

Encounter in the Park

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Rated G

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Summary: A continuation of the author's *Encounter in the Woods*.

She was something else. Clark Kent smiled to himself as he watched his wife alternate between ranting and firing questions at Dr. Mulligan. Earlier, they had both been afraid that the inventor might be dead. Now, Lois seemed about ready to kill the poor man herself. He and Mr. Wells had been looking over the schematics of the Time-Twister for the past half-hour. A thick row of trees shielded them all from the view of any passers-by; a good thing too, since, by the sound of it, there was a very busy playground not too far away.

"Look, I don't know whether it's sabotage or not," Mulligan told her once he could get a word in. "Give me a break; I won't even invent half of this stuff for another—what, fifteen years?"

"Twenty," Wells corrected him.

Lois threw up her hands in exasperation. "Can you do *anything*?" she shouted.

Mulligan sighed. "I suppose I could try to work on this part here"—he tapped a place on the schematic—"and see if that gives me enough insight to check over the rest..."

"We have your notes, if that helps," said Wells with a bit of hope in his voice.

The doctor shook his head. "It won't," he said. "I can't read my own hand-writing. I'm sorry."

Lois let out a frustrated growl that caused both men to look up at her.

Clark stood and gently took her by the shoulders. "Come on, Honey," he said. "Let's go take a walk while they work on this." She let out a slow breath. "Fine," she said at last.

The weather was warm, here, at least. They plodded up a grassy hill and came to a footpath lined by dandelions. A breeze came, scattering the big white puffs.

"Are we ever going to get home, Clark?" Lois asked him.

They walked on. "We'll be home before you know it, Sweetheart," he told her.

She drew close to him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I hope so," she said.

The path curved, up ahead. As they rounded the bend, Clark caught a glimpse of swing-sets and children running. They all seemed so happy...

He felt Lois slip her hand into his.

"Did you really mean it," he asked her, "when you told the younger me that I was the most human guy you knew?"

"I meant it," she said, giving his hand a firm squeeze.

He paused. "Even though I can't—?"

She stopped, pulling him to a halt in the middle of the path.

"Clark," she said, "we've been over this before. Whether we can or can't have children together doesn't matter. Family of two, remember?"

He remembered. He nodded.

They continued down the path.

She kept her grip on his hand.

The kids' shouts were getting louder now as the path wound closer to the playground's entrance. Clark paused as he caught sight of something tall, caped, and bronze.

"Nice statue," Lois commented beside him. "Looks like this

universe has a Superman."

Clark pulled down his glasses so he could read the inscription from where they stood. "Or *had*, at least," he said. "Apparently, this place is called the Superman Memorial Park."

Lois gasped.

"Actually," said a voice from behind them, "it's kind of a long story."

As one, they turned around. Clark's mirror image stood grinning at them.

"There's been discussion about changing the name," his doppelganger went on, "but apparently, bronze plaques are very expensive." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "It's nice to see you again, by the way. Gosh, it's been years, hasn't it?"

Clark and Lois exchanged a grin of their own.

"It's only been a day and a half for us," his wife replied.

"You seem to be doing well," said Clark.

His counterpart nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I want to thank you for that little chat in the woods; it really helped me out a lot."

"Did you ever find your Lo— er, your wife?" Lois asked.

His duplicate's grin broadened. "Lois Joanne Lane," he said. "Born in 1967 in Metropolis, New Troy. Prize-winning reporter for the Daily Planet, and the greatest woman I've ever met."

Clark wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders. "That she is," he said.

"Yeah." His double took on a dreamy expression. "It's hard to believe we've been married seven years already."

Clark started to nod his agreement when his double's words registered, and his mind ground to a halt. "Did you say seven years?" he asked.

The other man shrugged. "Well, it would have been longer, but she didn't want to get married until she won her first Kerth award, and that was okay with me, but then we ended up having an argument about the risks she was taking for her stories and— well," He looked from one to the other. "I guess I don't have to explain to *you* guys how it all went down, do I?"

Clark met his wife's stare. The shock on her face must have been a match for his own.

His doppelganger must have misinterpreted their surprise.

"Was that never an issue for the two of you?" the man asked.

"Er..." said Clark.

"Uh..." said Lois.

"It... was, yes," Clark said at last. "That is something we have discussed before. Yes."

"She's toned it down a lot these past few years," his counterpart told them.

"That's good," Clark said, blankly.

"Yeah," said the other man. "She's a great mom."

All other sound stopped. It was as if the Earth ground to a halt. For a full minute, there was only his heart thundering in his ears, Lois' beating rapidly beside him, and his doppelganger staring at them in confusion.

"You..." Lois squeaked, "...have kids?"

The other man nodded. "A daughter. She'll be three next week."

Lois' hand clenched his.

"I take it you don't have any of your own?" his double asked.

They both shook their heads.

"We've only been married for a year," Clark admitted. "We were in the middle of celebrating our paper anniversary when... well..."

"When the latest batch of weirdness happened," Lois finished for him.

His double's eyebrows raised. "Oh," he said. "I'm sorry."

Clark fidgeted. "We did look into the possibility, though," he said at last. "We were told it was impossible."

His double was silent for a while. He looked at Clark with an expression of shared pain. "It's possible," he said, quietly. "It

took me and my Lois a long time to find that out, so I know what you must be going through right about now. You need to know: it's a long shot, but it can happen."

The man paused, seeming to think for a bit. "Our friend, Dr. Klein, has a theory..." He paused again. "It's kind of hard to explain—I think fruit flies are involved somewhere—but basically, he said that when members of a single species split off into two groups and stay separated for a long time, having nothing to do with each other, they start to grow apart. He said that they slowly become two species instead of one, and eventually, they can't even breed with each other anymore. He thinks that, maybe, this is what happened to the peoples of Earth and Krypton; that maybe we were once the same, and now we're on the brink of diverging like that." He met Clark's eyes again. "He thinks we might, at least technically, be human."

Clark gasped. The sound was echoed by the woman beside him. He stared at his doppelganger, eyes wide in complete and utter shock. "Human?" he said.

"That's the theory, anyway," said his double. "And, by the way, if there's a Dr. Bernard Klein on your world, *don't* let him onto the idea. I had to face *so* many embarrassing questions, and then Lois and I had to talk him out of trying to write a paper on the topic." He gave them a wry half-smile. "Let's face it; it's not like a paper on Kryptonian-Earthling interbreeding could keep all its subjects anonymous."

They chuckled.

"Do you want to meet them?" his counterpart asked. "I've told Lois about you already, and Anne probably won't be *too* surprised to see copies of Mommy and Daddy; we've already had to deal with clones a couple times."

"Ugh, clones," Lois groaned.

"Perhaps, if it's not too much trouble," said Clark. "Where are they?"

"Right behind you," said a voice.

Lois and Clark turned. Behind them stood a very familiar brunette, holding a squirming toddler. Immediately, Clark decided that this dark-haired little girl was the most beautiful child that he had ever seen.

"Hi," said the woman. "I don't suppose I need to tell you that I'm Lois Lane."

"It's nice to meet you," his wife said. Clark nodded his agreement.

"I see you've already met my husband," the other Lois went on. "We were just about to go into the playground; do you want to join us?"

"I don't know," said Lois. She turned to him. "Do you think we have time?"

Clark cocked his head and listened. Off in the distance, he could hear the sound of someone swearing and kicking machinery, and a flustered Englishman trying to restore calm. He turned back to his wife. "I think we have time," he said.

"Good," she said, and smiled at her counterpart. "There is so much we have to talk about."

The End.