

# Agoraphobia

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Lois is aging, but Clark is not. All it takes is one comment to put the Man of Steel on the defensive. How can their family deal with the difficulties of Clark's paranoia?

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It had started out as it always did: with one stupid comment. Simple, mundane, something nobody would read into, except of course for Clark. He was a good sport, as he always was. He'd smiled, laughed, thanked the person for their flattery... But the smile didn't reach his eyes like it usually did, the laugh came out a little too airy, and the thanks were far from genuine.

It was all downhill from there.

She spent the first few days reassuring him that it was just a polite comment, something people said, that it should affect her more than it did him. As if she didn't still look like she was early thirties, she joked. And he smiled, laughed, thanked her for her kind words of consolation.

But it still lurked behind his eyes.

He made little adjustments. He shied away from photos, an increasingly difficult task with the rise of social media. He pulled away from some of his longtime friends, just marginally, but enough so that they wouldn't make comments. He got really adept at text and email, his new preferred method of communication. If he had to use social media, he preferred Twitter.

He reasoned. She conceded.

A necessary precaution.

Then came work. She never thought she'd see the day when he'd rather take a desk job than be hitting the streets with her, on the prowl for the next good story. But an editing position opened up, and Clark had jumped at it. He'd let Perry and Jimmy rib him a little, tease him about being too young to hang up his investigative reporter hat.

And the smile was a little smaller, the laugh even more half-hearted. The thanks didn't come at all.

He started to stay in his office, not mingle in the bullpen with her or any of the other, younger reporters. He kept the door closed, left the windows open. Only opened the door for Lois or Perry, occasionally Jimmy. He started to draw the blinds.

He rationalized. She said nothing.

He stayed home more and more often, leaving the house only for rescues and necessities. He took his work home with him, claiming he could get just as much if not more done there, without the watchful eyes of the office. He told people it was to help take care of the kids, or run errands. He started falling back on his old excuses of cheese of the month club and late video rentals, which only bit him in the rear when someone pointed out that most video stores had closed. So he began to call out. He used his sick time, when he could. He started to use his personal time.

She brought it up. He defended his actions.

He didn't show up at as many school functions, so he wouldn't have to see the looks of the other parents when they walked in together, hear the line. Fake a smile, pretend to laugh. He'd started by telling the kids that he'd watched them perform from the skies, or that he'd had to go on a rescue, or run into work. Eventually he just stopped bringing it up.

That was the last straw for Lois Lane-Kent.

She yelled. He argued. She threatened. He fought.

And they stopped smiling, stopped laughing, the effort to fake it taking too much of a toll.

She threw herself into her work, and into their children. He threw himself into Superman.

She stopped. When was he last *not* Superman?

The thought stunned her for a minute, racking her brain for a memory of the last time they were out as Lois and Clark. He could hardly even argue that he was Clark at home anymore. He stayed in his office, or their bedroom, didn't interact the same way as Clark Kent should. And that was if he was home.

Had it been a month? Longer? The only time she ever saw him out and about was in the Suit, and even then those stretches were limited to quick rescues and passing glances. She got her interviews with the man of steel at home, and even then sometimes Clark just bagged the story himself, to keep his writing skills sharp.

She stood up from her computer, her heart in her throat. She had to talk to her husband. Really talk. He couldn't live like this forever. This wasn't even living. He was so wrapped up in his own head, cornered by his own fears, that he was forgetting himself. She collected her things quickly, shot off a quick text to her mother to see if she could pick up the kids and watch them for a few hours, and sent a short message to Clark.

*We need to talk.*

The drive to the brownstone felt endless, jittery as she was, and the lack of reply from her husband weighed on her chest. Maybe he was on a rescue, and didn't get the message yet.

But no. She found him on their couch, phone at his side, book in hand. He pasted on a paltry smile for her, eyes returning to his book as she set her purse down on the table. Unbelievable. She stormed up to him and cleared her throat to get his attention. The sigh that escaped him didn't escape her notice, and his unfettered eyes were sad as they met hers.

"Did you not get my text?"

He set the book aside carefully, buying time as he hedged his words carefully. "I did."

She gave him a patent glare, waiting for him to continue. He tossed his hands up in the air. "Lois, I don't know what to say. I'm tired. I'm tired of all the fighting, I'm tired of the excuses, everything. You say we need to talk? Fine. You talk."

"You don't think I'm tired of fighting, Clark? You think I'm doing any better watching from the sidelines as I lose more and more of my husband?"

"You're not losing me," he exhaled, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Aren't I? You've become so obsessed with making sure people don't find out that Clark Kent is Superman that you've completely abandoned everything that Clark Kent is."

That riled him up, and she could see the fire back in his eyes. Good. Any sort of spark was better than the dead-eyed stare she'd grown accustomed to. Even if it meant they had to fight for her to see it. "I have not."

"What's the last thing you've done as Clark Kent? And don't say you submitted an article online or you edited somebody's story that was emailed to you."

"I made the kids breakfast."

"Did you take them to school? Did you ask them about their day? Did you volunteer to chaperone Ella's school dance or tell Marty that you'd love to watch his next baseball game?"

"You know what, how dare you. You know why I can't do those things?"

"No, I don't, Clark. Because of Superman? Do you hear how insane that is?"

"I'm a good father," he defended, a look of disgust on his face as he stood up and walked towards the kitchen. Away from her.

"Clark Kent is a good father. Superman isn't."

He spun around, fury shaking his whole form. “I am Superman. The kids know that. You know that! I have a responsibility—”

“You have more than one responsibility, Clark! You have your children, you have your work, you have me!” She searched his eyes frantically, silently begging for him to see sense. “I miss my husband. The man I married was kind and thoughtful, and able to balance having his own life and saving the world. He loved me, and I loved him. I loved that he had enough room in his heart for me and for the rest of the world. But I’m sorry, I didn’t marry you because you were Superman.”

He blinked at her, stunned out of his anger in that moment. “What... what are you saying, Lois? You’re not saying,” he swallowed thickly, eyes darting away, unable to even give voice to the words.

Her eyes softened a bit, the sting lifting out of her tone. “I’m not saying that,” she soothed, her admission easing his mind marginally. The weight of the thought that she almost said hung heavy in the room, dissipating all the anger and hostility. “What I am saying is that if I had to choose between the world maybe finding out Superman’s secret identity or never getting my husband back, I wouldn’t hesitate for a second.”

And that right there, that was the second scariest thing she could have said to him. He felt his heart pounding double time, a fluttering in his stomach. He tried to find the words to describe his emotions, but his throat felt too dry. “I... I can’t. I can’t risk it. You—the kids—we can’t afford any more suspicion. Do you know what it’s like to have to consider what everyone might be thinking of you every time you leave the house? I hate it, Lois. I can’t take it. It’s better to stay in.”

“Clark, I’m a woman. Of course I know what that’s like.”

He shook his head, a bit too manically for her liking. “You don’t understand.”

“I understand, Clark. I know it’s an enormous amount of pressure. But you’ve gotta think of the example you’re setting for your children. Ella tells her friends you’re agoraphobic, so they won’t want to come over.”

Clark swallowed and shook his head, trying to realign his thoughts with this new information. “She does not.”

“How many teenage girls have you seen hanging around here? She’s fourteen. They’d be here.”

He wanted to vomit. He wished he could. He sunk into a chair at the kitchen table, mind racing. His own daughter—his baby girl that he’d do anything to protect—was trying to protect him? Was embarrassed by him? Had he really sunk so low? “I didn’t know she felt that humiliated by me.”

Lois clicked her tongue. “Check that tone, mister. She’s fourteen. She’d be humiliated by anything either of us did. Don’t start thinking you’re all that.”

He snorted a laugh, more than he’d done in a long time. “Right. What about Marty? Is he embarrassed too?”

Lois hesitated, sinking down into the chair next to him. “Not embarrassed,” she started cautiously, “just confused. I know it’s a completely different situation, of course... But it’s hard to make “daddy had another rescue” not sound like “your father had to work late again” when you say it so many times.”

Clark felt like he’d been hit with a wave of Kryptonite. He studied his wife’s face, the way she remained stoically staring at the grain of the kitchen table. His heart clenched in his chest. Had he really been doing that? He couldn’t believe it. He’d been so wrapped up in protecting himself and by extension the rest of them, that he hadn’t looked around him to see who he was actually hurting. He reached for her hand nervously. She let him take it at least, although the expression of surprise that flashed across her face from the gesture stung him a bit. “Lois, look at me.” Her eyes darted away from their joined hands and glued onto his eyes. “I never meant to make you or the kids feel that way. I never wanted

to be like your father. I promise you, I’ll try to be better. You might not believe me right now, but I’ll prove it.”

She swallowed, tears in her eyes. “Promise?”

He slid her off her seat and into his lap, pressing a kiss to her temple. “I promise.”

He started the very next day. He woke up early, began by making breakfast as he usually did. Only he was dressed in a suit, garish tie and all. He’d fumbled for a while trying to tie it, fingers clumsy with nerves. He breathed through it. One step at a time.

The kids woke up, happy to see him up and about, and he smiled as they ate their food. Ella ribbed him about the monkey suit a bit, and he laughed. Lois had given him a quick peck on the cheek, and he thanked her.

He stood at the door to their brownstone anxiously, firmly rooted to the spot as their kids scrambled to get ready. Facing down the solid oak door, he realized that it had been a long time since he’d walked out it. The ball of anxiety sitting on his chest wound a little tighter, and he had to wipe his palms on his slacks to keep his coffee cup from sliding out of his hands. He hadn’t left the house in so long, barring anything requiring heroics, he wasn’t sure he knew what to do with himself. Would people notice?

Would they make comments about him looking good, or having not seen him in a while? Of course they would. He brought this on himself. Now he would be a topic of conversation, drawn attention to himself. He could easily have just gone with the flow and nobody would have been the wiser. His stomach clenched again. What a mess he’d made. He couldn’t believe it had gone this far—

“Hey,” Lois intoned quietly, sliding a hand up the middle of his back. “You okay?”

He nodded, not trusting his voice just yet.

“You don’t have to do this, you know. Not today. You can take your time with it.”

“No,” he sighed. “I have to do this today. I don’t want to lose my nerve.”

She nodded against his shoulder. “Then you’re gonna need these.”

The light glinted off the lens of his glasses as she held them aloft. He stared at them, the flutter in his stomach returning, but this time, with a hint of anticipation. He took the spectacles out of her hand, hefting them gently. He slid them onto the bridge of his nose, the gesture familiar and reassuring, the weight of it grounding him.

He felt better already.

He took a deep breath, steeling himself. He could do this. He was Superman. No—he was Clark Kent.

He could do this.

Everything went pretty well, all things considered. The sun beating down on his face did him a lot of good. He dropped the kids off at school. Waved hello to some of the teachers and parents. The positive encounters bolstered him.

He went into work. Took in the surprised looks and greetings, pushing down the panic that crept in around him. Not shaking hands—that felt like too much. But he smiled. That was nice. Somebody cracked a joke over the coffee pot, and he laughed. That was nice too.

It got better. Slowly but surely, things started looking up. He got the comments still. But he smiled more easily, laughed it off when he could. He spoke to the kids about it all. Got their opinions on everything. He got his relationship back with them, did more with them.

Things got better with Lois, too. Much better. They went on dates, he accompanied her on some stories again, when possible. When he didn’t have to be editing in the office. They went for walks in the park, out to movies, out to eat. They smiled, they laughed. He was entirely grateful to his incredible wife. She’d saved his life. He hadn’t realized how dark he had gotten. Life was better lived.

Life was better as Clark Kent. He didn't ever want to make that mistake again.

So on the thirtieth anniversary of becoming Superman, when he felt like he couldn't cover for it anymore, he released the article: Living as Superman.

They'd talked about it, batted the idea around, even got the kids involved. But he'd wanted it to be a surprise of sorts, so he'd gone ahead and done it.

The relief he felt once it was published was incredible.

There would be challenges, sure. But no more secrets, or hiding, or paranoia. He and his family could face it head on. Clark smiled at his wife as she rubbed his shoulder warmly, delivering his travel mug of coffee and with a smile of her own.

"You ready for this?"

He grinned, and held out his arm for his wife. She slipped her arm through his as they prepared to tackle this new milestone.

"Never been more ready for anything in my life."

THE END