unwavering.
 Bold.
 Inventive.
 Patient.
 Supportive.
 I could go on. I have no lack of words to describe how steadfast they have been in helping me to deal with each of my abilities. The way they have tirelessly worked with me to help me find ways to control the terrifying powers that have erupted into my life, turning my world upside down and destroying any sense of security and normalcy that I once possessed. The ceaselessly patient way they have guided me and come up with solutions to help me control the things that I can do, to the point now where my restraint over those powers is as natural as breathing, and it seems almost difficult to remember how hard I had to work to find that restraint.

Almost.
 But not quite. I still sometimes find that my iron grip on my powers can slide just a fraction of an inch. Those moments scare me more than I can say. It’s all too easy to think about how a crushed pencil or broken chair could have been a teammate’s bones out on the football field, or those of my parents if I hug

them too tightly. But those moments are infrequent and becoming rarer still as I continue my conscious efforts to perfect my control.

Still, sometimes it feels good to let go of those inner chains and let the real me burst forth. A run at top speed along the scarcely used, rusting railroad tracks on the outskirts of town. Leaping bounds through the back fields, seeing how far I can sling my body, the distance measured in rows of crops — tall stalks of corn or neat rows of cabbage, it makes no difference.

And now this.
 Flight.

The ultimate freedom. It’s probably the one power that should have been the most frightening. After all, who’s to say that I will always land — that I won’t just float suspended in air for the rest of my days? It’s not like gravity seems to apply to me anymore, even if it’s more of an effort to stay airborne rather than to remain earthbound. My concentration is key, right now. In any case, flying isn’t scary at all. Somehow, I have faith that I can land wherever and whenever I want.

And right now, I want to test my limits.

For the first time, I’m feeling comfortable enough to see how fast I can fly, and how high. With my feet firmly planted on the ground, I rise into the air and laugh at the hold gravity thinks it has over me. Up I go, urging myself in some instinctual way to go faster, higher than I ever have before. The feeling is nothing short of exhilarating as I punch my way through gauzy white clouds and watch as the world falls away at a dizzying pace, like it’s suddenly and inexplicably shrinking beneath my very feet. Still higher I go, feeling the atmosphere thin out before altogether vanishing as I free myself from the very bonds of Earth.

Space.

I am in space.

I am no longer a part of the planet Earth.

And yet, I am not part of the stars either.

Drifting here, I am singularly unique. An anomaly. I exist independent of anything and everything else.

The quiet here is astounding. For the first time, I know true silence. There is no expectation of hearing a sudden burst of radio static or the barking of a dog, several long miles down the road. All I can hear is the inner workings of my body.

It’s peaceful.

Relaxing.

Kind of creepy too.

I’ve found a sanctuary that feels almost tailor-fit to my needs, as ridiculous as the thought may be.

I could grow to love it here. In fact, I think I already *do* love it here.

Triumphant.

That’s how I feel about my newest ability.

Free.

No longer tied to any one location. The world is open to my every whim. And, even as I become aware of that fact, the implications hit me. I can travel anywhere I like — see and do anything I want to. My ability to defy gravity coupled with the extraordinary speed I possess means nothing is out of the realm of possibility. Japanese food for dinner? Give me ten minutes and I’ll pick up something from Tokyo. Nothing to do on a Saturday? Let’s all go visit the Louvre.

So many possibilities. So many ways I can at least attempt to repay my parents for helping me through these last eight or so difficult years as I grew ever more dangerous with the things that I can do. No longer am I limited to just doing things around the farm — lifting a tractor here, bailing the hay within a mere moments, harvesting the crops in the span of a few hours, preparing and seeding the soil for the new crops, repainting the barn in the blink of an eye.

Now, I can give my parents the world.

Together.

Two halves of a whole.

United in a way that I've never felt before.

Divided in a way I've never imagined possible too.

Superman.

I finally have a way to help people while keeping myself as safe as I can. I've exposed myself as something other than human in order to *hide* the fact that I am something other than human. It's simultaneously terrifying and thrilling, insanely stupid and the best idea I've ever had, reckless and carefully calculated for the risks it poses.

I'm pleased with my decision to create a character that I can use to hide behind, while finding ways to help those in need. Funny, how my anonymity depends so heavily on thrusting myself into the limelight of celebrity status — how I've become the least known man in the world while becoming the most famous face the world has ever seen. A large part of me hates the way my likeness has been splashed across the globe — everything from newspaper photographs to plastic action figures. I've never been comfortable being in the spotlight. I've always shied away from public acknowledgement and praise because it was the best way that I knew to keep my secret intact. But part of me doesn't mind the way Superman has become an icon. If I can somehow inspire the hopeless, bring a sense of peace to those in turmoil, and promote justice, then every blinding snap of a camera's flash is well worth it.

Clark.

Superman.

The hardest part has been reconciling with myself that I'm now living life as two different people. It's not easy. I find myself all too often referring to myself in the third person, as though I'm a writer crafting a tale about other people. Sometimes, I find myself slipping away and getting lost in the blue suit. And then there are times when it seems like all of the efforts I've put forth are in vain. Superman might stop a robbery, only to miss a hit-and-run accident. He might save the victims of a mudslide but be too occupied during that rescue to protect the victims of a shooting.

During those moments, I find myself so torn, so separated in my mind. To kill Superman off and shrug off the pressures thrust upon me by the word — but mostly by myself — with the hope that I might be able to live a normal life? Or to keep the hero alive and sacrifice Clark to what can feel like an all-consuming job, hoping to make, at the very least, a thumbprint impression in changing the world for the better?

In those moments, I like to come up here to be among the stars, distancing myself from the world crying out for a hero to save them. It helps, having this place, where no sound travels and the sun is never hidden by weather or clouds. It's the perfect place to rejuvenate my body and mind, reflecting on... well, usually on Lois, if I'm being honest. Too many times to count, even though Superman is barely out of his infancy, she's managed to say just the right words to me — to Clark, to Superman — to fuel me enough to continue to push forward.

It's here, in this place of perfect isolation and zero distraction when the two sides of me can finally come together in one cohesive man.

Together.

For the first time, I feel like I might have a chance at finding love and the happily ever after I've always imagined for myself. If only *she* would see it that way.

Lois Lane.

The most exquisite woman on the face of the planet. I know, I've looked. A woman of rare beauty — the soft brown eyes like two pools of chocolate, the soft, shoulder-length hair, the poise

and bearing that challenges anyone to dare and mess with her, a soft smile so rare but so bright it's like a comet streaking through the darkness of space — there and gone in an instant, but making a man feel all the luckier for having witnessed it. She's made even more attractive by her spirit. She may attempt to pass herself off as full of salt and vinegar, and maybe it's true that the world has somehow hardened her, but I can see through the stone walls of defense she's built around herself for protection. I don't even need my x-ray vision to see past those barricades.

Granted, Lois hates me right now. I'm an unwanted nuisance in her life. The barely acceptable partner that Mr. White has thrust upon her. The greenhorn with a litany of puff pieces to his name and very little hard news articles. She feels she works better on her own. Maybe she does. Maybe I'm just dragging her down.

I'm still glad to be partnered with her.

If I have things to still learn about my trade, I want to learn from the best. And I know Lois is the best. Even before I knew her personally, I'd read her articles, followed her work, no matter what corner of the globe I was hiding out in, hoping to find a life and a way to stop putting myself in danger of being discovered for the freak that I am. When Mr. White so off-handedly paired me with Lois, I could scarcely believe that it was really happening. Surely it was all just a dream — nothing else could explain it — securing my dream job and being partnered with one of the greatest journalists of modern times, all in one fell swoop.

Together.

Together, Lois and I saved the space program. We exposed the lies, the cover-ups, the blatant sabotage. Together, we helped to save the lives of the colonists who were looking forward to spending time among the stars, experimenting, hoping to find cures for debilitating diseases, hoping to discover ways to better life on this planet. And with Superman's assistance, the shuttle made it into orbit, where the mission would have otherwise been aborted.

Up here, in my private refuge away from the world, I can almost imagine that I see the shuttle as it orbits the blue and green ball beneath my feet. I can't — I suppose it's on the other side of the world at the moment. And even if they were in sight? So what? I would likely still feel the same isolation and privacy that I do now. The freedom to contemplate the wonder that is being paired with Lois Lane.

I want to get to know her better. I want her to take notice of me, *Clark*, not Superman, which I realized only too late that she would — and did, to my chagrin — become enamored with. I want to earn her trust, her respect, her friendship. I want to one day feel the freedom to invite her over to my apartment for the sole purpose of eating takeout and watching a movie. I want to one day be confident enough to ask her out on a date.

One day, I want "together" to actually mean that we are together as a couple.

Together.

Friends.

At long last.

Although, I guess it really hasn't been *that* long. A few months, sure. I'm still in shock, I think. Somehow, amid all of the terrifying and new developments in Smallville, Lois Lane allowed me behind the defensive walls of the fortress she'd built to keep people out of her heart, and into the warmth of her friendship. I'm not sure what caused it. I'm not sure it even matters. Maybe it was simply that being away from Metropolis and in the friendly, slower-paced country gave us both an opportunity to unwind and relax a little. I know that, for me, coming home put me at ease. Showing Lois around, introducing her to people I'd known all my life, put me in a different state of mind. I wasn't trying to impress her. I was trying to help her become comfortable in her new surroundings.

I guess it worked.
She's finally accepted me — as a co-worker, a partner, a friend.

Best friend?

Maybe.

I know how lucky I am to see Lois in this new light. Her defensive walls are still up, but she's lowered them enough for me to sneak small peeks into what she hides beyond them — her heart. It's bruised and wounded and mostly untrusting, but when she looks at me now, I see a sparkle in her eyes as opposed to the flinty-hardness I once did. There's a fun-loving, even tender side to Lois, that I used to only imagine or hope that she had. Now I find that beneath the stony exterior she dons to shield herself from all the hurts of the world, there's a softness to Lois.

She really *is* the woman I always prayed I would find.

And suddenly, Metropolis isn't as cold and unfeeling as I once saw it. Oh, I always did love the pulse and feel of the city, but it's a far cry from the warm, open community you find in small towns, like my home of Smallville. Any large city — Metropolis, LA, New York, Tokyo — has an inherent hardness and a tendency to chew up and spit out any unprepared individual. People aren't kidding when they say that only the strong survive in those places.

But with my newly secured friendship to Lois as strong as if we'd known each other for a lifetime instead of mere months, Metropolis feels warm and comfortable — like a well-loved blanket. It's open and full of wonder and possibilities each and every day that I wake up here. It's my home — truly and completely. With Lois' new open-armed acceptance of me, I feel like the city itself has accepted me. I'm no longer the stranger looking in from the outside, the way I've always felt in anyplace other than the farmlands of my youth.

I belong here.

I belong at Lois' side.

Oh, it's far too early to even *entertain* the idea of taking our relationship from friendship to something more. At least, outside of my daydreams it is. But one day, when I'm more certain that asking her out on a date won't cause her to pull away from me or frighten her in any way, I will broach the subject.

Until then, I will count my blessings that I am allowed to be with her at all.

Together.

Two friends — two *best* friends — working alongside one another, righting wrongs and having fun while we do so.

Together.

We were once together, if only for a short time.

I could see it there, in the hologram.

My family. My *birth* family. The mother and father I had been born to — the people whose genes I carry on in a unique combination.

And in those images, as they played out before my waking eyes, I could see it. They loved me. More than anything. More than themselves. So much that they sent me away from their dying planet in order to give me a chance to live when they would only be resigning themselves to certain death. They could not save me and have enough time to ensure their own survival.

Together.

Together, they said their final goodbyes, trusting that the tiny space ship would carry their only child away from death and to a new life. Twin faces of grief and hope. Matching tears on their cheeks. Identical love in their eyes mixed with equal pain.

I wish I could remember them. Something. Anything. Their voices, undisturbed by the metallic, somehow “off” resonance of the holograms, as if their technology could not capture a pure, unadulterated sound. The echo of their laughter in the back of my mind. The scents that were uniquely them — a certain perfume or

cologne — the way certain fragrances have always reminded me of my Earth family. Even a ghostly remembrance of the feel of their hands, the feel of their lips as they kissed my newborn head. *Something.*

But, I have nothing.

No. That's not true.

I have their messages. I have proof that they loved me. I have the globe, even now, cradled in my palm as I float here amongst the stars and wonder: in what direction did Krypton once lay? And I have their legacy, even if it's only in the form of the stylized S that I wear on my chest. Though they never once made mention of the symbol, I know in my heart that it is the crest of my family. The crest of El. Like medieval knights, it seems that they — and maybe all Kryptonians, for all I know — wore sigils upon them, announcing their family and history.

I'm proud to bear that name, that symbol.

I'm proud to be a Kent too.

What's interesting to me is how instinctively my mother and I knew to add the S to Superman's uniform. I didn't even know of the globe back then, or the holograms it contained, but, like my biological father and mother, I proudly displayed the sigil of our family on my chest, just as they once did.

Together.

I wish I could have met them even just once as an adult. Just one day, one measly twenty-four-hour span of time. Just enough time to get to know them and to let them get to know me and the man I turned out to be. I think — *I hope* — they would have been proud of me. I *know* they would have loved and approved of my Earth parents. Ask anyone: it's not possible to dislike Jonathan and Martha Kent.

I wish they had had more time to leave more messages for me in this globe. Or, did they? Will I one day awaken in the middle of the night once again, to find more of my past revealed? Will the globe ever come alive again, to show me more about the people who gave me life? Try as I might, I have not been able to get the globe to talk to me since that fifth and final message from Jor-El. No more lights, no more sounds, no more ghostly messages from a long-dead world. No more insights into the blood that runs in my veins or the genes that comprise my body.

Please, globe, give me a sign. Tell me that you'll once again reunite me, so to speak, with my birth family.

Together.

A nearly lost friendship restored.

Lois.

Still a Lane, not a Luthor. Thank God, not a Luthor.

She said no to him. She said yes to our friendship.

And suddenly, just like that, the hurtful words we'd fired at each other like devastating missiles were erased from reality. Wounds were healed and forgiven. Our friendship was patched, as seamless as it once was, as if there had never even been a tear in the fabric to begin with. I can't speak for Lois, of course. But for me, I can forget all of the harsh unpleasantness that had descended upon us while Lois was engaged to the sociopath billionaire, if it means that I once again have the woman of my dreams in my life.

I missed her terribly during those bleak weeks. Even when I was standing there, face to face with her, talking to her, the strain between us was suffocating, and I felt like an alien outsider for the first time in a long time. Though I was surrounded with other friends and my parents, I felt impossibly, indescribably lonely and incredibly bereaved. But that no longer matters. We've mended our friendship in an almost completely unspoken way. We've always had a great understanding of one another, ever since we crossed the invisible threshold from partners-not-by-choice to best friends.

Okay, well, maybe that healing wasn't as instantaneous as all

of that. For a short time — the span of a heartbeat or two in the grand scheme of things — we were right back to where we'd begun things — two people feeling out a new friendship. There were times when awkwardness reigned supreme, as we each tried to find that place where we were both comfortable. Was it acceptable to invite her over for a late night pizza and movie? Did she dare ask to crash at my place if the movie ran too long? We didn't even have the Planet in those early days of our restored friendship — another one of the scars Luthor gashed through our lives before he died. We felt like we had to find excuses to be together — there was no stopping at a coffee vendor before a day at the office, no late nights buried in research, no stakeouts forcing us into close quarters for hours or days at a time.

But, if our time together before Luthor had given us anything, it was the knowledge that we both needed each other's friendship. We each knew that the other could be trusted and, more importantly, that we would forgive each other's missteps and mistakes. We had an unbreakable trust in each other, and that proved to be our saving grace. I think each of us was embarrassed about the things we'd said and done during those torturous weeks of Lois' engagement, but the other never made an issue of it or brought it up, and before we knew it, we'd smoothed over the roughness and found things back to normal.

The unbreakable bond between us as prevailed, stronger than ever, if I'm any judge.

Lane and Kent.

Kent and Lane.

Best friends.

Partners.

Taking the world by storm. Righting wrongs. Uncovering the truth. Fighting for justice. Side by side. Just as it was always meant to be.

My soul is peaceful now, here as I drift among the alien stars, free of the Earth. I'm free of the weights that held me down and tethered me to the ground even when I fled to this silent, isolated refuge, feeling as alone and insignificant as a speck of dust. Back then, when I was mourning the loss of Lois as well as fearing for her life, this special place of mine and mine alone could not ease my mind, could not soothe the way that my stomach roiled, could not calm my racing heart, could not banish the sickening, coppery taste of pure terror from my throat and tongue.

But now, I am relaxed. If my heart races, it's in joy. My stomach is blissfully quiet, if not craving some authentic Chinese food, shared, of course, with Lois. The only thing I taste is remnants of a jelly donut I ate just before leaving the bullpen. Ah, the bullpen. It's been so good to have it back — restored and made even better since Mr. Stern bought the paper. It's brought the missing spark back into Lois' eyes as well. She needs the paper — the Planet's ink flows in her veins. It gives her a sense of purpose and a way to keep her mind away from the mistake she nearly made — even she now freely admits that saying "I do" would have been the greatest blunder of her life.

Together.

Together we're rebuilding our lives, reclaiming what was nearly lost. And I could not be more excited to do so.

Together.

She's said yes. To me. To the idea of a date.

I feel like a giddy teenager. I'm floating. Not just in body but in mind, body, soul, and heart as well. I can't stay rooted to the ground when I am feeling this elated. So here I am, back in my favorite refuge, floating freely, not tethered to the Earth and separate from the stars.

Me.

Clark.

Not Superman.

That's who she's agreed to date. And suddenly, I have hope

for the future. Hope that Superman is a fantasy that Lois has given up. Hope that, once she knows everything, that she'll love me for me, not for what I symbolize. Hope that, one day, I'll be able to tell her the truth about me.

But that's not something to worry about now. I have to know that we can be together as Lois and Clark. I have to know that Superman doesn't factor into the equation at all. I need to know that, if she chooses to continue to date me, that she's doing it for the right reasons. I *do* trust her — it isn't that. But, I know only too well how infatuated she was — is? — with the flashy, but fake, superhero. It still stings, when I think of how she rebuffed Clark's declaration of love when she was engaged to Luthor, but only hours later threw herself — shamelessly so! — at Superman. I don't fault her — I know she wasn't trying to hurt me. But it *is* a sharp reminder of how differently she views what she perceives to be two separate men.

It's my own fault, really. Superman was never supposed to be recognizable as Clark Kent. I've gone to painstaking lengths to distance the two men from each other as much as possible. Superman is *supposed to be* a distraction — the garish colors of his uniform are meant to dazzle the eye so that no one sees the man beneath it all. So, I don't blame Lois for being blind to the fact that it's really me, Clark, hiding beneath that cape.

No, I blame myself. And yet, at the same time, I have to be proud of myself too. Lois knows me — in both of the suits — better than anyone, and yet, she hasn't seen past the disguise. Which means that I've always been able to breathe a sigh of relief that there is a slim chance, at best, of anyone else connecting Clark and Superman.

It doesn't matter.

He doesn't matter.

Lois said yes to Clark.

Together.

One of my greatest wishes come true.

And oh, what a great time I will show her! I can picture it now. A romantic dinner for two, followed by the excitement of the concert I secured tickets for. A stop at a coffee shop after the show, for drinks and something chocolate, of course. It *is*, after all, Lois' favorite.

But mostly, I won't hold myself back. For the first time, I'll be able to compliment her the way she deserves — not as a friend or fellow reporter — but as a deeply enthralled man to the woman who's captured his heart. For once, if I am allowed to kiss her, I won't have to hold back. I won't have to make it a ruse to deceive others. I won't have to rein in my emotions. I won't have to make it chaste or merely friendly. I won't have to do it with my heart breaking in two. I'll simply be able to be me — fully, unrestrained, completely honestly me.

Together.

The two of us will be able to focus on each other. No Perry to yell at us to get back to work. No piles of research enticing us to sleuth out the truth hidden within. No Jimmy to interrupt us at a key moment. No story to occupy our thoughts. Just us. Lois and Clark. The way, my heart tells me, it was always meant to be.

Together.

Not quite the way I'd hoped to be, but the main thing is that she's here with me in this moment, as I float above the clouds until the vastness of space is the only thing above us — an infinite vault of glittering stars and remote, alien planets and limitless possibilities.

She didn't say yes to me this time.

I asked her to marry me and she didn't say yes. But, then again, she didn't say no either. Instead, she let me know that the fragile mask of Superman had broken in her eyes. She'd seen the man beneath the S shield. Clark could no longer cower behind a cape and Superman could no longer hide behind a pair of glasses.

Two men no longer existed. They had become one for her.

My greatest fear.

My greatest desire.

The stark terror that ran through me — how mad *was* she with me? — was rivaled only by a profound sense of relief. There would be no more hiding, no more lying, no more running from her with a flimsy — if any — excuse, knowing that she probably thought the worst of me. I could finally, *finally*, be my whole self around her. For the first time, I could speak completely freely around her, without having to carefully censor my words to protect the alien side of me.

For the first time, I had to walk on eggshells around Lois. I didn't want to upset her any more than she already was. I needed her to know how glad I was that she knew my secret, and to make her understand that I wanted to be the one to tell her, even if I didn't know the words to use or feel courageous enough to let her in on my deepest secret. I had to be sure that she knew, without a doubt, that my secret meant nothing — that I was still the same guy she'd befriended, dated, fallen in love with.

For a time, things were rough between us, the way I always suspected they would be once my secret came out into the open, especially as it got later and later into our relationship. I knew she would question her decision to trust me at all. But Lois is a remarkably smart woman, and she quickly put the pieces together — why I hadn't told her before, what my fears were, how important it is that no one else ever find out the truth. She forgave me and accepted me back into her life.

Together.

She's here in my arms now, her face turned upward, looking at the innumerable stars above us. There's a softness to her features — a childlike sense of wonderment and awe, as though she'd never seen the night sky before now. And she looks at me, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth — a smile I have no defense against and gently return. Her smile widens in response and I see such tenderness and love in her eyes that it glistens there in her eyes, reflecting back the moon's silver-white light. She sighs and lays her head against my chest, so trusting, so naturally that it seems like the strain of my secret being revealed could not have been anything more serious than a bad dream.

I didn't know what to expect when I asked her to talk with me tonight, after we worked together to diffuse the bomb at the Art Museum. In looking back, maybe I should have waited until Jimmy and Perry were out of earshot before asking — almost pleading — if Lois would talk to me for a minute. Or maybe approached the whole situation dressed as Clark, not as Superman. But what's done is done. I hoped she would allow me to talk to her, to clear the air, and to my heart's delight, she agreed to come with me.

Where else could I take her, but up here to my old refuge? It was the last place in the world that was ever just mine — a place to hide from the pressures of society and pretending and hiding my powers. A place where peace and quiet reign supreme and the world falls away and I can be alone. Not Clark. Not Superman. Just a wayward soul searching for his place in the universe.

I didn't want the privacy anymore. I wanted Lois to be able to broach this one, final, unreachable fortress of solitude. So I brought her here, to give her a glimpse into my life, as well as to ensure that no one could listen in on our private, important, conversation. I let her know how much I love her. I told her I would wait for her, for as long as it takes her to reconcile my deception. And, in turn, she assured me that I'm no longer alone.

Together.

A united front against the world.

Together.

Even if we aren't quite "together" as an engaged couple, the way I'd pray we would be.

What matters is that she hasn't run from me. She's here with

me now. She's vowed to remain at my side. The trust I shattered has miraculously been repaired. Her righteous anger has burned out. Our friendship — our love for one another — remains standing.

Right now, it's more than I ever dared to hope for.

Together.

She's said yes.

Or rather, I guess *I* was the one to say yes. After all, she did ask *me* to marry *her*.

I don't mind that she's the one who asked me. It's never mattered to me where or when we'd get engaged. The words didn't matter — so long as Lois knew how much I love her and how I can't live without her in my life. All that mattered was that, one day, Lois would wear my diamond on her finger. That we'd be looking toward a future of being together, bonded as husband and wife.

So, it doesn't bother me that Lois was the one to get down on one knee tonight. If anything, it was more romantic than I ever imagined. Seeing her there, asking me to spend my life with her... it made me realize just how special a woman Lois is. Not that I didn't know that already. I'm reminded of it in a thousand little ways every day. But to see this new confidence of hers — where she is willing and ready to risk everything in the name of love — is something truly special. I don't know if I've ever seen Lois put herself out there like that before. In that moment, I think she was the most vulnerable I've ever seen her. All traces of her defensive walls — the thick armor she's always wrapped herself in — fell away into oblivion. Nothing stood between her and my reaction — nothing to protect her if I rebuffed her advances, nothing to cushion the potential blow to her exposed heart.

It made me love her even more.

And now we can finally look ahead to the rest of our lives. An eternity of being together, sharing our love, building a family, supporting one another. A lifetime spent with hands and hearts entwined, never to be separated.

Together.

The soon-to-be Kents.

The — I hope — one day Kent *family*, complete with a child or three.

The thought makes me smile. And it makes my heart ache for Lois to be physically here, even though I only just left her at her apartment a few minutes ago, before I came here to my private thinking place amongst the stars.

Together.

Even when I'm here by myself with empty arms, I'm not alone.

Lois' love comes with me. Forever.

Together.

We did it together.

Earth is saved.

New Krypton is free from the threat of Lord Nor, and, instead, in the capable hands of Zara and Ching. It is free of *me*, the unhappy would-be leader of the struggling new colony of a rocky, desolate world.

And I couldn't have done it without Lois.

She risked her life for me. That's something I don't take lightly, even if she brushes it off as something anyone would do for the person they love. It makes me sick to my stomach to think how easily she could have been hurt or killed — by the Kryptonians, yes, but even by human Earthlings like Colonel Cash and his men. Every time I close my eyes, I see her running to me, yelling, screaming, warning me to get away, seconds too late, as the Kryptonite gas was launched at the street where I'd been fighting with Nor. Every time, I feel ill, as I wonder what might have happened — what if the shooter's aim had been off

and he'd hit Lois with that rocket instead?

What if Nor had succeeded in killing me? Would he have murdered Lois too, just to spite the memory of me? I don't just mean out on that deserted street either. Rather, I mean after that farce of a trial in which she was paraded before all of New Krypton as "evidence" against me and branded as a cheap, home-wrecking harlot — even though I hadn't known I was married to Zara since infancy — and as a "mere" Earthling unfit to be with someone of noble Kryptonian blood. How that same noble blood of mine had boiled at those comments! It had been all I could do to restrain myself from doing something rash and trying to fight Nor right then and there in that chamber. Not that I had much choice. Under the light of the yellow sun, I would have been overpowered — one lone super-powered being against far too many to count.

So, here I am, drifting in space, trying to find some way to shake off the nightmare images of the past weeks, while Lois slumbers away in my apartment, safe and snug beneath the blankets of my bed. I should be with her, I know. I should be tucked in bed right alongside her, innocent as our snuggling would be, though on nights like this, our promise to wait until our wedding night is almost too difficult a task to carry out. I should be laying in the darkness listening to nothing but the steady, reassuring beat of her heart.

But I'm far too restless for that tonight. I have too much nervous energy still pent up inside me, even if I'm not quite sure how that's possible. After getting hit with the Kryptonite gas, I should be just as exhausted as Lois is. But not tonight. Tonight, my brain is firing at lightning speed and rest is as elusive as a unicorn.

Together.

For a short span of time, I was reunited with others who share my unique, other-worldly DNA. I'd imagined it a hundred times over, especially in my youth, once it became obvious that I was not born of this planet. The rush, the excitement, the feeling of belonging that I would have once I met others like me. As it turned out, the fantasy was better than the reality. Instead of feeling an instant connection and belonging, I've never felt so alone or so much like an outsider in all my life. Strange customs that I stumbled over. Constantly feeling scrutinized, as though my every breath were being weighed to see if I was worthy of the name of El. Expectations that I would lead people who barely trusted me — if at all! — into a war to be fought over a world that was alien to me.

Not together.

Surrounded by my fellow survivors of Krypton, I was utterly alone. Forced to share quarters with my Kryptonian birth-wife, I was completely isolated. Constantly flanked by a security detail and attendants, I felt like the only man left alive in the universe.

Until Lois — God bless her! — showed up in the most unexpected of ways, but not a moment too soon.

Together.

I held her in my arms and felt all of the broken pieces of my heart knitting back together again. I kissed her and my shattered soul was once again complete. I looked into her eyes and knew that I would never be more connected to the world, to life, than I would be with her by my side.

I could not have won my battles without her. Indeed, I would have lost my very life if she hadn't found a way to be at my side throughout the entire ordeal.

Though it was Ching who found the loophole to reverse my slow, excruciatingly painful execution, it was only through Lois' wonderfully demanding defiance that the process was stopped and reversed when it was. Though my body was being literally ripped to shreds at the molecular level, I was still conscious enough to be aware of what was going on in that courtroom. Lois saved my life by demanding that the molecular disbander be

reversed when it was. Another moment or two and I know I would have been lost forever. My hold on life was tenuous enough as it was when I felt my body being pieced back together. The edges of my vision had already turned black and fuzzy when Ching announced that he'd found a loophole to spare my life. And my hearing was fading, as though my ears were stuffed full of thick cotton. But Lois' voice cut through loud and clear, filling me with hope and such love that I would have shed tears if I'd been able to do anything at all in that moment. Each breath I took was the greatest effort I'd ever expended in my life.

Together.

I took her love with me into that final showdown with Nor, wrapping myself in it like an invisible suit of armor. Ching had practiced fighting with the drei with me before I went into battle. But all that did was to give me foreknowledge of what I was getting myself into. One night of training could not possibly begin to put me on Nor's level — he'd mastered the art of that particular kind of fighting long ago — even if Ching complimented me on how quick I was to learn the basic moves. No, what gave me the advantage was Lois. Nor was a madman fighting for vengeance and hatred. He fought with a blind rage. I was a man desperately fighting to save the life of the woman I love, as well as an entire planet full of people I'd long ago sworn to myself that I would protect. I fought with calculated risks and carefully, even if swiftly, weighed decisions. And when I did that special move — the one Ching said could only be done by clearing my mind and focusing only on the kill — the only thought on my mind was protecting Lois and the world.

When the dust finally settled — the dry, choking dust of Earth and the poisoned dust of Krypton — Lois was right there beside me. Through the haze of pain and death as I laid there on the street, I heard her calling me — calling me back to life, calling me back to *her*. Again, she'd saved my life. With her by my side, this time I happily returned to the Kryptonian's palace to recuperate. It seemed like a completely new place to my eyes. The once dark and drab, muted colors of the place — as they'd seemed to my miserable heart — were now vivid and beautiful. The eerie, strange, twisted shapes molded into their art and architecture suddenly appeared pleasing, soft, and rich in a history that I didn't understand but could still find beautiful. The people — once judgmental strangers — all seemed to become accepting and respectful and yes, even friendly.

Together.

Together, we walked out of there, arm-in-arm, hearts beating in tune, footfalls evenly matched, as we were always meant to be. No two people have ever been happier to have each other, rivaled only, perhaps, by Zara and Ching. For the first time in their lives, no shadow loomed over them. No noble-blooded birth-husband to be unhappily bonded to — or compete with, as the case may have been. No lunatic waiting in the wings if said birth-husband was found unworthy of his marriage, his right to rule, his very heritage. Leaving Zara and Ching behind, saying our last goodbyes, knowing I'll never see them again in my lifetime, I couldn't help but to feel saddened to lose contact with them. But I was also so immensely happy for them, because now, finally, they could both, for the very first time, love unconditionally.

Just like me.

Just like *us*.

More than ever, I'm grateful that there is still an "us" to celebrate.

Together.

Bonded together for all eternity.

Husband and wife.

Ready to face the world, side by side, just as we always have, but now as two hearts and two lives merged into one beautiful unit.

What God has joined, no man, nor beast, nor villain, nor space rock, nor circumstance, nor superhero will *ever* be able to tear asunder.

Here on this night — this wondrous, perfect, dreamlike night — I can hardly believe that the woman in my arms is my wife. I can scarcely believe that my once incomplete and yearning soul is whole and content. No. More than content. Blissfully ecstatic. Now, more than ever, I feel like I'm home. Not the kind with four walls, a roof, and a mortgage, but the inner kind that makes a heart glad and puts the mind at rest.

I've brought Lois to this place before, this void between our world and the unknown depths of the universe. But tonight, we're both seeing this old sanctuary of mine with new eyes. Up here, we exist in a reality known only to ourselves. Up here, we are our own, unique little microcosm. Up here, we are the only world of life. No one can touch us. No one can pull us down. No one can witness as Superman tenderly kisses his reason for living.

I can see her love for me in every facet of her body. The way her eyes shimmer with their own inner light and laughter, as if perfect white stars live in those twin chocolate pools. The way the moonlight plays in her hair, giving those dark locks a sheen of silver. The relaxed posture of her body. The way her heart beats in her chest. The way her fingers rake across my back, beneath the heavy drape of red cape, not quite urging me back home, to our bedroom, but whispering promises of what's still to come when we return and reminding me of what we've already experienced. My arms around her waist, I hold her close. Chest to chest, I can feel the hammering of our hearts, beating so fiercely it's as if they believe that they, like our lips, can kiss, if only they beat with enough fervor.

She is the picture of perfection.

It makes my breath hitch in my throat to think that, of all of the men who populate this planet, that *I'm* the one she's chosen to spend her life with.

We're together.

After all we've recently been through to get to this point, it feels like I must be dreaming. How is it possible that the universe has finally, *finally*, given us a break? What made God decide that we'd passed enough tests, that our love was strong enough, that He stopped all the evil in the world for a few blessed hours so that Lois and I could pledge our love and lives to one another? I'm not even sure I want to know. All I want is to bask in this moment, this feeling, for the rest of my life. All I want is for this to never end — for it to be just Lois and I together, leaving the world and all its turmoil and problems behind. All I want is for us to never be apart ever again.

I do.

I chose her and she chose me. Not to love — I never had a choice in loving Lois or not. From the moment I saw her, I somehow instantly knew that she was the one for me. My soul-mate. Loving her was, and is, as mandatory as breathing for me. No. What I chosen was to include her in on my secret life, my super side, my alien heritage. She chose to forgive my deceit and accepted me for who I am. We chose to make a life together.

Together.

Never once, in my younger, lonelier days, did I ever imagine that “together” could feel so good. Sure, I had hoped to find love. I had hoped to make a real life for myself. I had hoped to find a home — to finally find a place that soothed all the intangible homesickness I felt for a place I'd never even been to. But I never dared to hope to find the life I have now. I never believed that Metropolis could exist for me — not the city itself, but the *feeling*, the rightness I feel living here. I could never have imagined that my dream job of reporting for a well-respected newspaper would come to such fruition — that I would find myself writing for one of the world's top publications and conducting my investigations along with one of the most

respected journalists in the country, if not the world.

And Lois.

Of all the women I'd dreamed up over the years, sadly sighing with a heavy, broken, lonely heart, not one came close to Lois. I never dared dream I'd find such perfection in one person. I never imagined that one woman could so wholly complete me. I never dared to pray that one woman could take away all my sorrows and hurts and make me feel so connected to the world. How could I have? I was a freak of nature, a force of terrifying powers, an outsider, someone who lived his whole life in half-truths and white lies. I was unworthy of finding someone like Lois.

And then, she came storming into my life when I least expected it. Suddenly, I knew who I'd been longing for, the other half of my soul, the one who would make my heart whole. In that instant, I didn't think of myself as worthy of her, but I did send up a silent prayer that I *might* be worthy of her. And like an answering echo deep in my heart, I knew that my destiny was at her side.

A friend.

A partner.

A spouse.

Now, here we float, free from the Earth, looking into our future together. Two lives made one by the words that we said and the vows that we swore. Two hearts made one, long before any rings were exchanged. Two souls entwined without the need for any official ceremony.

Husband.

Wife.

A family.

Hopefully, one day, a family that will include our children. Sons or daughters that will be the best parts of us merged into new, distinctly unique little people. The only genetic link I'll ever have in this world. Children born of two worlds and two noble heritages — that of Earth and Krypton. Young lives to guide, helping them to choose to better this planet. A legacy to leave behind once my time here in this mortal realm is done.

You know, it's funny. Lois has always referred to me as the eternal optimist. At first, it was said in a nearly derogatory way, back when I was nothing more than the unwanted, hack from Nowheresville partner that Perry had thrust upon her. Over time, it became a term of endearment. But the truth is this: while I was always more or less upbeat and usually quick to see the bright side of things, *Lois herself* was the reason for my overwhelming optimism. And she remains the reason why I look forward to whatever life throws at us next.

Because, together, we can handle it.

Together.

Just you and me.

Just us and the stars.

I never even really meant to take you up here. Not now. Not while you're still so tiny and fragile and new. But it happened, and I'm glad it did.

My baby.

You were never supposed to be, if Dr. Klein's tests were to be believed. Human and Kryptonian DNA isn't able to recombine for reproductive purposes, he told me, with eyes cast down to the floor, a hitch in his voice, and trembling hands. And I... I believed him at the time. What else could I do? I've always known that I was different. I've always known, since the time the globe relinquished the messages from Jor-El and Lara, my birth parents, your grandparents, that my alien genetics might render me sterile when paired with an Earth woman. So, loathe as I was to accept the inevitable from Dr. Klein, I believed him when he gave me the crushing news.

Not just crushing.

Devastating.

Part of me died that day. A deep piece of my soul blackened and withered as I saw my dreams of having a family turn to ash and blow away in the wind. I think part of your mother died too — a smaller piece, to be sure. She's always been so tenacious, so unwilling to accept what she's been told. She questions everything and fights back in every way that she knows how. She was the only reason why I was able to keep any spark of hope alive in my soul for the chance of having a child with her. I tried to keep a brave face for her, but I know she saw right through me. I know she's aware that she was a pinnacle of strength for me back then. I can only hope that I was able to lend her strength and courage as well.

And then, a miracle.

You.

A surprise announcement when Lois secretly took a home pregnancy test. The instant love we had for you from the first moment we knew you were on your way. The resurrection of those dead pieces of our souls. Tears of joy at that first ultrasound, to confirm that her pregnancy was viable. The elation of finding out that you were completely healthy. The life-changing moment when you emerged into the world and screamed at the unfairness of leaving the warm, dark home of your mother's womb — a cry of defiance that so perfectly mirrored your mother.

Blessed.

Okay, so it's a bit cliché. But that's the only word to describe how I feel.

Every moment is something I celebrate and cherish. Even moments like this one, in the small hours of the night, while you are screaming your lungs out. Colic is such a brutal thing. I would take on your agony a hundred fold if only I could take your pain away.

I took you from your crib and walked downstairs with you, hoping to give your mother a rest. She needs more sleep than I do. I fed you some of the milk she'd stored in bottles in the fridge, then burped and changed you. But you were in too much pain to sleep, so I walked you outside in the mild early summer air, giving us both a much-needed change of scenery. I would have pointed out the stars to you, but we don't get to see many from the ground, not even on our typically quiet block. Metropolis is a land of perpetual day, with all the streetlights and nightlife it boasts.

So, instead of showing you the far-flung planets and stars that I traveled past in order to reach Earth and your mother, I paced the tiny speck of land that we own. The cool, bedewed grass felt wonderful on my bare feet as I traversed the yard, alternately cooing and shushing you, hoping to lull you into the sleep you need. I rocked you and patted your back, hoping to off you some relief. I would have sang to you, but, trust me, you don't want me to. Rockets I can hold, but not a tune. Somehow, absently, at some point, I floated away from the ground and into the air above the house. I was so wrapped up in studying your perfect face, nestled amid the warm blankets swaddled around you, that I simply forgot to keep my abilities in check.

It's easy for me to keep the bulk of them firmly squashed down inside until I'm in need of them. Keeping control is second nature to me. Loosening the chains inside to let them out to assist me — anything from catching a criminal to destroying an asteroid, to chilling a bottle of champagne, takes effort and concentration. With the exception of one.

You see, it's easy for me to float when I don't intend to.

A lot of things can unintentionally make my feet leave the floor. Sometimes the depths of my slumber. Times of great stress. Times where I've been so overwhelmed by something beautiful — like the first time I ever saw your mother all dressed up at the White Orchid Ball. And quiet, blissfully content times, when my

heart is so full of light and life and love that it makes my body rise as it soars itself.

Times like tonight, when I've been so overcome with my love for you. My gratitude that I've been blessed with a child of my own. The humbleness I feel in having been chosen to be your father. The surrealism of having you in my arms after being told this would never be. The heady feeling of knowing that my dreams are all coming to pass — dreams of using my abilities as a man and superhero to help others, of having Lois as my wife, of raising a family with her.

I was not surprised to find myself looking upon the universe when I finally tore my eyes from your face. I've always liked this place — the peace it can bring when the world gets to be too much, when the demands on Superman threaten to break him. And maybe you like it here too, for after a few minutes, your crying ceased and your lids grew heavy with sleep as I rocked you from side to side. A few hiccups escaped you as you settled down — last reminders of how hard your sobbing had been — making me smile and threatening to make my heart burst with the love I have for you.

Together.

Just you and me.

Father and child.

Let's make a deal, okay? I won't tell your mother about tonight if you won't. She's so protective of you. I am too. And while I know that she trusts me and won't be alarmed by the fact that I took you up here — accidentally or not — she's been stressed over too much right now. The lack of sleep, the hardships of breastfeeding, finding time to pump milk so that I can take over some of the night feedings, the pressures she, and she alone, has placed upon herself to be the perfect mother — despite my constant assurances to her that she *already is* the perfect mother.

Oh, I'll tell her eventually that I've introduced you to my quiet, lonely little sanctuary up here beyond the confines of the world. Just not right now. For now, this is our little secret. But one day soon, it will be the three of us up here.

Together.

Together.

Forty wonderful years of wedded bliss.

Forty amazing years of sharing our lives — as crazy and weird as they might be — with each other.

Forty years of love and support.

Scratch that last one. We've had *more* than forty years of love and support. We've had that nearly since the moment we met. And for that, I am speechlessly thankful. I don't know what I would have done without Lois in it. I don't like to even entertain the idea of thinking about what my life would have been like without her. How dark. How lonely. How completely miserable, worse than any of the sad years I spent traversing the globe, looking for my home. How I'm not sure if Clark would have faded away and been lost to Superman.

Together.

Lois' love has given me more than I can say. When I try, the sheer enormity of what I feel, what I know she's changed in the world for me...it renders me mute. My prowess as a wordsmith — a shaper of words and phrases by nature and by professional choice — fails me. Part of the problem, I think, stems from the fact that the traditional words used for describing love and happiness all fall woefully short of what I feel in my heart, my soul, in every molecule of my being.

These last forty years have changed me. They've made me the happiest I've ever been. Oh, I've always made the best out of whatever situation I've found myself in. Every obscure little village I visited in my quest to find where I belonged had some beauty to it, some truly wonderful inhabitants. Every major city had some intriguing facet to it. Every time I stepped onto the

football field in high school and college, I got a rush of excitement and a wave of adrenaline that filled me almost to bursting. Every summer spent in the fields of my youth brings back memories of golden sunshine, bonding with my parents, working the soil so that it would yield nourishment.

But all of those times are tinged with sadness too, even if I do my best to push that to the side. Every village I landed in made me feel like an outsider as I scrambled to try and fit in as best I could. Every bustling city made me feel isolated, as if I were invisible in the midst of a great rushing sea of people that swirled around me. Every football game brought a strenuous, terrifying battle to keep firm control over my budding powers. Every summer spent in the farmlands I grew up in brought new and scary changes to my body as each year passed, even as far back as my early years, when I was just a toddler and my parents were discovering that I had not only an impressive memory but also the inability to be wounded by ordinary means. I knew, even then, that it should have put their minds at ease that I couldn't accidentally electrocute myself by sticking a fork in a socket, but it didn't. It put them on edge because, back then, we didn't understand *why* I was so different. Was there something medically wrong with me? Was it something that would alter or shorten my life? What would it mean for my future? How would we cover up my uniqueness?

I always felt so guilty, every time some new ability would manifest, turning our lives upside down. I always felt bad making my parents scramble to find new ways to help me and protect me. I always felt so afraid of my own self — never trusting myself not to do something that would endanger others...or myself. That was always my greatest fear. That somehow, I wouldn't be careful enough and that I would cause injury to someone, or that I would do something that would out myself as someone very different from the rest of humanity. One time, when I was a senior in high school, I accidentally crashed into one of my teammates on the football field. We were both going for the ball, both of us too occupied with the opposing players who were also rushing for the ball, to see each other. Four of us reached the ball at the same time and we collided. Alan broke his arm in two places. The doctor said that it was the way he hit the ground, but I blamed myself, and for weeks, I barely slept, my mind filled with phantom nightmares of government officials in lab coats finding out that I wasn't human and taking me away to dissect me. To this day, I still don't believe Alan's injury was the result of hitting the ground at a weird angle.

But Lois changed everything for me.

Suddenly, Metropolis was my home. Suddenly, I had a reason to stay in one place. Suddenly, I no longer felt like the drifting, shiftless alien I once was. Suddenly, my strange abilities were something to celebrate and make known to the world, albeit in an altered form, not hidden away.

With Lois' help, I gave birth to Superman.

She gave me the freedom and the desire to be who I truly was. Even in the beginning, when I had to lie and pretend to be two separate men, I could always truly be myself around her. I didn't have to hold back on teasing her — good-naturedly, of course — or in opening up to her about my family, my life, my goals, even some of my fears. As Superman, I didn't have to pretend to be anything more than a powerful alien being who has a soft heart and a gentle nature, even if he *does* have to get tough with criminals.

And once she knew my secret, that the two men were one and the same, I stopped hiding from her completely. It was one of the best days of my entire life. No more lying. No more hiding. No more disappointing the woman I loved when I had to suddenly vanish without an excuse. Instead, we could finally tackle the logistical problems Superman could sometimes bring about. I could trust her to cover for me when it was needed. I could trust

her to know what she needed to do if — and when! — I got into trouble. More than once, she saved my life.

Together.

Together, we've built a life. We have the strongest marriage anyone could hope for. We still have the roaring passion and love for each other that we had as newlyweds. We've tackled problems far too big for either of us to handle alone. We've brought children into this world, and raised them to be upstanding citizens of this planet. They've even — in recent years, taken up the cape, spreading the mission Superman began — to better this world, to heal hurts, to bring justice, to protect and serve those who cannot do so for themselves.

Together, we've brought justice to so many. Superman aside, the reporting team of Lane and Kent has seen more criminals taken off the streets that even *I* can remember. No crime, no injustice of any kind has been too big or too small for us. From the couple illegally denied the ability to rent an apartment, to child abductions, to taking down multibillion dollar corporations with unsavory sides to them and links to the criminal element, nothing has ever made us balk. We've always just dove right in, eager to see justice served. We never questioned if we *could* do it, we always just knew that we *would*, because there's nothing the two of us can't accomplish.

Now, here we are, floating together here in what once was my little get-away from the world — literally speaking — but has long since been *our* get-away. The stars and planets that were once witnesses to my despair and heartache have known mostly happiness and hopefulness since I met Lois. Oh, I've still fled to this place sometimes to clear my head or to be alone with my solitary burden of pain — sometimes over mistakes I've made, sometimes over the pressure of being Superman, sometimes over things outside of my control. But mainly, Lois and I have come to this place together for stolen moments away from everything and everyone, when we can take a few minutes just to appreciate each other and collect ourselves.

Sometimes, Lois and I toss aside the privacy of even this place. There have been many times when our children have accompanied us to this place. Sometimes, it's been done in order to discuss important matters in the utmost confidence, with no fear that the ever-changing, fast paced world of technology doesn't spy on us either accidentally or intentionally. And sometimes, we've all come up here just to bask in the wonder of the universe and experience the calming sensation of knowing how infinitely small we all are in the grand scheme of things. Our children have always likened these leisurely flights to a normal family's after-dinner walks around the neighborhood.

But now, on this fortieth anniversary, it's just Lois and me against the vastness of the universe. A quiet moment to just be with each other and remember all the good times we've had along the journey to make it this long together. A peaceful moment to wonder what our future will bring.

We've changed, Lois and I. We've both felt the effects of aging. We both have silver in our hair now — experience highlights, as Lois fondly calls them, now that she's given up on trying to dye them away. Arthritis has attacked Lois' joints, especially when rain is near, which slows her movements and makes her ache. She's dependent on glasses to see now that her eyes have weakened, even if they haven't lost their spark. As for me, well, I've had to retire from my role as Superman, hanging up the cape for good, leaving the world in the more-than-capable hands of my children. I don't like having to sit back and watch — I am, after all, a man of action, but I've unfortunately become a bit less "super" with each passing year — a result, I believe, of having given up a part of myself way back in the day when I had to save Jimmy's life in that aging machine. If this is the price I have to pay for saving my "brother's" life, then I am happy to so. Seeing him alive and well, a father of two and editor of *The Daily*

Planet now that Perry is gone, is worth every dimming ability.

Lois argues that I've served the world far longer than I ever needed to. She tells me that the world has no right to make demands on me. She reminds me that I chose to provide a service and that I shouldn't feel guilty about stepping back and enjoying my remaining years.

And, of course, she's right.

Just because I have loved being Superman doesn't mean that I'm not tired. Physically tired and mentally tired. I never imagined, back in my twenties, how demanding being Superman would be. The exposure to Kryptonite. The constantly staying two steps ahead of those who would seek to destroy me and/or my loved ones. The ever-present knots of worry as I responded to disaster after disaster, hoping and praying that every split-second decision I needed to make would be the right one. And now, with the explosion of technology — phones that record video, computers that fit in pockets, and all the rest — the never-ending stress of trying to keep my identity secure.

Still, I miss it. All of it. The boots. The cape. The tight fit of the suit. The thrill of making an impossible rescue. The pride I felt inside when delivering criminals to the police. But I have something better now. Uninterrupted time with the woman I love.

Together.

Dancing. The movies. Theater shows. Leisurely walks. Vacations. Quiet nights at home.

All things once so rare. All things that are now so common. And even more precious because they have *become* our new normal. Spending time with Lois is what I love most in this life. Being with her and our children. And, of course, *their* children. In those moments when we can all be together, my heart is complete.

Together.

Today.

Tomorrow.

Always.

Together.

What I wouldn't give to be together again.

I miss you, Lois.

It's been far too long since I last looked upon your face in life, not from my still-crisp memories. Too long since I heard your voice outside of videos on TV and echoes inside my own head. Too long since my arms last held you, since my lips last tasted yours, though I can remember perfectly well how you felt, how you tasted. Too long since I was able to make love to you.

Death is cruel, Lois. Cruel to those who waste away waiting for it to claim them. And crueler still to those who can do nothing to stave off its advance on a loved one. Unbearable for those left behind to mourn. And I have mourned you, every day since you left this world, and for months prior, when death lurked in the shadowy corners, watching your every move.

But as unmoving and patient as death was, so was I. In all that time, I was by your side. We talked of the past — adventures we'd had, moments we shared, times we'd laughed and cried together. I held your hand, you held my heart. And when you'd tire I'd watch you sleep, the lines of pain easing as the medication would kick in, giving you back a pale imitation of the youth and vitality you once had, even as your body grew weaker by the day. Your mind remained sharp as ever, as did your wit and the sparkle in your eyes — the same sparkle I'd fallen in love with all those years ago.

Then, in an instant, you were gone.

There in one heartbeat.

Gone in the next.

For the first time in my life, I was separated from you by a barrier that even I could not cross. You'd gone where I could not follow. Not then. There were still those who needed me here. Our

children. Our grandchildren. The great-grandchildren you never got to meet. Jimmy and his family. Our nieces and nephews, especially once Lucy passed on.

That's been the hardest part about me lingering here, Lois. I've had to watch so many people age, sicken, and die. I've known more loss than I ever thought I would. I guess it's not so different than the experience of untold numbers of regular humans. After all, some of us have to live while others have to die. But I never wanted to live my life without you, Lois. I would have gladly died the day you did. Part of me wishes that I would have. It's been hard, seeing each year out and ushering each new one in, knowing that it's only putting me further and further from the last time we were together.

Together.

It won't be much longer now, Lois.

I'm dying.

I feel it in my bones. I know it in my heart. My life is drawing to a close. Make no mistake about it, I'm afraid. Afraid of suffering. Afraid of death. I think it's only natural to have those fears. But, I welcome it too. I'm tired, Lois. I'm grateful for each new day that dawns that I get to see, but, at the same time, it's a burden just to make it through to the night. My powers are all but gone now — I know in my soul that this is the last time I'll be able to make it up here to this silent, starry refuge. It's so hard to fly now, to find the energy to raise myself off the ground, so I rarely do it. I reserve it for moments like this, when I need to be up here, alone with my memories.

It's funny, Lois.

There was a time in my life when this place was a symbol of my alien self. A physical manifestation of how disconnected I felt from my adopted home world. A refuge from everything, where I could be as alone as I felt, to brood on all the things that were weighing my heart down.

But now?

Now, this place, while still the perfect hideaway from the world, is one of the places where I feel the closest to you. It's as if, on some level, I feel like the higher into the sky I rise, the closer I become to the intangible, otherworldly realm of bliss. It's as though some part of me believes that I can get closer to Heaven this way, and, in turn, closer to you. So I come here, and I reminisce about bygone years when you walked this Earth and all I had to do was reach out and I could touch you.

My heart has been broken since the moment your heart stopped beating. My world shattered. I won't pretend that there haven't been days, weeks, months of good times since then, when I've been around our family. But every day, every happy moment, has been tinged with sadness. I'll think to myself, "I wish Lois could see this," or "Lois would have gotten such a kick out of that." And my heart will bleed anew.

I miss you, Lois.

So I come here, to this alien landscape, to look upon faraway worlds and brilliant pinpricks of starlight and feel close to you. Because of you, Lois, this unearthly space is no longer associated with my loneliness. When I come here, I remember all the times you and I came here together. All the private kisses stolen away where no one could see. The times we made love here. The quiet conversations we had — both spoken and unspoken, with only the moon and stars to bear witness. All the times we came here and you gave me your reassurances that you'd be by my side forever. All of the reaffirmations of our love. All of the moments we spent here with our family, and the way this place used to soothe even the most upset, colicky infant.

Together.

You took away my hurt. You vanquished my inner pain. You obliterated my loneliness. You gave me a reason to believe in love. You gave me a million reasons to continue on as Superman, when it seemed so hard to want to pull on the suit, when it felt

like all of the hero's efforts counted for nothing. You destroyed the sadness that had once ruled my life and filled me with joy and hope.

Together.

I'm old, Lois. I used to wonder how long I would live. Did my Kryptonian DNA make me invulnerable to age and death? Would some villain finally succeed in murdering me with a stolen piece of radioactive green space rock? But I know now that I am not invulnerable to the effects of time. It doesn't have to be Kryptonite that whittles my life away.

And I am glad.

For, soon, Lois, I will be with you. Soon, I will be able to follow you to where you have gone. Soon, we will be reunited once more. Soon, my soul will meet yours and become complete again.

Together, for all eternity.

THE END