

One Lifetime

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Rated: G

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Summary: A lifetime of love is more than enough for Clark.

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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.

Author's Note: This is in response to the 2021 Kerth Challenge #7, which asked authors to use a love declaration from a movie or TV show and have Lois or Clark use it in an admission of how they feel about each other.

"Clark?" Lois asked, as she shuffled into their bedroom, carrying a tray with two steaming cups of oolong tea. "How are you feeling?"

"Weak," he croaked, his voice hollow and ancient sounding. He tried to hoist himself up into a sitting position, but his waning strength failed him. He gave her an apologetic look.

"Hey, let me help with that," Lois lovingly admonished, setting the tray on his night table.

She gently helped to pull him up, leaning his frail frame against her sturdier, though aged, body. She stuck a few extra pillows behind his back to help him stay upright, then carefully eased him back. He coughed a little - a wet, phlegmy sound - and fumbled with the oxygen cannulas in his nostrils, repositioning them so they sat more comfortably and more effectively. For a moment, Lois gazed at him, her heart breaking all over again.

He's only ninety! she thought bitterly. *He should still be healthy and strong! He's Superman!*

But, Superman or not, reality didn't care.

Clark Kent was dying, and had been for weeks.

And Lois wished every single day that it was her instead of him.

"You're doing it again," he said, his lips quirking up into a soft smile, and a trace of his old bantering tone was in his voice.

"Doing what?" she asked, smoothing down a lock of the silver hair that somehow looked even more dashing than the midnight black it had been in his youth.

"Obsessing."

"I am *not* obsessing!" she said, lying and knowing that she was doing a poor job of hiding the fact that she was lying.

"Honey, I heard you on the phone with the kids last night. You still think that my dying is a result of that age sucking machine we dealt with so long ago," he replied in a loving tone.

"Isn't it though?" Lois asked, fighting back her tears.

"I don't know," he replied honestly.

"It *has* to be! Dr. Klein *said* it took something from you. Maybe this is it. Maybe it took years off your life. Maybe you were supposed to live another hundred years. Or...or..." She failed in her effort to keep her emotions in check and a single silver tear slid down her cheek.

Clark reached out with a gnarled and wrinkled finger and wiped it away. "Even if that was true, that the machine shortened my life, I still don't regret it. Jimmy's alive with five kids and eighteen grandkids and three great-grandkids because of what I gave up."

"I know, but..." she started to protest, but stopped there. How could she argue against his sacrifice to ensure that their best friend got to live a long, full life? She couldn't. Not without sounding like a raging witch.

"Besides, without you, a hundred years more would have been torture." He coughed again.

"You still..."

He shook his head. "No. Lois, listen to me. I would rather spend one lifetime with you, then face all the ages of this world alone."

The argument Lois was trying to form died in her throat and she laughed a little. "Did you..." She paused and shook her head in disbelief. "Did you just quote *The Lord of the Rings*?" she asked, and a few more tears fell as she lost all hope of restraint.

Clark's smile grew. "Arwen was a *very* smart woman," he replied, reaching out to cup her cheek, the way he'd always done. "She knew a long life without love just wasn't all it was cracked up to be."

"She died though. Alone. After a great many years without Aragorn," Lois countered as she helped Clark to take his teacup in hand.

He shrugged a little. "True, but she still had more years with him than if she'd chosen the immortal life of her people and left Middle Earth. *And* she got to have a family of her own." With shaking hands, he brought the cup to his lips and drank. When he was finished, he lowered it to his lap and sighed. "My life isn't so different. I've had a *wonderful* life, Lois. Being with you, raising our family together, every moment of pain or triumph we've shared...it's been worth it. I wouldn't trade a single second of it for anything. I've never wanted to live forever or for a thousand years or whatever my life *might* have looked like without that youth sucking machine."

Lois nodded. "I know," she admitted softly.

Clark's tender smile bloomed on his face again. "When I first realized that nothing could hurt me...before I knew of Kryptonite or all the close calls I would have with it over the course of my life..." His voice trailed off as the past seemed to waltz before his failing eyes. "Once I thought about all the implications, it was kind of terrifying. The thought of living, possibly forever, while I watched everyone I loved grow old and die..." He shook his head gently. "It was almost a relief to know that there was at least one green stone out there that could ensure I wouldn't have to endure that fate. That I wasn't as immortal as I'd once feared."

He took another drink, and this one seemed to cost him twice the effort, although Lois knew he would never admit it. "I'm so proud to have spent all these long years as your husband, Lois. I still thank my lucky stars that you found me worthy enough to love."

"Worthy enough?" Lois paused in reaching for her own tea. "How can you say that? *Of course* I love you, Clark! You're the best man I've ever known, with the gentlest soul, and the biggest heart. If anything, I've always been surprised and grateful that you love me."

"I've always wished you could see yourself the way I see you," Clark lamented, wheezing a little before a cough overcame him. When it subsided, he took several gasping breaths before continuing. "I've seen every corner of this planet and enough of space to know that you are the brightest thing in this whole amazing universe, Lois. More than anything else, your love has made me human."

"Oh, Clark," she breathed, brushing another lock of hair off his forehead, and noticing that his brow was clammy with sweat. "I love you."

"And I love you. Always and forever. And...whatever lies ahead, beyond this mortal world, I'll be waiting for you."

Lois couldn't answer, lest she burst into uncontrolled sobs. Sitting up and talking had seemed to sap Clark of his strength, so

she took his tea from his bony hands and helped him settle back down so he could lay comfortably. It didn't take long for him to fall into a peaceful sleep. For a long time, Lois simply sat watching him – the way his features smoothed out in his dreams, making him look younger, the reassuring rise and fall of his chest, the way that even the ravaging effects of time and illness hadn't dimmed his handsome looks or hid the fact that he'd once been the world's greatest hero, the way that the hero couldn't outshine the perfect, human man he was. But as the day exploded into a brilliant orange-red sunset, a change came over him.

"One lifetime," he murmured, his eyes still closed, before his body went slack and he slipped into a coma.

The coma was short lived. As the stars twinkled overhead that evening, just as most people kissed their spouse goodnight as they snuggled into their beds, Clark Kent quietly slipped away to where Lois could not yet follow. Her heart shattered permanently and her life seemed to go dark and her grief threatened to suffocate her.

But hours later, as she sat alone and emotionally exhausted from the process of having her husband's body taken away by the coroner, knowing that she would have to contact the funeral home in the morning, and putting off returning downstairs to her children and grandchildren, their last conversation came floating back to her.

"The Lord of the Rings, of all things," she mused, and a smile tugged, unbidden, at the corner of her mouth because it was just so completely geeky, like Clark.

And suddenly, another scene from the movie occurred to her – a moment between Pippin and Gandalf as they faced overwhelming odds in battle.

"I didn't think it would end like this," the forlorn and terrified hobbit had said.

"End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path. One that we all must take. The gray rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass. Then, you see it," the wizard had kindly replied.

"What? Gandalf? See what?"

"White shores and beyond. A far green country, under a swift sunrise."

"Well, that isn't so bad," Lois said aloud, echoing the young hobbit.

And somewhere, in the back of her mind, Clark answered with Gandalf's voice. "No. No it isn't."

THE END