

# Boys' Night Out: Floats, Flags, and Fireworks

by Deborah Rorabaugh (SHADO Librarian)

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Rating: K+

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**Author's Notes:** Set in the Shadows Universe, nine months after **Crystal Dreams**. I am considering a short series of 'Boy's Night Out' stories with Clark and Jason. This is the first in the series, although probably not the first in the timeline.

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"Where's Dad?" seven year old Jason Kent whined as he peered through the French doors at the heavy rain. "He promised we'd go see the fire works."

His mother nodded at the wide screen TV. GNN was covering Superman's efforts to contain the California wild fires. "You know he'll be back as soon as he can. Besides, I don't think we'll be seeing any fireworks in Metropolis this year. It's raining too hard."

Thunder rumbled as if to echo her statement. Mother Nature was putting on a grand display of her own. The lights flickered as lightning split the sky and thunder rattled the house. The month old baby in Lois Lane's arms looked up from her suckling then settled back down to finish her meal. Unlike Jason before her, Lara Richelle was an 'easy' baby, unfussy and content to get on with the task of eating, sleeping, and growing without getting overly upset or distracted.

Jason flopped down on the sofa, his lower lip pushed out in a pout.

"We can watch the display in Gotham or D.C. on the TV," Lois offered.

"It's not the same," Jason complained.

"What isn't the same?" a familiar voice asked. Lois looked over to see her husband standing in the open doorway to the back deck. His clothes were damp and his glasses were in his hand.

"What isn't the same?" Clark repeated.

"Watching the fireworks on TV," Jason told him. "The fireworks were rained out. Can't you do something about the rain?"

"Even Superman's no match for Mother Nature," Clark told his son.

"How is everything in California?" Lois asked as he came and sat next to her on the sofa. Lara had drifted off to sleep and Lois adjusted her bra and blouse to cover herself.

"Under control," he told her. "The local people should be able to handle it unless the wind whips up again. And the weather people are predicting cool and calm for the next few days. Maybe even a little rain."

"That's good," Lois murmured. Clark still smelled of smoke as she snuggled closer to him.

"So, what are we going to do about the fireworks? You did promise."

"I know," Clark admitted. "And I do happen to know a great place to watch fireworks. You can see four displays at once. But..."

"But?"

"But..." He took a deep breath and gave her apologetic look. "It's on the West Coast."

"What did you do, take an inventory of all the best places to watch fireworks?" Lois asked. It wouldn't have surprised her if he had. He and Jason had been planning this outing for a week.

Clark grinned. "Actually, one of my high school buddies is in charge of a summer camp up in that area and invited me and Jason to a flag retirement ceremony. He also asked me to extend the invitation to Superman if I saw him. Do you want to come with us?"

Lois looked down at the sleeping baby in her arms. She wanted to go with them, wanted to get away from the city for a little bit. She had forgotten how claustrophobic being stuck at home with a newborn could be even though she was still working, turning in stories from home. The arrangement was working, but she was exhausted.

"I would love to, but I doubt I could keep my eyes open," Lois told him. "You and Jason go and have a good time. He needs some father-son bonding time."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. Now git," she ordered. "Wake me up when you get back, okay."

He kissed her. "Okay."

"Where are we going, Dad?" Jason asked above Chicago. They had paused to watch some of the fireworks display over Lake Michigan from a vantage point few other people had - above the explosions.

"You'll see," Clark promised as they started west again. Clark wasn't worried they might be seen; they were both in dark clothing. Black long sleeved shirts and dark jeans, black sneakers.

Clark headed for Smallville, to the Elbow River where the local Scout troops were presenting a short patriotic program and a small fireworks display. Clark waved to his mother, catching her attention.

She looked around then walked over to him and Jason. "Isn't Lois with you?"

"She decided to stay home and get some sleep," Clark told her. "The baby..."

"Well, having a new baby in the house isn't exactly easy, you know," Martha commented with a smile. "I'm so glad you're around this time to help."

"Mo-om," Clark whined only half joking. He still regretted, and would probably never overcome regretting, leaving Earth to discover Krypton's fate, leaving Lois alone and pregnant. That he'd had no way of knowing their tryst had left her carrying his child didn't lessen his self recrimination. He had missed so much.

"Ben's in charge of the hot dogs and hamburgers," Martha said, breaking into his glum train of thought. "There's salad and soda and there might even be some ice cream left for root beer floats."

"We just stopped by to kill some time before heading to the coast," Clark told her. Jason tugged on his arm.

"Dad, how about some root beer floats? Pleeeeease?"

Martha chuckled. "I'll go see if I can rustle up two root beer floats. If anybody asks, I'll tell them your working on something in Wichita and just drove down for a quick visit."

"Thanks Mom," Clark said as she disappeared into the shadows. He turned to his son, expression stern. "Jason, begging is for dogs."

The boy giggled and Clark found he couldn't keep his stern demeanor. He started laughing along with his son. It felt good to just be out, without worrying about the rest of the world for a while, without worrying about deadlines or interviews.

A few minutes later Martha returned with two large drink cups. She handed one to Jason who peered into the cup in rapt fascination before sticking the straw in his mouth.

"You're in luck. Madge just brought over some more ice cream," Martha told them, smiling as she watched Jason battling the ice cream with just a straw.

Clark took a sip of his own float. Sweet and spicy, creamy and fizzy. It reminded him of other Fourth of Julys when *he* was a boy. Root beer floats were a special treat on the Fourth. There were no real holidays in the summer on a farm but on the Fourth, up until the day Jonathan Kent died, one of the extra things they did for the holiday was make vanilla ice cream in an old hand cranked ice cream maker. Cranking the machine had been Clark's job. It was always vanilla. Other days they might make strawberry or other flavors, but on the Fourth it was always vanilla for root beer floats and for strawberry and blueberry shortcake.

"I wish Dad was here," Clark murmured to his mother. "I miss him."

"He'd be proud of you, you know," she murmured back, reaching up to ruffle his hair.

Clark nodded and finished his float. The Scout program was beginning. A brief history of Old Glory, the meaning of liberty. Jason slurped the last of his float and Martha shushed at him.

Clark listened to the program for a while then: "We need to get going," he whispered to his mother. She gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Bring Lois and the baby next time," she ordered in a whisper.

He smiled. "I will, I promise." With that Clark led Jason into the cover of a copse of trees and took off with the boy under one arm.

Lois turned off the television. There was nothing on TV she wanted to watch - the fireworks in DC were over and she was in no mood for war movies. Lara had settled down to sleep and Lois decided it was a good idea to try to get some more sleep.

It was hard to fall asleep. Clark's side of the bed was cold and empty and even though she knew she should be used to it, she missed him when he was gone out of their bed.

"Get a grip, Lane," she muttered to herself. "You up and married a guy who only needs a couple hours sleep a night. What do you expect? Fireworks every night?"

She rolled over and grabbed the pillow from his side of the bed and hugged it to her, breathing in his scent. Finally, she fell asleep.

Jason was quiet as they skimmed over the Rocky Mountains. Lights from small towns and cities twinkled like bright stars beneath them. After a few moments Clark pointed out the glow of the coastal cities. Seattle and Pugetopolis to the north, California and its millions to the south. Further north was Vancouver and Victoria. The dark gash of the Columbia was below them as they dropped closer to the ground.

"Is that where we're going?" Jason asked quietly, pointing to the city ahead.

"No," Clark told him. He pointed to a bluff several miles away from the city, a pool of darkness surrounded by light. "It's a camp ground," he added. Jason shivered and Clark suspected it wasn't from cold, but he asked anyway. Jason shook his head.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Clark asked gently as they set down on the wooded bluff. Jason shook his head again.

"I miss him too," Clark said. Richard White, the man Jason had known as his father from the time he was born, had been murdered while on a camp out with Jason and Clark. Clark had been overcome with kryptonite poisoning and had been unable to prevent it. Jason still occasionally had nightmares. For that matter, so did Clark.

"There aren't any bad men hiding here, are there?" Jason whispered.

"I certainly hope not," Clark said, making a show of pulling down his glasses and scanning the area. "But we *are* surrounded by Cub Scouts."

Jason giggled. Clark took his hand and headed toward the isolated campfire he had spotted from the air.

A man in a khaki uniform was tending the fire. He started when he realized he wasn't alone in the clearing.

"Hello Bob," Clark greeted, stepping closer to the fire so they could be seen. The man peered at him, relaxing as he recognized him.

"Jeez Clark," Bob remarked. "Give a guy a heart attack... When did you get in? I'd've had Milly pick you up at the airport."

"That's okay," Clark assured his old friend. Robert Morris had been a year behind Clark all through school in Smallville and they'd been in the same Boy Scout Troop. Bob had married his high school sweetheart and was now a Vancouver cop with a wife and three kids.

"We weren't sure when we were getting in," Clark added.

Bob tended the fire a moment before straightening up. "You must be Jason," he said. Jason nodded.

"Did Superman get our invitation?" Bob went on.

"Yes," Clark said. "And there's even a good chance he'll show up."

Clark heard the tramp of feet on the trail to the clearing. After a moment a color guard carrying a folded flag, followed by a crowd of Cub Scouts, their parents, and Scout masters appeared in the clearing. They assembled around the fire.

"Stay here," Clark ordered Jason. The boy nodded as Clark disappeared into the darkness. Superman had been invited to the ceremony and Superman was going to attend.

One of the older scouts stepped forward to stand near the fire. "The following is a direct quotation from the beginning of Title 36, Section 176, of the United States Code: 'No disrespect should be shown to the flag of the United States of America.' Furthermore, Paragraph (K) of this same Title 36, Section 176, states: 'The flag, when it is in such condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem for display, should be destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning.'"

The color guard came forward and unfurled the folded flag, displaying it to the assembled group. The flag was tattered and faded. The first boy came forward with a pair of scissors.

"Permit me," Superman said, approaching the fire. There weren't supposed to be cameras present at the ceremony but cameras and cell phones came out anyway, documenting his presence.

Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to take Bob up on his invitation but it was too late now.

Superman stood still for a moment, letting them get their photos before going on with the ceremony. A few didn't want to stop. Finally he turned to those few.

"A flag retirement is a solemn occasion, akin to a funeral. Would you want paparazzi

snapping away at the funeral of one of *your* loved ones?" The recalcitrant few finally put away their camera and cell phones. He gestured for the color guard to hold out the tattered flag for him.

A second older boy stepped forward, reading from a paper lit by a flashlight. "I am your flag. I was born on June 14, 1777. I am more than cloth just shaped into a design. I am the refuge of the world's oppressed people. I am the silent sentinel of freedom. I am the emblem of the greatest sovereign nation on earth. I am the inspiration for which American Patriots gave their lives and fortunes. I have led your sons into battle from Valley Forge to the blistering desert of the Arabian Peninsula. I walked in silence with each of your honored dead to their final resting place beneath the silent white crosses row upon row. I have flown through peace and war, strife and prosperity, and amidst it all I have been respected.

"'Old Glory' is my nickname; proudly I wave on high. Honor me, respect me, defend me with your lives and your fortunes. Never let my enemies tear me down from my lofty position lest I never return. Keep alight the fires of patriotism, strive earnestly for the spirit of democracy. Worship Eternal God and keep His commandments and I shall remain the bulwark of peace and freedom for all people. For I am your flag."

Superman was finished cutting the flag into pieces - the red and white stripes separated from one another but the blue field and stars intact - just as the boy finished his reading.

"My red stripes symbolize the blood spilled in defense of this glorious nation," the boy continued.

"Let us retire the red stripes," the first boy announced. "Hand salute!" The people in uniform put their hands up in salute while those in civilian clothes placed their right hands over their hearts as the red fabric strips were placed on the fire. Clark was pleased to see Jason following the lead of the others. As for himself, while in the Suit he was a helpful refuge from another planet, a naturalized citizen of Planet Earth rather than an American. He stood respectfully in an 'at ease' position, hands clasped behind his back.

"Two!" the first boy ordered, ending the salute. The red had already burned to ash, with a little help from Superman.

"My white stripes signify the burning tears shed by Americans who lost their sons," the second speaker intoned.

"Let us retire the white stripes," the first boy said. The white strips were placed in the fire and burned down quickly.

"My blue field is indicative of God's heaven under which we fly," the second boy said. "My stars, clustered together, unify 50 States as one for God and Country."

"Let us retire the blue field with stars," the first boy instructed. This time the blue field was placed on the fire. Someone was playing a painful rendition of 'Taps' as the blue field blackened and burned down to ash.

There was a moment of silence before the ceremony team filed out down the trail, followed by the rest of the group. Superman waved and lifted off into the darkness. Seconds later, Clark reappeared by Jason's side in time to follow the others while uniformed adults put out the camp fire.

"Dad, I thought burning the flag was dis... disrespectful," Jason whispered, tripping over the word.

"Disrespectful?"

Jason nodded. "Grandpa Sam gets all upset when he sees people burning flags."

Grandpa Sam was Jason's maternal grandfather, a soon to be retired U.S. army general.

Clark was aware of Grandpa Sam's opinions on many things, including flag burning.

"Grandpa Sam is right. It is disrespectful. But we were 'retiring' this flag. It's kind of like the difference between arson and cremation. One is to destroy something, sometimes even a body, and the other is a respectful way to dispose of a body instead of burying it."

"Oh," Jason murmured. "When can we see the fireworks?"

"Almost there," Clark promised. The group was heading toward the bluff that overlooked the Columbia River. To the northwest was Portland and the Willamette River, almost directly across the river was Vancouver and its suburbs. To the east were Troutdale and Gresham. The fireworks displays had already started over the Columbia and Willamette. They were too far away to hear the explosions but the clear sky was alight with sparklers and rockets.

Jason gasped as he looked out at the displays and Clark smiled.

The show was over too soon, but Jason was asleep on his feet. Clark gathered him up and the boy snuggled into his shoulder.

"Clark," Bob said, coming up to him as the group dispersed to the campsites lower on the mountain. "Thanks for inviting Superman for us. I mean, you probably get to see him everyday, but for us it was a real thrill. And I do apologize for the cameras. Everyone was told to leave them down at the campsites, but..."

"No apology is necessary, I'm sure. He was happy to do it," Clark assured him. Jason stirred against his shoulder. "I've got to get this guy into a bed."

"Need a ride anywhere?" Bob asked.

Clark shook his head. "Got it covered but thanks."

Bob nodded and hurried off to tend to his duties. Clark made sure he was out of sight then walked into the trees before taking off vertically then heading home.

"What time is it?" Lois asked as the bed creaked under her husband's weight.

"About three in the morning," Clark answered.

"Good thing there's no school tomorrow," she murmured. "How'd he do?"

"Fine. We watched fireworks over Lake Michigan, had root beer floats in Smallville, took part in that flag retirement Superman was invited to, saw more fireworks."

He put his arms around her and she relaxed into him, enjoying how warm he was. The bed had been cold without him.

"I missed you," she murmured. He gently kissed her neck.

"You could have come with us," he reminded her.

"No... but we can always do a little celebrating of our own..."

No more words were needed as his mouth covered hers and she felt fireworks.