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America's Fortress of Solitude

by Dale Bridges

When I was eight years old, I punched my best friend, Ray Bledsoe, in the head because he said that Lois Lane didn't really love Superman. In retrospect, I think I might have overreacted slightly, but at the time, I felt my actions were justified.

It might seem kind of strange to some readers that the only thing Ray found unbelievable about Superman was his personal relationship with his coworker. After all, this is a dude who shoots laser beams out of his eyes and fights crime wearing red boots and blue tights. However, Ray had a point. In the comic book world, Superman's extraordinary abilities and fashion sense are completely understandable. He gained his powers when the radiation from Earth's yellow sun mutated his alien DNA (duh). And as for his costume: try kicking the crap out of super villains while wearing blue jeans and Birkenstocks sometime. I think you'll find it's a lot harder than it looks.

On the other hand, it's difficult to believe that an intelligent woman like Lois — who is a newspaper reporter, for the love of God — would be fooled by Superman's lame Clark Kent disguise: a blue suit and a pair of dorky glasses. Ray's argument was actually fairly sophisticated for a kid that slept with a Scooby-Doo night light. Ray believed that a woman who is truly in love with a man should notice certain details about him — such as the fact that *he is the same goddamn person she sees at work every goddamn day*. At best, their relationship is dysfunctional. At worst, it is a sham.

Of course, Superman and Lois have always been a bit of a mismatch. Superman was raised in Smallville, Kan., by his foster parents, Jonathan and Martha Kent, while Lois is a city girl, hailing from the appropriately named Metropolis. He's the conservative boy scout-type; she's a blue-state feminist. At the very least, they need to watch a few episodes of *Dr. Phil* and work on their communication skills before they start apartment hunting.

And when you think about it, as a boyfriend, Superman/Clark is emotionally distant and a bit passive/aggressive. He keeps secrets. He won't talk about his real parents. He can see through walls and hear conversations that are happening two miles away, which is bound to feel a tad invasive after a while. But Lois is no prize, either. For starters, the woman is workaholic and kind of a narcissist. She's always blowing Clark off to go on some assignment for the Daily Planet. She never has time for anyone else. And she's horribly superficial. She drools all over Clark when he's dressed up as the athletic, handsome Superman, but she won't even give him the time of day when he puts on a pair of glasses.

In many ways, Lois and Clark represent the ultimate paradox of modern American gender roles. Lois has to work twice as hard to prove that a woman can succeed in a man's world, but at the end of the day, she ignores opportunities to engage in an emotionally satisfying relationship and instead falls for the hunky, tough guy who can come to her rescue in an emergency. Clark tries to be passive and non-confrontational whenever possible, but society is constantly demanding that he assert himself through violence and authoritative behavior (America doesn't just want men; it wants *super* men).

In short, Lois and Clark are my parents. And they're probably your parents, too.

In the same year that I punched Ray Bledsoe in the head, I began to notice a change in my parents' relationship. They were never the type of couple to make-out in public or call each other pet names like "Pumpkin" and "Sugar Britches," but now they seemed to actively resent one another. My dad started spending all his time in front of the TV, and my mom became an exercise nut. They divided the house into occupational zones. At night, while my dad watched the Broncos game in the living room, my mom angrily lifted weights in the basement. The kitchen was the Gaza Strip.

And while my parents were fighting over psychological boundaries throughout the house, I was retreating into the fantasy worlds of sci-fi and comic books in my room. I chose Superman because he represented unconditional idealism. Unlike Batman, the Incredible Hulk and other comic book heroes with complicated motives, there was no ambiguity with the Man of Steel. Superman was always good, and he never failed. Therefore, when Ray Bledsoe suggested that Superman and Lois might not be as happy as they appear on the surface, I kind of flipped out, because on some level I knew he was talking about my parents.

There's a reason why the Baby Boomers have such a high divorce rate. They were the first generation that had to deal with the knowledge that America (and, by extension, the American



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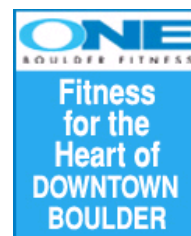


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family) wasn't perfect. And while scholars will probably point to Vietnam and Nixon to explain this, I will always think about Superman at the North Pole, locked away in his Fortress of Solitude. He and Lois can't talk about their problems, because if they do their universe will implode, so they just sit there, ignoring one another, waiting for Lex Luthor to blow something up.

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