

Little Boy Blue

By Lynn S. M. <lois_and_clark_fan_at_verizon.net
(Replace _at_ with @)>

Rated: G

Submitted: February 2011

Summary: Clark finds it a super-challenge to balance the responsibilities of being a super-hero and being a father.

Will his relationship with his son survive the strain?

Disclaimers appear after the story. My thanks, as always, to Female Hawk, beta reader par excellence.

2000

“OK, you may go in now,” Lois told her son. Benjamin had been jumping up and down with excitement while Lois had put the meal they had prepared together on the breakfast tray, along with a vase containing a single red rose. She picked up the tray and followed Benjamin into the master bedroom.

By the time she entered the room, Ben had already swung open the door and pounced on his father, who had been feigning sleep all this time. “Happy Father’s Day, Daddy! Mommy and me made breakfast for you! I made the toast and cracked the eggs!”

Clark sat up so that Lois could put the tray down over his thighs. She saw him take in the sight of slightly burnt toast and scrambled eggs complete with bits of egg shell. She had briefly contemplated trying to remove the shards while she was stirring the eggs, but Ben had been watching her closely, and she didn’t want to hurt his feelings. Besides, she figured any man who can eat bomb shells -- containing live bombs -- to no ill effect could certainly put up with a few egg shells for a good cause.

“Thanks, kiddo! This looks great!” Clark’s eyes twinkled, and he ventured a glance at Lois. “You cook even better than your Mom!” Actually, Lois’ cooking had improved over the years, but their long-standing joke remained. His gentle teasing of her was just another way he expressed his love. Normally, she would have provided an equally-loving, but seemingly acerbic, retort; but under the circumstances, she settled for giving him a mock-glare over their son’s back.

Clark dug into his breakfast with apparent relish. When he was finished, Ben jumped down from the bed. “I’ve got something for you, Daddy. A present! Mommy and I went to the store, and I picked it out all by myself!” He ran out of the room and was back a minute later with a small package which he had obviously “helped” wrap. By the time he had returned, Clark had moved the tray to the side of the bed.

Clark opened the package and raised the lid of a small cardboard box. He lifted out a coffee mug on which was the phrase, “World’s Best Dad.”

“Wow! That’s terrific! You know what? I’ll drink my first cup of coffee from it every morning. What a wonderful way to start the day. Thanks, sport! It’s perfect!” Clark leaned over the side of the bed to give his son a hug.

2004

Clark settled down next to Lois to await the start of the game. Ben had played Tee Ball for the past couple of years -- and he had quite a natural talent for the sport, but this was the first time he would be playing a *real* baseball game, and his son was both excited and nervous about the prospect. He had been chattering away eagerly about it the whole trip over to the field.

In the bleacher ahead of them, a woman turned to her husband. “Honestly, Joe,” she complained, “I don’t know why I had to come here, too. You’re here for Jerry, already. I *hate* sports. Jerry knows I love him, so why do I have to be stuck wasting my afternoon here, too?”

“Come on, Margaret, it won’t be so bad. It’s only for a couple of hours, and it really will mean the world to him. He wants his Mom to be here, too; not just his Dad.”

Margaret heaved a melodramatic sigh. “Well, I’m stuck here now, but I am *not* just going to be bored silly for the whole afternoon. She rummaged through her copious purse and retrieved a small radio, put the earpiece in her left ear, and said, “At least I can listen to some music.”

Clark and Lois exchanged a glance, shared a smile, and settled back as the game began. Clark raised their clasped hands to kiss the back of Lois’ hand.

Soon it was Ben’s first time up to bat. Clark shouted out an encouragement to his son.

The ball approached Ben who, in his eagerness, swung the bat a moment too soon.

“Steerike one!”

As Ben took a moment to change his grip on the bat, Clark heard something on Margaret’s radio. He groaned, “Not now,” and then leaned over to whisper to Lois, “Bad earthquake in the Philippines,” before leaving the bleachers to find a quiet place to change into Superman. As he ran out of the stadium, he heard the crowd go wild.

“Mom, where was Dad? I looked up to the bleachers after I ran home, and he wasn’t there! He missed my first ever home run!”

Lois’ heart went out to her son. “Oh, honey, he wanted to be here for you, but he had to go off to work. How about you tell him all about it when he gets home?”

Ben remained slumped down. “Why does he always have to go to work? He said he’d be here. Why did he have to leave just as I was stepping up to bat?”

“Your father has responsibilities. He didn’t want to leave, but he had to. I know you’re disappointed he wasn’t here. He’ll be disappointed, too, when he hears that he missed your first home run. But sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to do. That’s just life.”

“But you never have to leave for work in the middle of dinner or a board game or ... or ...” He was obviously struggling not to cry. “... or my first ever baseball game. You’re both reporters; so if you can stay with me, why can’t he?”

Lois didn’t know what to say, since the family secret wasn’t hers to reveal. “You’ll have to ask him that later. In the meantime, how about we go to the Dairy Freeze to celebrate your team’s victory?”

Ben dejectedly agreed.

Lois had stayed up to await Clark’s return. He hadn’t gotten back until late that evening. She waited until after he had showered and changed into his pajamas to mention what had been bothering her all day.

“You missed Ben’s first home run. He had looked up from home plate and realized you were gone. He’s taking it really hard. He cried himself to sleep tonight.” She was pleased that she had been able to speak calmly and without any accusation in her tone.

Even so, Clark wilted at her speech. “I wish I could have been there. But those people in the Philippines needed me. That quake had endangered thousands of people.”

Lois put her hand on her husband’s arm. “Honey, *I* know you had a good reason for your absence, but *Ben* doesn’t know that. I used our usual excuse about your having to go to work, but he was still disappointed. He wanted to know why you always have to go to work at odd times when I don’t.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing, really. What could I tell him? I just said to speak with you about it.”

Clark nodded. “Thanks.”

Lois took a deep breath and then exhaled. “I think it’s time that you sat him down and had ‘The Talk’. He’s shown he can keep little secrets, and I think he needs to know our family secret before your frequent absences drive a wedge between the two of you.”

Clark nodded. “I’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

Clark approached Ben as soon as his son had stepped out of the bathroom the following morning.

“Hey there, sport. I’m so sorry I missed your first home run.”

“Why weren’t you there? You said you would watch the game, and you didn’t! You lied to me! Why?”

“I really am sorry, Ben. I had wanted to be there for you. You have no idea how hard it was for me to leave, and I know you must feel terribly hurt and angry with me right now. And I don’t blame you. If I were you, I’d feel the same way. But I do have a good reason. Could we sit down and talk about it?”

“Kay.”

They went into Ben’s room and sat down on the side of his bed.

Although Clark had known for years that they would have to have this discussion someday, he still wasn’t sure quite how to approach it.

“Ben, suppose you could save someone’s life. Would you do it?”

“Huh? What does that have to do with your missing my ball game?”

“Please, Ben. Just humor me. Would you save someone’s life if you could?”

“Sure!”

“What if to save that person you had to miss something that meant a lot to you and to your mom and me? Something like a very important ball game? Would you still save the other person’s life?”

Ben only had to think a moment before answering. “Yeah. I would. I mean, I wouldn’t want to miss the game, but if I could save someone’s life -- yeah, I’d do it.”

“Good. I’m proud of you! And that’s the decision I made yesterday. I had to leave the ballgame to save people’s lives.”

When Ben didn’t answer except with a confused expression, Clark continued. “You see, when I go off suddenly, I’m not really going to work -- at least, not to work at The Planet. You’re old enough now to know what I really do.

“When I run off, it’s to help save people’s lives. You see, son, I’m Superman.”

Ben scowled. “Come off it, Dad! I stopped believing in Santa Claus a couple years ago, and now you expect me to believe *you* are Superman? Give me a break! “

Clark stood up and spin-changed into his Suit. He then levitated a few feet above the floor. He settled back onto the bed and raised an eyebrow questioningly at Ben.

Ben’s eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. It took him a few minutes to recover the power of speech, and even then, he could only stutter, “Wow! Oh, wow! You really *are* Superman! My Dad is Superman!!! Wait till I tell Bobby!”

Clark nixed that idea immediately. “Ben, this is a family secret; you can tell *no one* about it -- not even Bobby. That’s why we waited this long to tell you; we wanted to make sure you could keep a secret first. If you tell anyone, they could tell other people, and eventually the bad guys could find out. If they do, they could capture you or Mom to try to make me do bad things for them. You and Mom could get hurt. I know how big the secret is, and how much you’ll be tempted to tell your friends, but for your own safety, you must *never, ever* tell *anyone*. Do you understand?”

Ben nodded. “So, if you’re Superman, you can fly, right? Can you teach me to fly, too?”

Clark smiled. “I can’t teach you to fly, but someday you might be able to fly on your own. I started flying when I was in high school. Maybe you will, too. But I tell you what, kiddo. How about, after it gets dark tonight, you get dressed all in black and I’ll take you flying?”

Ben’s eyes lit up. “Could we? Oh boy!”

2007

Lois sat beside Clark while they watched the apricot made of light bulbs descend from the top of the LexCorp tower. When it reached the pavement, they kissed.

“Happy New Year!”

“So, Clark, are you making any new year’s resolutions?”

“Uh huh. I’m resolving to cut my super-work down to the bare minimum and to spend more time with you and Ben.”

Lois smiled and said, not without affection, “That’s your resolution every year. Think you’ll be able to keep it for more than a week this time around?”

Clark gave a chagrined smile. “I’ll sure try...”

2013

Lois had already headed off to work, but Clark remained in the kitchen so that he could apologize to Benjamin. Their son accosted him as soon as he entered the room and saw his father.

“Mom had to take me to the father-son scouting dinner last night! You know how embarrassing that was? Even Steve’s father was there -- and his parents are divorced. He lives with his Mom, but *his* Dad was able to make it. You left right before we were going to head out to the dinner -- we didn’t have time to get anyone else to take me, so I was the only one who was there with his *mother*. Do you have any idea how much teasing I got? Or what it felt like for me? And of course, I couldn’t tell anyone the real reason you weren’t there -- I had to keep ‘the family secret’. And this was supposed to be a big night for me -- I was getting my Eagle Scout badge. Instead it was a fiasco. How could you do that to me? How can you *keep* doing that to me --

abandoning me and then making me lie to cover up your absences?”

Clark looked at his son. “I’m so sorry, Ben. I know it’s not fair to you. And I really did want to be there, but there was a huge mud-slide in California and -- “

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Ben rolled his eyes. “-- And I needed to go help save people’s lives. You’re always there for everyone else. But I can’t count on you. What do I have to do to make sure you’ll be with me -- jump off a building? Get caught in a fire? Do I have to risk death to get a little attention from my own father?”

Clark flinched. His son was right, and he knew it. But what could he do? He couldn’t just let those people die.

“Ben, I wish I could have been there, I really do. And if you are ever in trouble of any sort, if you ever really need me, you know I am there for you. I love you, and I am trying hard to be the best dad that I can. But I can’t turn a deaf ear when people are dying. By missing one father-son dinner last night, I was able to save a lot of fathers and sons who otherwise would never have lived to have had any dinners together again, ever.”

“You always say something like that. I can’t even be mad at you without you trying to make me feel guilty about it. Why do *I* have to have a freak for a father?”

Clark closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly, silently, counted to ten. When he felt he could answer calmly, he spoke. “Sometimes, I wish I were just a normal human, too, and that I could be there for you the way I want to be -- the way other dads are for their kids. But I’m not. I’m not human, and I’m not normal. I believe I’ve been given all of my special powers so that I can help other people. And whether we like it or not, sometimes that means that to save lives, I have to sacrifice some family time. I hate doing it as much as you hate having me do it. And I know you don’t have a say in the sacrifices that you have to make. I wish things were otherwise, but we have to play the hand we’re dealt in life.”

“Yeah? Well, you know what? I can’t count on you? Fine! Who needs you?”

Ben started to storm off, then stopped when he saw the very worn coffee mug he had given his father a decade earlier. “ ‘World’s Best Dad’? Hah! ‘World’s Worst Dad’ is more like it!” He snatched up the mug and dashed it to the floor, a flicker of a smile crossing his face when it shattered. He then stomped out of the room, ignoring his father’s command for Benjamin George Lane-Kent to get back into the kitchen and clean up the mess immediately.

Clark came in from another night-time rescue. After he had showered and changed, he went in to check on his sleeping son. Ben always looked so peaceful when asleep; so

different from the sullenness he displayed toward Clark while awake. Clark wished there were a way to bridge the chasm that had formed between them, but he couldn't see how that would be possible without giving up Superman altogether and letting people die.

He sighed as he quietly left the room.

2015

"Help! Help! I'm trapped! For God's sake, someone please help me!"

Ben's super hearing had manifested itself the night before. The frequent cries for help throughout the night did not permit him much sleep. He had never before realized how many there were, or how desperate the calls sounded. He looked at his father who was calmly eating some cereal.

"Don't you hear that lady, Dad? Why aren't you going to help?"

"There are police nearby. They'll assist her."

Indeed, now that his Dad had pointed them out to him, Ben could hear the police running toward the car crash, one of them placing a call for an ambulance and fire truck even as he ran.

"How do you do it?" Ben asked. "There are always so many calls for help. How can you just stand by and do nothing?"

His father smiled ruefully. "I used to go all the time. But then I married your Mom and you came into our lives. And ever since, I've been struggling to balance their needs," he nodded in the direction of the car crash, "with yours and Mom's. I know I haven't always succeeded, but I really have tried."

Ben suddenly understood his father better than he ever had before. He stared at his spoon as he used it to move his cereal around his bowl. "I never realized what it must have been like for you. How many times you stayed with us when you heard people calling for Superman. How hard it must have been to ignore them. And I haven't made it any easier over the years, have I?"

His Dad gave him a look full of sympathy and understanding. "You didn't know. You couldn't have."

"But now that I do, I'll try to cut you some slack. So, how *do* you do it, Dad? How do you keep from going insane?"

"You know how, when you're at a party, you can tune out all the conversations except the one you are in? And how, although you don't think you are listening to the other conversations, you suddenly will focus in on one of them if someone mentions your name?"

"Yeah...?"

"Well, I've learned to do something like that. I tune out my "super hearing" most of the time, but it will kick in when

someone calls for help. I've learned to ignore situations that are not life-threatening or that can be handled by the police or firemen. That took me some time to do -- and there's a part of me that still wants to go help each time, but there's a larger part that wants to be there for you. And so I harden my heart to the cries of distress so that I can be with you and Mom. I love you, son."

Ben blushed and whined in a typical teenage protest against parental mushiness, "Aw, Dad!"

2016

Had Clark's grin spread any wider, it would have split his face in two. Ben had just flown downstairs -- literally. The power he had been eagerly hoping for and talking about for years had finally manifest itself, and he wasn't about to stay grounded until nightfall when he could leave the apartment to exercise his new ability. If he had to stay within the confines of the townhouse during the day, so be it -- but fly he would!

"Look Dad! No hands -- or feet!" Ben's grin matched Clark's own.

Lois called, "Watch out!" Alas, a fraction of a second too late. Ben had crashed into the dining room wall, bashing in a hole several feet in diameter. Fortunately, he had been invulnerable for a few years already, so only his pride was hurt.

Clark chuckled when he saw his son stare in horror at the damage he had caused. "That's OK, son. You should have seen what I did to Grandma and Grandpa's barn when I was learning to fly! I'll teach you how to repair drywall and hang wallpaper today, and tonight we'll head up to the sky for an outdoor flying lesson. But no flying until then."

2018

Clark admired his Mom's handiwork. Jonathan and Martha had moved to an apartment in Metropolis a few years ago when taking care of the farm became too much for them. Martha had, of course, brought her old sewing machine with her. And eyeing his son wearing his new outfit, Clark could see that she had lost none of her facility with it.

At Ben's request, Martha had made a costume very similar to Clark's. Ben didn't like yellow so much, so Martha had made the belt and the background of the El shield a light blue. She had also added a red eye mask to the outfit. But the rest was identical to Clark's Suit. The family resemblance would be unmistakable to any onlooker.

Ben had worked hard over the past few years. Clark had taught him all he could about controlling his powers, about how best to live a double life, about the best ways to handle different emergency situations, and about how to interact

with the public in his superhero guise. His son was an avid learner.

Ben had started needing less sleep than his human peers, and so father and son were able to spend most of several nights each week honing Ben's skills. Some nights they would fly to the mountains, others to the desert or over the ocean. Lois would come along for the first few hours each night to role play a member of the adoring public or the victim of the crisis-du-jour. (Clark mused to himself that she certainly had gotten enough real life practice with both roles since he had first met her!) Clark would be the villain when one was needed. Occasionally, Lois and Clark would switch roles. When Lois' bedtime approached, Clark would fly her home and return to Ben afterwards. The two would then discuss Ben's mock rescues of the night and how he could improve his performance in the future.

Clark felt that now, after three years of training, Ben knew all he needed to in order to make his debut as a superhero. Tonight he would be introduced to the world.

Ben was swelling with pride as he asked, "Well, what do you think?"

Clark beamed. "You look...super!"

And he proudly thought to himself, "He's grown up just like me. My boy is just like me."

Disclaimers: Lois, Clark, Martha, Jonathan, Superman, and The Daily Planet all belong to DC Comics and Warner Brothers. I am just borrowing them for a little not-for-profit fun. (Benjamin is my own creation.)

The title of this story and the final quote were both taken from the Harry Chapin song, "Cat's in the Cradle." If you have never heard this powerful, poignant piece, you can listen to it at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zH46SmVv8SU>

But be forewarned -- it is a lot more depressing than my story, and it is a song that, once heard, you will *never* forget! It still brings tears to my eyes, and I'd like to think that it has helped me to become a better mother. I *never* want to be like the father in the song!

THE END