

The Gift of Words

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Rated G

Submitted April 2011

Summary: It's Lois's birthday — and everyone has forgotten. Or have they? A story set in season two.

A/N — This little fic was written to celebrate Lynn S. M.'s birthday. My grateful thanks to IolantheAlias and Bob (bobbart) who betaed this with very little notice. Thanks also to Lynn for helping prepare this for the archive and Stopquidont for being the GE.

The characters are not mine.

Lois Lane stared at the two envelopes in her hand. This was a good year — *both* of her parents had remembered her birthday.

Not that she actually needed to open the envelopes to know what they contained.

Her mother's card would be dripping with mawkish sentiments about mother-daughter relationships — sentiments that bore absolutely no resemblance to the troubled bond between Ellen Lane and her elder daughter.

However, at least it would be in her mother's handwriting.

The card from her father would have been written — and chosen — by his secretary. Lois had never met any of his secretaries — although she could track the gradual decline in age and intellect by the steadily eroding suitability of the birthday cards she received.

Last year's card had clearly been designed for — and by — an airheaded teenager.

With a long sigh that threatened to disintegrate into a sob, Lois hurled both envelopes at her counter. One hit low and nose-dived to the floor. The other skimmed across the counter, cannoned into the cupboard door on the other side, and dropped out of sight.

The urge to dissolve into tears was strong.

Not one person had even wished her a happy birthday.

Not one.

Perry usually remembered, but he was out of town at an editors' conference. Jimmy couldn't be relied upon to remember anything that didn't directly affect him. And Clark ...

Last year, Clark hadn't known it was her birthday. Then, the cake Perry ordered had arrived in the newsroom, and everyone had gathered around to sing "Happy Birthday." As Lois cut the cake, Clark had unobtrusively slipped away — not that that was unusual.

But he'd been back almost before the frosting had solidified on the knife.

With a neatly wrapped gift.

He'd given it to her, saying, "I often walk past this in the store window. It always makes me think of you."

She'd opened it — curious, and not completely able to quell her fears that this would be a joke that turned on her. Her qualms had been unfounded. Pushing back the wrapping had revealed a little desk plaque that read: "Words are my toys ... but sometimes they just won't play nice."

It was the accompanying picture that had captured and held Lois's attention. A cute dark-haired girl stood with her hands on her hips as she regarded — with abject frustration — her just-tumbled-down tower of letter blocks.

Yet, despite being grumpy and probably within a heartbeat of losing her cool, the little girl had an endearing naturalness that

made you want to take her into your arms and shower her with understanding.

This reminded Clark of her, Lois?

Her thanks had been a little brusque — due entirely to the lump that had inconveniently deposited itself in her throat.

But that had been last year.

Last year ... before Clark had told her he was in love with her.

Last year ... before she had told Clark she loved him — but only as a friend.

Last year ... before she had agreed to marry Lex Luthor — only to discover he was a deceitful, cold-blooded criminal.

Last year ... before Clark had retracted his declaration of love, explaining it away as a ruse to deter her from marrying Luthor.

Last year ... before she had known that the man she truly loved sat just across from her in the newsroom ... her partner ... her best friend.

So much had changed since last year.

They had agreed to be friends — agreed that was what they both wanted.

But Lois had lied.

She wanted so much more than friendship.

Clark was, above all, a man of his word. Whatever his feelings for her — and Lois had never fully accepted the ruse story — he had packed them away so securely that there had been nothing in his actions or words to even hint at their existence. By now, they had probably suffocated from the lack of light, and air, and hope.

A tear squeezed from the corner of Lois's eye and sped down the slope of her cheek.

She fiercely wiped it away. She would *not* cry. She would *not* sink into a puddle of self-pity.

Just because she was alone.

And it was her birthday.

And not even the man she loved had remembered.

It took more than that to reduce Lois Lane to tears.

If only she'd known. If only she'd discerned the state of her heart before it was too late. If only, when Clark had said, "I have been in love with you for a long time," ... if only she'd responded with something that — instead of eliciting that look of utter devastation — had induced his sensational smile to bubble over with joy.

Maybe ... he might have even kissed her — right there, in the park.

And ... tonight ... she wouldn't be alone. She'd be with Clark. And he would definitely kiss her.

Lois shook her head, sweeping away the piles of regret. She would *not* think about things that couldn't be.

She would ... she would ... she would have a long, hot bath. She would soak in silky suds, relax, and think about ... nothing at all.

Ten minutes later, Lois slid into the luxuriously deep water. She laid back and groaned with pleasure — mostly to convince herself that she really was going to enjoy this.

The phone shrilled through the silence, and Lois groaned again.

Someone had impeccable timing.

She should ignore it.

But what if it were someone — *anyone* — who'd remembered her birthday?

Lois hauled herself from the water and wrapped a fluffy white towel around her dripping body. "Lois Lane," she said into the phone.

"Lois, it's Clark."

Clark!

A sliver of longing oozed out of its tightly closed compartment in her heart and spread swiftly through her body. "What's up?" she asked crisply.

“Nothing,” he said, sounding a bit defensive. “Uh, are you busy?”

“Busy? No, she was alone and with not one thing to do. “Not really. What are you suggesting?” she asked, knowing that whatever he suggested, she was going to grasp it like a drowning woman grasps a floating plank.

“Perhaps I could come over ... Bring some Chinese takeout.”

Lois felt her excitement well up inside her. Since her disastrous almost-wedding, she and Clark had done nothing that didn't fit securely under the heading of 'work'. “That would be great,” she said. “Should I get a movie?”

“I thought we could play a game,” Clark said.

“A game?”

“Scrabble.”

Scrabble? Scrabble was about the least romantic activity she could think of, but Lois squashed her budding disappointment and decided that Scrabble with Clark was preferable to soaking in a tub — an activity that, if she were honest, had managed to become boring in the snatch of time between getting in and being interrupted by the phone. “That sounds great,” she said. “Do you have the game?”

“Yeah. I'll bring it over.”

“OK. I'll see you in half an hour.”

Clark laughed, and Lois thought she detected a trace of nervousness. “I've already ordered the takeout,” he admitted. “I can be there in fifteen.”

“See you then.” Lois slammed down the phone and scurried to the shower to rinse off the suds.

Thanks to a well-developed ability to multi-task, Lois was dressed — with her hair done, her makeup perfect, and a dab of her best perfume behind her knee — when her doorbell sounded.

After a final check in the mirror, she hurried to release the series of locks and then opened her door.

Clark was there — dressed in jeans and a blue check shirt.

He looked so mind-numbingly good.

“Come on in,” Lois said, trying not to sound breathless ... trying to sound like this meant nothing more to her than a friend dropping around for a casual evening.

“Thanks,” he said. He placed the Scrabble box on the counter, and they took plates and cutlery to her couch.

“What did you get?” Lois asked.

“Shrimp dumplings and chicken rice noodles.”

“Yum,” Lois said. “I love shrimp dumplings.”

Clark paused from his task of opening the boxes. “I know,” he said quietly.

Her heart began to thump wildly. His voice was so incredibly sexy when he spoke like that — low, and deep, and laden with sincerity. Memories rolled through her mind like crashing waves. When Clark had said, “I have been in love with you for a long time.” Lois pushed away the mountain of self-reproach. That moment had gone. She needed to accept that.

But Clark was here now — and although it seemed he hadn't remembered it was her birthday, she was determined to enjoy the unexpected turn of events.

In the time it took to dish out the food, she had pacified her heart and calmed her mind. She would accept this for what it was — a pleasant evening with a friend.

The first taste of her dumpling brought back a shoal of memories. Her and Clark ... right at the beginning ... eating Chinese takeout ... in the otherwise deserted newsroom.

What was it she had said? Don't fall for me, farmboy.

But he had ... maybe.

And she had missed her opportunity.

And now, if she had her time again, what would she say? *Do* fall for me, farmboy — because I have fallen for you, and my heart is breaking because we aren't together.

“You're very quiet,” Clark commented.

Lois shot him a smile that she hoped looked genuine.

“Testament to the great food,” she said.

“Did you have a good day?”

Lois eyed him suspiciously. “Why do you ask?” she demanded.

He held up one hand in mock surrender. “Just a question,” he said with a smile.

He had the best smile. So expressive. And always warm enough to melt her heart. “Yeah, I had a good day,” Lois lied.

“Good,” Clark said. “You won't be too irascible when I beat you at Scrabble.”

“Ha!” Lois said with derision. “Don't you remember the honeymoon suite? I won *every* game.”

“You did,” he said mildly.

He said nothing else, and Lois wondered if it were possible that he was also thinking about that kiss. On the park bench, he'd said he'd been in love with her for a 'long' time. Had he been in love with her when he'd gently thrown her onto the bed, draped his body over hers, and — despite it supposedly being nothing more than a safeguard for their cover — indelibly imprinted the memory of him onto her lips?

Lois subdued that most powerful of memories and looked at Clark. The food *was* great, but even so, he seemed unusually quiet.

Was this more than a simple meal and a game of Scrabble between friends?

Had he planned something else?

Did he have something he wanted to tell her?

What?

Her mind flooded with possibilities — each one more awful than the last.

He didn't want to be her partner anymore.

He was leaving Metropolis.

He was in love with someone else.

“How was your day?” Lois asked. “You weren't in the office much.”

“No. Perry had lined up a touchy-feely piece for me, and then I stumbled over a Superman rescue.”

“And you stayed long enough to interview him afterwards?”

“I got a few quotes for my story.”

She didn't want to talk about work, and the silence threatened again. Lois decided to deny it a foothold. “Was there any particular reason you came over?” she asked.

“No,” Clark said too quickly. Before she could probe further, he stood and moved into her kitchen. He washed his hands and then came back to collect her plate. “Ready to be beaten?” he said.

“In your dreams,” Lois said, smiling whole-heartedly for the first time that day.

“You set up the board,” Clark said. “And I'll clear away the food.”

Soon, they were sitting on cushions on the floor — the board between them, the spare tiles scattered and upside-down in the box lid, and both studying their first rack of letters.

Lois had won the right to go first. Her letters weren't overly helpful — M, K, L, R, E, E, Y.

While she was still trying to assemble the best possible word, Clark turned the board ninety degrees — so instead of it being side-on to both of them, it was facing her. She glanced up from her letters with a questioning look.

“I don't want you to have any excuses when I beat you,” Clark explained.

“You want excuses for when I beat you?” she said.

He smiled. “Just put down your first word,” he said.

MEEKLY — Lois spelled out.

Clark laughed aloud. “That is *not* a word I associate with

you,” he said.

“You should,” Lois said. “It scored me thirty-six points. Good luck catching up, farmboy.”

The endearment had slipped out unintentionally, and they both stopped as their eyes locked. Lois’s breath became jammed as her throat seized. She jerked her eyes away from the magnetism of Clark’s deep brown ones and gave her complete concentration to the arduous task of selecting six new tiles.

“Your turn,” she said.

“I know.”

“Surely you’re not going to concede already?”

Clark looked up and smiled softly at her. “Shush,” he said. “I’m thinking.”

Half a minute later, Clark arranged three tiles on the board. He put in FIRE, using her first E. “Fourteen.”

Lois wrote his score next to hers and grinned at him. “You are twenty-two points down,” she said.

“Your turn.”

Lois scrutinised her letters — R, P, P, I, W, A, E. She picked up most of them and made the word KIPPER. “Sixteen points,” she said.

“Good word,” Clark said. Without any thinking time, he loosed a fistful of tiles on the board and, off the second P in KIPPER, spelled out PASSION.

Lois’s heart jumped, and her eyes leapt to his face. He smiled at her, but it was a smile devoid of the satisfaction or triumph that she’d expected. “How many?” she asked.

“Eighteen,” he said. “Double word score.”

“Good thing for me that you couldn’t get your final letter in there,” Lois said as she wrote down his score. “I’m twenty points ahead.”

So rapid had been Clark’s response that Lois hadn’t yet replaced her tiles. She picked up five tiles and now had W, A, J, S, N, O, A. She wanted time to think about how to take best advantage of the high-scoring J, so she put her S in front of KIPPER. “Sixteen,” she said. She totalled her score. “I’m more than double you,” she announced.

“You’ve had one extra turn,” Clark said. He picked up four tiles and formed HEART around the R of SKIPPER. The H just missed a double word score. “Eight.”

“Eight isn’t going to help you make up lost ground,” Lois said.

“It was the best I could do,” Clark said, a tinge of defensiveness in his tone.

Lois added up his score. “You’re twenty-eight behind,” she informed him. She contemplated him. “Are you fully committed to winning this game?” she asked.

He met her eyes and dwelled there for a moment that seemed to stretch forever. “Totally committed,” he said.

Unable to think of a response, Lois dropped her gaze to her rack. She stared at the letters, but her mind was embroiled in the man on the other side of the board. What was Clark doing? *Did* he know it was her birthday and was deliberately allowing her the victory? Could he really believe that she would enjoy defeating someone who hadn’t even tried? Lois felt a little spurt of annoyance. She tried to study him while still keeping her eyes fixed on her tiles. He was staring at his rack, looking completely engrossed in finding a word that would help him close the gap between them.

Thankfully, she had an obvious move. From the T in HEART, she made TOY, with the Y landing on the Triple Word Score. “Eighteen,” she said.

“Nice,” Clark said, though his eyes quickly returned to his own letters.

“You need a good word, Kent,” Lois said. “You need to score at least twenty if you want to have any chance at all.”

“I’m hoping for a lot more than that,” he said absently, his

eyes still fastened on his letters.

There was silence as he thought.

A minute crawled by.

Then another thirty seconds. “Do you need to pass?” Lois pressed.

“No,” Clark said. “I have exactly the right words.” He glanced up at her. “Words I have wanted to use for a long time.”

Something in his voice caught at her heart. He picked up every tile from his rack and cupped them in the palm of his left hand. Then, to the left of the Y in TOY, he laid an I.

Followed by L.

And then O.

V.

E.

After the Y, he placed OU and then looked straight at her, awaiting her response. There was no expression on his face, but quivering trepidation clouded his eyes.

Lois swallowed, her heart pounding, her skin tingling. “That’s ...” Her voice ground to a croak. “That’s not a word,” she said, trying to mount a challenge, yet managing only the mildest of protests.

“It’s the truth,” Clark stated quietly, his eyes boring deeply into hers and filling her with an effervescent wonderment she didn’t dare believe.

“It has never stopped being the truth.”

“I ... I thought you said ... you wanted to be friends.”

“I lied.”

“Why?”

“Because I was scared of losing you completely,” he said. “I thought I’d rather be friends than risk that.”

“What changed?”

The set of his mouth melted enough to allow a suggestion of his smile. “Nothing,” he said. “Nothing really. You’re still the ...”

“The what?”

“The only woman my heart wants.”

With hands that shook, Lois took the Scrabble board and turned it a half rotation. “Right back at you, farmboy,” she said.

His eyes yo-yoed from the board and into her face. “Lois?” he said. His throat jumped. “Lois ... Is there ...?”

“Do you remember what you said to me in the park?”

He nodded.

“Do you remember what I said to you?”

He nodded again, but this time the lingering pain lined his face.

“What you said ... Is that still true?” Lois asked.

“I think it will be true every day of my life.”

“What I said ... It’s not true anymore.” Lois stifled a sob. “I don’t think it was true then, but I didn’t know.”

Hope engulfed the remaining pain on his face. “What is the truth?” he asked in a strangled voice.

“That I have been in love with you for a very long time.”

Clark started to say her name, but before he’d uttered the first syllable, Lois leant across the board, put her hands on his knees, and lowered her mouth onto his mouth.

He responded instantly. His lips plied hers with delicious dexterity. His mouth enraptured her — not just with physical touch but also with a billowing surge of emotion that inundated every part of her. His hands curved around her ribs, steadying her as his mouth continued to speak eloquently of his love, and his longing, and his delight in her.

When she backed away, the tiles were askew — the words they had formed were no longer legible.

“My message has gone,” Clark said.

“No, it hasn’t,” Lois corrected. “It is written on my heart — where it can’t be scattered or erased.”

He smiled — his full, expressive smile that so clearly communicated the richness of his joy. “Happy birthday,” he said.

“I love you, Lois.”

So he *did* know. “This has been the best birthday of my life,” she said.

“Shrimp dumplings and Scrabble?”

Lois shook her head. “No. Your gift ... your words ... your willingness to put your heart on the line ... again.”

“I couldn’t hide my feelings any longer,” Clark said. “I couldn’t let you go on believing that I only wanted to be friends.”

In the midst of her elation, a question nagged for an answer.

“Tell me something,” Lois said.

“I’ll tell you everything,” Clark said solemnly. “No more secrets. I promise.”

“How did you work it so you got *exactly* the tiles you needed? How did you know I would give you a Y?”

“Well,” he said, taking a big breath. “That’s a very long story.”

THE END