

An Incredible Movie Experience

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Summary: Going to the movies with your family is supposed to be relaxing, but for Clark Kent, things can be a little different.

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“Dad! Dad! Can we get some popcorn?” six year old Michael asked excitedly as Clark attempted to guide him through the movie theater lobby.

“And a drink?” asked little Christopher, who was barely five.

“I don't know,” Clark wavered, thinking over his options, which were limited to caving to his children's requests and spoiling their appetite for dinner, or risking a public meltdown and having to cart his sons back home again.

“Please?” came the perfectly synched plea.

“Let's skip the snacks. I don't want to spoil your dinner,” Clark explained with a shake of his head. “Mom's making fajitas tonight, and I know how much you love them.”

He smiled to himself as he said the words. While it was true that Lois was no Iron Chef, she'd gotten fairly good at cooking a — very small — list of meals. Much of that, he knew, was due to his mother's gentle lessons and some remnants of whatever the ghost of Katie Banks had left behind during the brief period where she'd possessed Lois' body. And some of Lois' — more recent — culinary skills had been gained under his own gentle tutelage.

“But Dad...” Michael began to protest.

But Clark shook his head. “No. But, I'll make you a deal. If you're both good, we'll pick up some ice cream on the way home for dessert after dinner tonight. Sound good?”

“And sprinkles?” Christopher asked.

“And hot fudge?” Michael wanted to know.

“With whatever toppings you want,” Clark promised.

“Yay!” the boys shouted in tandem. Clark could hear two older women chuckling over the outburst.

“Okay,” Clark said with a gentle smile. “But remember, you both have to be good. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Okay. Let's go get our tickets.”

He led his sons over to the ticket counter and purchased three tickets for the movie his boys had been begging to see for weeks, ever since they'd first seen a preview for it on television. The Incredibles — a story, from what he'd gathered, about a family of superheroes. The idea made him slightly uncomfortable, but ever since Superman had hit the scene, other heroes had emerged, and the public had become taken with the idea of superheroes in general. It wasn't a surprise that Disney and Pixar had dipped

their toes into the superhero pool too.

“I wish Mommy was here,” Christopher lamented as Clark handed the cashier his credit card.

“Me too,” he told his son, “but she had to stay home with your baby sister.”

“I know. But I miss her.”

“Me too,” Clark repeated with a smile as the cashier handed back his card and his tickets. “Thank you.”

“Enjoy the movie, sir,” the blonde woman said pleasantly, her eyes already on the family waiting behind Clark.

“Come on, boys,” Clark said, and the two obediently followed as he led them to the appropriate theater. “Huh. Pretty crowded in here,” he muttered, more to himself than to his sons, as they entered into the darkened theater space.

“Can we sit up front?” Michael asked eagerly.

“I think that's a bit too close,” Clark said, dreading the assault on his sensitive eyes at so close a range to the huge screen. “Besides, I don't see three seats together. Come on, let's check up higher.”

Up the stairs they went, Clark scanning each row as they walked by. There were seats available, but none that were three together, with the exception of the empty back row of the theater. Michael and Christopher looked disappointed to be sitting so far back, but, amazingly, they held their tongues. Clark imagined that they were still envisioning the promised ice cream to come if they behaved themselves.

Lois would be so proud of them, he thought to himself, picturing her rocking their two month old daughter in his mind's eye.

He contentedly sighed to himself, as he usually did when he thought of his family. The family he'd once thought he'd never have. The family he'd wanted all his life and had intensely needed ever since the moment Lois had stormed into his life. The family Dr. Klein had morosely told him could never biologically be.

The family that the love between Lois and himself had conceived anyway.

“Are you guys excited?” he asked as the two swung their feet in boredom. “You've been wanting to see this for a while now.”

“Yes,” Michael said with a serious nod, looking so much like Lois in that instant.

“Can't wait!” Christopher put in. “How much longer, Daddy?”

Clark checked his watch with a swift glance. “Just a few minutes.”

“Ooooookay,” the boys said, dragging out the word.

A few minutes later, right on schedule, the house lights dimmed and the previews began. Clark mentally noted the ones the boys would likely want to see, and which of those looked age appropriate. Then the lights shut down completely and the movie began.

“Is this thing on?” Mr. Incredible asked an off-screen interviewer.

Clark settled back into his seat, wishing he had a box of Milk Duds or some SnoCaps. Of course, he knew, that would have meant that he would have needed to buy the boys snacks and drinks too.

“That's fine,” the interviewer said from off-screen.

“I can break through walls, I just can't...” Mr. Incredible continued, fiddling with the microphone on the front of his costume. “I can't get this on.”

The film cut to Mr. Incredible sitting calmly, his microphone now perfectly situated on him. Clark liked how the film stock looked grainy, like old footage that had resurfaced after long years locked away in storage. He relaxed further.

“So, Mr. Incredible...do you have a secret identity?” the interviewer asked.

The short hairs on the back of Clark's neck stood to attention and panic shot through him. His body sat bolt upright, as though electricity had been sent through him. He had to fight the urge to duck out of the theater and get his boys safely home.

Easy, his inner voice said. You don't know that they are going that route...

"Every superhero has a secret identity," Mr. Incredible answered with casual calmness and a cool demeanor. "I don't know a single one who doesn't. Who wants the pressure of being super all the time?"

Nausea roiled in Clark's stomach.

Oh, God, his mind groaned. Anything but the secret identity angle. Please...

"Of course I have a secret identity," a woman proclaimed. "Can you see me in this at the supermarket? Come on. Who'd want to go shopping as Elastigirl, y'know what I mean?"

Or Superman, he couldn't help but think as he subconsciously slunk down into his seat a little, as though it could hide him or make the movie go away.

He snuck a glance at his sons. They were sitting still in rapt attention, smiles on their faces. At least they were having fun so far. Clark, on the other hand, felt more sick by the moment. More than one person over the years had tried — and tried hard! — to prove the existence of a secret identity for Superman. A few had gotten dangerously close. Off hand, he could think of Diana Stride and her discovery of his stash of Superman costumes in the hidden compartment in the closet, back at his old apartment. She'd even managed to poison him with Kryptonite, bringing him dangerously close to death.

Tempus had tried to expose Superman as nothing more than Clark Kent as well, after he'd duped the world into thinking he was John Doe, candidate for the presidency. Thankfully, the Clark that H.G. Wells had brought from an alternate dimension to fill in for Superman in Clark's absence while he'd been stuck in a rift in time and space, had still been around to play the part of Superman, so people could see both the reporter and the hero together at the same time, in the same place. Tempus had been enraged, but the public had been satisfied.

There had been other incidents since, but each time, Clark had managed to throw the public off his tracks and keep his secret intact. But this movie...this was dangerous. Cartoon though it was, it had the power to make people think and question. Where did Superman hang his cape at night? How did Batman earn a living to afford his gadgets? What did Wonder Woman do between rescues? Did the untouchable heroes — the stuff of legends — have secret identities that they could retreat into to avoid detection? Were there times when the "supers" of the world weren't so super? Did they do mundane things like check out books from the library and make runs to the grocery store to pick up fresh milk, eggs, and bread?

"Sometimes, I think I'd just like the simple life, you know?" Mr. Incredible was saying on screen, bringing Clark's attention back to the movie. "Relax a little and raise a family."

Clark had to fight the urge to throw up.

Raise a family.

Instinctual fear made his head snap toward where his boys sat. He breathed a sigh of relief and almost had to nervously laugh at himself. What? Did he really believe some villain was going to automatically figure out his secret and snatch his kids away?

Of course not. You need to calm down, Clark. You're getting paranoid.

Still, unease sat in his stomach like a boulder. Nervous sweat beaded on his brow and every hair on his body seemed to be standing at attention. He felt like every pair of eyes in the world was fixated on him and his family, like bugs under a magnifying glass. He felt exposed, in a very abstract way, as though the

movie had proclaimed "Clark Kent IS Superman" in flashing neon letters on screen.

He had to remind himself to take a deep, calming breath, which barely helped put his mind at ease. His thoughts went to Lois. What would she say? She'd be worried too, he realized. She always worried about his secret remaining a secret, ever since she'd first learned that the man she loved moonlit as an alien superhero. But he knew she'd also tell him to forget the movie — to laugh it off as a ridiculous notion if anyone ever mentioned it to either of his identities.

She'd be right to tell me that, he said to himself. Laugh it off. Don't give anyone a reason to give the idea of a superhero living a normal, undercover life a second thought. Let people think it's just a rather clever plot twist the movie studio came up with.

On screen, Elastigirl and Mr. Incredible exchanged wedding vows in a quaint church after thwarting a number of villains. Clark smiled in the darkened theater. It made him think of his own wedding day, when he'd *finally* become Lois' husband. Thinking about that, even now, gave him a mental rush and flooded him with love for the woman he'd given himself over to. And it *almost* made him forget what a battle it had been to make it to the altar with the *real* Lois and actually get the opportunity to exchange vows with her.

"I love you," Elastigirl — now identified as Helen — told her not-quite-yet husband Bob, "but if we're going to make this work, you've got to be more than Mr. Incredible. You know that, don't you?"

Don't I know it, Clark mused to himself.

Finding a balance between his family life, his work life, and his superhero duties had been anything but easy. There were still nights when he lay awake, wracked with guilt that he hadn't been able to attend some disaster or crime scene. But he couldn't be Superman all the time. Even if he and Lois hadn't been able to have a family...even if Lois hadn't come into his life...there was no way he could be Superman twenty-four hours a day. And even if he could, he'd long ago made peace with the fact that he couldn't be everywhere at once. But it bothered him nonetheless, that he'd taken a slight step back from his work as Superman once he'd become a husband, and again as he'd become a father. There'd been no public outcry, but he knew that it was unlikely most folks had noticed. After all, it was nearly impossible to measure what passed for Superman's "normal" activity.

He watched as the movie wore on, showing a depressed former Mr. Incredible dragging his way through life after superheroes began getting sued by the people they'd saved — so much so that they were all forced to go underground and cease their super activities. He did have to smile, however, at the depiction of Bob as an insurance adjuster. Vince, one of his college friends, had worked in insurance briefly after graduation, and had described the job pretty much exactly as the movie portrayed it — a cesspool of pressure and depression, where every move was micromanaged.

"You work your butt off all day to afford depression medication so you can go work your butt off all day," Vince had semi-seriously said of the job.

It made Clark infinitely glad that he loved his work as a reporter. It wasn't a glamorous job by any means, but it filled his life with meaning, to be able to defend those who couldn't do so for themselves. And the best part was, he could do it without the use of his powers...most of the time. He had no qualms about employing his abilities to find a lead when all avenues had grown cold and seemed dead-ended.

I feel your pain, Bob, he thought to the frustrated ex-superhero on screen. I'd be unhappy doing your job too. And I can't imagine being forced to stop being Superman.

Bob and his friend Lucius — also known as Frozone — were just about to head out for a night of bowling when Christopher's

urgent squirming caught Clark's attention. He swiftly ushered both of his sons out of the theater and to the men's room — luckily just across the hallway from where *The Incredibles* was playing. He had them both in and out of the bathroom in record time, and noticed that even Michael looked more comfortable after being told to relieve himself, despite the boy's repeated claims that he really didn't need to use the facilities.

They returned to their seats just in time to discover that the two super-powered friends in the movie weren't actually bowling, but were, instead, inside a burning building with some very irate police officers trying to arrest them. Clark got the boys settled before taking his own seat. He saw them both get immediately absorbed back into the story that was unfolding.

I wonder if they'll develop any powers of their own, he thought as he gazed at the living miracles before his eyes — miracles born of both human and Kryptonian roots.

The movie progressed. Tempted by the idea of becoming a hero again and craving the excitement that went along with it, Mr. Incredible accepted a job offer from a shady woman. The former superhero's mood improved over the course of a montage of images set to dramatic, heroic sounding music. He toned his overweight body. He grew happier. His marriage and family life became visibly better. Like Clark, Bob Parr needed the freedom to use his impressive abilities to feel whole and useful to the world. Letting his powers waste away was simply not an option, though it left a bad taste in Clark's mouth how it seemed like Bob only became an invested husband and father once he'd returned to moonlighting in tights. Clark knew that, even if he were to lose his powers permanently at that very moment, nothing in the world would make him become distant from — and almost disinterested in — his wife and children.

His family was the greatest adventure of his life.

As time went on, Helen discovered that Edna Mode, a former costumer to superheroes, had made new suits for all of the members of the Parr family. Her concern growing and with a bad feeling, Helen used the homing device in Bob's suit to locate him, triggering a series of events that led to him being captured by the movie's villain, Syndrome. Meanwhile, using a borrowed jet, Helen raced to the island where her husband was, not knowing that he was a prisoner, or that her two oldest kids had stowed away on board the aircraft. After being shot from the sky by a couple of missiles, the three made their way to shore and found a cave to hide in.

"Remember the bad guys on those shows you used to watch on Saturdays mornings?" Helen asked Dash and Violet. "Well these guys are not like those guys. They won't exercise restraint because you're children. They will kill you if they get the chance. Do not give them that chance," she told them solemnly.

Clark involuntarily shuddered. How true that statement was! He'd seen first-hand how little regard for human life real world villains could have. He lived in terror of his kids being used as bait to goad him into a trap, or worse, his kids being hurt or killed in some psychopath's deranged revenge plot. Even Lex Luthor, who'd claimed to love Lois, had never hesitated to use her in his war against Superman. Clark didn't want to imagine what the billionaire would have done if he'd lived to see Superman's children be born, especially since he'd discovered that Clark Kent and Superman — his two sworn enemies — were the same man.

Guiltily, Clark took a modicum of relief in knowing that Luthor was long dead and buried under tons of rubble from the subway collapse he'd caused.

At least he can't hurt my family any more, Clark thought as he passively watched the colorful images on the movie screen.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hey time out!" Syndrome exclaimed a short time later as he caught up with the Parr family, freezing them in place with some kind of laser. "What have we here? Matching uniforms? Oh, no! Elastigirl?" The villain laughed.

"You married Elastigirl? Whoa! And got busy! It's a whole family of supers! Looks like I've hit the jackpot! Oh, this is just too good!" Syndrome scoffed.

Unbidden, Clark's mind went to Jason Trask, the first man who'd physically declared himself to be Superman's enemy. That surprised Clark. It had been a long time since he'd last spared a thought for the xenophobic leader of Bureau Thirty-Nine, an agency who'd discovered the deadly green stone called Kryptonite, the bane of Clark's life. The thought of Trask sent a chill down Clark's spine.

He would have killed my kids for the sole reason that they are half Kryptonian.

He had to fight the urge to gather Michael and Christopher in his arms right then and there to reassure himself that they were fine.

Breathe, Clark, he told himself. *Just breathe.*

Completely rattled now, he tried to focus on the film.

Inwardly though, he could barely wait until it was over. He just wanted to get home, be with his family, and try to forget the movie as much as his mind would let him. But realistically, he knew he wouldn't be sleeping a wink that night, and not just because of his baby daughter.

Eventually, and, Clark had to admit, quite predictably, the Parr family saved the city from certain destruction from Syndrome's giant robot. Working together, and with the help of their friend, Frozone, they destroyed the threat, but the villain escaped justice. At least, he escaped until the family arrived back at home. Then he made the mistake of trying to kidnap their youngest — and powerless — son. Suddenly, the boy transformed a number of times — becoming a monster, going on fire, turning to metal.

Of course, sweet baby Jack-Jack was saved by his mother and Syndrome wound up meeting a grisly end due to his cape. Even Clark had to chuckle at the throwback to Edna's insistence that she would not design any superhero costumes with capes, thanks to several heroes dying due to mishaps with the garment. It made him think of his own red cape that completed Superman's outfit. He'd been uncertain about the long drape of heavy fabric when his mother had first designed the iconic suit. But she'd insisted that it looked dashing and Clark had liked the coverage it had afforded him in the back, so he'd agreed to keep it. Now, he couldn't imagine Superman without the cape.

Good thing Edna isn't the one making my costumes, he thought wryly.

On screen, time passed as the Parr family settled into their new normal, in a world once again learning to stop scorning superheroes. The Parrs were still underground, of course, but they were at least a more cohesive family. Even Helen was less uptight, letting her super-speedy son go out for the track team. It ended with the family putting on their identity-obscuring masks to go fight a new villain who had literally just surfaced after drilling up through the pavement.

The house lights came up as the credits started to roll. Clark stood and stretched before putting a hand on each of his sons' shoulders. They took the hint and stood, but they seemed incapable of tearing their eyes from the screen.

"Come on, boys," Clark said, giving them a smile.

"I have to go," Michael said, wiggling a little as he stood there.

"Okay. I was going to hit the bathroom myself," Clark said. "Come on."

After a quick stop in the men's room, they headed out of the cinema and into the cool early November weather. It was a nice day, Clark had to admit, with the sun just starting to set. But as he put his back to the theater, he felt like a man escaping prison. As lighthearted and fun as the movie had striven to be — and had probably been for most folks, he assumed — it had left him

covered in a sheen of sweat and with shaken nerves.

“Ice cream?” Christopher asked, reminding Clark of his promise.

“Absolutely,” he said with a grin. “You were both great during the movie. Where should we go?”

“Scooper-Man!” they cried in unison, making Clark chuckle. The little hole-in-the-wall ice cream shop was their favorite.

“Sounds perfect,” he said, his heart nearly bursting with love for them.

“Can we get Becca some?” Michael asked.

Clark shook his head. “That’s sweet of you, but she’s still too little for ice cream.”

“Oh. Okay,” came the disappointed reply.

“We’ll get extra for Mom though,” Clark promised, brightening his son’s fallen expression.

“Okay!”

No one was in the ice cream shop when they arrived. Kelsey, the owner’s wife, quickly filled their order and packed everything in a bag. Clark made pleasant small talk with the slightly younger woman as he placed their order and paid with his credit card. Then he and his children were on their way again, taking the subway back home. Luckily, the subway car they chose was empty, and he had no trouble sneaking a peek inside the bag containing their frozen treats to give it a blast of his icy breath to keep everything cold.

“Hi, honey!” he called as he opened the door to the living room when they arrived back home.

“Hi, Clark!” she called back from the couch.

“Mommy!” the boys cried loudly as they made a beeline for their mother.

“Hi, sweetie,” she said to each of them as they hugged her, as best they could. Clark could see as he entered the room that she was nursing their daughter. “Did you like the movie?”

“It was awesome!” Michael declared, before the boys launched into a detailed report of the plot, tripping over one another’s words and flat out interrupting in their excitement.

Clark took the opportunity to put the ice cream in the freezer. When he returned, the boys were finally winding down. He sat next to Lois, gently taking the baby as she finished her meal. Putting her on his shoulder, he lightly patted her back, getting her to release a healthy burp.

“And you? How’d you like the movie?” she asked as the boys immediately turned their attention to their toys. “It sounds like the boys liked it.”

He shook his head. “It was terrifying,” he said in a lowered tone, mindful of listening ears. Their children did not know of their father’s alter ego. “The whole idea of superheroes with a secret identity... what if it makes people start asking uncomfortable questions? What if there’s a sudden resurgence of people bound and determined to expose us again? You know how close things came for me... several times already.”

Lois nodded. “Unfortunately, I do. But it’s just a movie, Clark. Most people aren’t going to take it any deeper than that.”

“Most people,” Clark said, watching as the boys raced cars on a track on the other side of the room. “I just worry, that’s all. The stakes are a *lot* higher now with you and the kids...”

“Honey, just relax,” Lois said with a smile. “There’s no reason to panic about it right now.”

“Maybe, but... I don’t know... maybe the others and I should at least *talk* about what problems this might cause us down the road.”

“I guess that wouldn’t be a bad idea,” Lois slowly agreed.

“I’ll give Bruce a call tomorrow,” he said. “People have been after Batman’s identity probably even more than Superman’s.”

Lois’ stomach rumbled and she flushed a little in embarrassment. “Sorry, I didn’t get a chance to eat much today. I think Becca’s hitting a growth spurt. I spent most of the day

nursing her.”

“Let me run out for some takeout then,” Clark said, leaning over and kissing her forehead.

But Lois shook her head. “No, that’s okay. I’ve got a real craving for fajitas.”

“You want me to make them?” he offered.

Again, she shook her head. “Are you kidding? I need to get up and stretch my legs. You can hang out here with the kids.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” he teased, smiling at the sleeping baby on his shoulder. “But I think I can be on baby duty.”

“Great. Thanks.”

She stood and stretched before disappearing in the direction of the kitchen. It wasn’t long before Clark could hear her singing as she cooked the meat and vegetables he’d cleaned and prepared earlier that morning, in an effort to help her. Soon, delicious smells began wafting through the house.

“No, *I* want to be Frozone!” he heard Christopher say in wounded tones.

“No. I’m older, *I* get to pick first!” Michael said bossily.

“No! Littlest goes first!”

“You’re *still* not first! Becca is the littlest!”

“Boys!” Clark called. “What’s going on?”

“We’re playing Incredibles. I want to be Frozone,” Michael pouted.

“But *I* want to be him,” Christopher said, with an equally pouty expression on his face.

“Can’t you take turns?” Clark suggested.

“Me first!”

“No, *me* first!”

Clark sighed and shook his head. “Not so loud. Your sister is sleeping,” he reminded them. “Maybe you can *both* be Frozone.”

“How?” Michael asked skeptically. “There’s only one of him.”

“You could pretend Frozone has a twin brother,” Clark suggested. “That way you can both be him.”

The boys took a moment and thought it over.

“Okay,” they both said, nearly together.

“Good. Now, go get washed up. Mom should be done cooking in a couple of minutes.”

They nodded and rushed off, already pretending to be the icy superhero of the movie. Clark smiled as he watched them go.

Then he put his sleeping daughter in her bouncy seat and carried her over to the dining room table, situating her on the floor next to his chair, where he could keep an eye on her. He gazed down at her, filled with love for the children he’d help to create, and worried about the future.

“You’re still obsessing,” Lois observed as she emerged from the kitchen with a plate piled high with chicken and a bowl full of cheese.

Clark sighed. “I know. I can’t help it. That movie really rattled me, Lois.”

She smiled at him. “Relax. It’s *just* a movie. No one is going to see it and think ‘hey, do you think Superman has a house in the suburbs?’ Okay?”

“What if they...”

“Whoosh!” came the voices of two little superheroes as they raced into the dining room, cutting Clark off.

“Okay, you two heroes,” Lois said indulgently. “Time to power up with some dinner.”

They took their seats, and Clark helped them to make their fajitas. As he sat and crafted his own dinner, carefully rolling the tortillas so the meat wouldn’t spill out, he started to relax by the slightest of degrees. Maybe Lois was right after all.

“Hey, dad?” Michael said.

“Hmm?” he replied, his mouth full of food.

“Did you like the movie?”

Clark swallowed. “It was very good,” he said carefully, not

wanting to upset his kids by saying no, but not wanting to flat out lie by singing its praises when it had so deeply shaken him.

“Do you think it’s true?”

“What’s true?” Clark asked.

“Superheroes,” Michael pressed. “Do you think they all have secret identities?”

Clark nearly choked on his iced tea. “What?” From the corner of his eye, he saw Lois stiffen slightly.

“Do you think Superman’s got kids? Does Batman have a wife?” the boy asked thoughtfully.

“I think, whatever happens in the private life of any superhero should stay private,” Clark answered vaguely. “I mean, look at what happened in the movie. The bad guy found out and did all sorts of cruel things. Right?”

“Right,” Michael said with a nod. “Superman’s nice. I don’t want bad things to happen to him.”

“Me neither,” Clark agreed. “Me neither.”

Forget tomorrow. I’ll call Bruce tonight, he thought to himself as he steered the conversation to other topics.

THE END