

In The Bleak Midwinter

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Rating: K

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*In the bleak midwinter,
Frosty winds made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone...
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter,
Long ago...*

Lois Lane sat at her desk in the Daily Planet newsroom, looking out at the pillars with their decorations, contemplating her own undecorated house. Christmas was only a few days away and she simply hadn't had the energy to climb into the storage space over the garage and pull down the Christmas decorations. For five years that had been Richard's job - decorating the house, checking the lights, buying the Christmas tree. Richard had loved Christmas, had loved sharing it Lois and Jason. Only now Richard was dead and buried and Lois was sitting staring at nothing, too numb, too exhausted to care about anything but work and her son.

She didn't really care, she told herself. She had only gone along with Richard's Christmas celebrations for Jason's sake. Lois had lost the Christmas spirit a long time ago - too many Thanksgivings with her father away from home, too many Christmases where she'd had to keep her younger sister's spirits up because Santa wasn't coming. Too many Christmas Eves where the only holiday cheer was in the bottle her mother had finished off before falling into a drunken stupor.

It had been Richard and Jason's delight in the sights and sounds of Christmas that had made the holidays tolerable for her for the past five years. Especially seeing Jason's wide-eyed glee at seeing Santa Claus and the reindeer, the crèches at the local churches, watching him open his presents then play with the boxes instead of the toys that had come in them.

For Jason's sake, Lois tried to pull herself out of her numbness. *I should at least wrap his presents when I get home. Jimmy and Clark will probably be there with Jason when I get there. They can keep him occupied.*

School was out and rather than take vacation time, Lois had brought Jason into the newsroom - again. Jason was used to hanging out in the newsroom and he liked hanging out with Clark and Jimmy. It didn't hurt that Clark Kent was Jason's biological father even though the newsroom wags were still trying to figure that one out.

Or more to the point, they were trying to figure out why Lois Lane had let Clark Kent live

after he returned to Metropolis and the Daily Planet following a six-year absence. He had left her without a word, alone and pregnant, leaving Richard White to pick up the pieces.

She tried to concentrate on the last paragraph of the piece she was working on - a side bar on the dangers of unattended candles and dry trees. It was a mindless piece - a reworking of the same warnings the Planet published this time every year updated with the newest fire statistics and prevention suggestions. Winter was a bad time of year for a lot of people. Having your house burn down from ignorance wouldn't help.

Lois's eyes searched out the framed photo of her, Richard, and Jason that used to sit on her desk. Then she recalled the frame and glass had broken just before Luthor's crystalquake. It had disappeared altogether sometime during the cleanup and she hadn't bothered to replace it.

She looked over to the desk opposite hers. Clark's desk was clear, except for the tiny fiber optic tree that sat in one corner. Jimmy's desk was also buttoned up for the weekend. Even Jason's art supplies - which were normally spread between Lois's, Clark's, and Jimmy's desks - were neatly put away.

Lois still wasn't sure how the three conspirators had managed it on a Friday afternoon, but Jason, Clark, and Jimmy had talked Perry into letting them cover some sort of innocuous story that certainly wouldn't have needed a staff photographer and the paper's second best reporter on it. An assignment innocuous enough that Jason could go with them. Neither man would tell her what they were working on, except to assure her that Jason would be safe and they'd have him home in time for dinner - and they planned to handle dinner for her. Knowing the three of them, dinner was going to be pizza.

"Lois?" Perry White's gravelly voice brought her out of her reverie.

"Just finished it," she announced, pressing the sequence of keys that would send the document to the printer.

He stopped by her desk, peering down at her from beneath grizzled eyebrows. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, why shouldn't I be?" she asked back.

"The holidays are the worst, you know," Perry said quietly. "Jerry's been gone seven years now and Alice... I still catch her crying when she's pulling out the old boxes of ornaments because the ones Jerry made in school are packed there."

It was rare for Perry to be so open even with Lois and she was one of the few Daily Planet employees who had known Jerry White. Jerry - Perry Jerome White Jr. - had been a few years younger than Lois and like her, he had spent much of his childhood with his father being disappointed in him. Lois's father had resented the fact that his first-born wasn't a boy. Perry, at least in Jerry's mind, had wanted a son who was like him - hard driving, articulate, passionate about the truth and his profession. Jerry White had been none of those. He was a con man and a thief and when, finally, he was caught and sent to prison it was everyone's fault but his.

When Jerry was released from prison things seemed to have started looking up for him. He got a job, met a woman, got married. Their first child, Marilyn, arrived less than a year later, Jerry was doing well as a truck dispatcher, and it had looked as though Jerry and Perry had finally accepted one another. Jerry and Gina had a second child, a boy they named Joshua. Then the bottom fell out - the company Jerry had been working for was implicated in drug smuggling thanks to the efforts of an investigative team named Lane and Kent. Jerry's innocence in the matter turned out to be moot. His body was found in the burnt out offices of

the trucking company with two bullet holes in it. Perry and Alice had been devastated and Gina's decision to leave Metropolis with the two babies hadn't helped.

"But you do get through it," Perry continued. "You find you can remember the good times without breaking down quite as often. You get to the point where you can remember them without drowning in that empty place in your heart. It's hard but you can get there."

"That's what Clark's mom kept telling me," Lois told him.

"She's a wise woman," Perry said. "Why don't you get on home?"

"Yeah," Lois agreed, grabbing her coat and purse. "I figure Porthos, Athos and d'Artagnan will beat me there."

Perry chuckled. "I suppose that makes you Aramis?"

"Yeah," Lois told him. "You can blame Clark and Jimmy for that, by the way. Jason found Richard's *Three Musketeers* DVDs last Saturday and they had a movie marathon." There was a catch in her voice and she hoped Perry hadn't caught it. Richard had loved the *Three Musketeers* movies.

"Go home Lois," Perry ordered. "And try to have a Merry Christmas."

"You too, Chief," Lois said, heading for the door.

The city was crowded, even more than a normal Friday night, with last minute shoppers. Many of her co-workers were already having drinks at Dooley's, but Lois had begged off. The bright decorations on the office buildings and department stores simply added to the cold depression in her chest. Intellectually she knew that every one of the people in the cars around her or walking the sidewalks had their own grief hiding inside. It didn't help.

I'll get home, see what the boys have been up to, and call it a day. I'll wrap Jason's presents in the morning, before he wakes up.

She maneuvered her Audi onto Ordway Drive, then to the Jefferson Parkway and the Jefferson Bridge to Lafayette. It had been snowing off and on all week and the weather-guessers were predicting a white Christmas. The worst of the traffic problems had happened earlier in the week. Superman's assistance had been required several times that first day to clear the various bridges and roadways of cars and trucks that had skated into guardrails.

Clark had complained, just as he had before he'd disappeared for nearly six years, that he didn't understand how people living in a city that had snow every year, and was even subject to blizzards, couldn't remember from one year to the next how to drive in snow. Lois and Jimmy simply nodded understandingly as he vented, just as they had before.

It was odd, she thought as she wended her way off the bridge onto the streets that would take her home, how the old dynamic had come back following Richard's death and Clark's near death. Lane and Kent with photos by James B. Olsen, the Three Musketeers of the Daily Planet. She wondered how Richard would have fit in, assuming things had gone differently - if he had lived and if Lois hadn't remembered that it was really Clark under Superman's red cape. Or would Richard's presence have kept the trio from reforming. Perry had assigned Richard and Clark to work together, not Lois and Clark.

"Do you think Clark would be interested in moving over to International?" Richard had asked after they spent a late night in Clark's new apartment. The two men had been doing research into the kryptonite ammunition that had flooded the city following Superman's return.

"He's been out of touch for a long time," Lois reminded him.

"I know," Richard said. "But I've read some of his old international stuff. I'm astonished

he didn't get at least a nod from the Pulitzer committee for his series on the Latislan-Podansk treaty negotiations. It was brilliant."

"The Pulitzer committees are a little snobbish when it comes to stories about Superman," Lois reminded him. It was an unpleasant fact, but the only Superman related article that had ever gotten the nod from any Pulitzer committee was her own editorial 'Why The World Doesn't Need Superman.' Superman sold papers, but covering him didn't win journalism prizes.

"Pity," Richard said. "Clark's work really deserves to be noticed. I think I'll ask Uncle Perry what he thinks."

No, Lois decided. Richard would have pulled Clark into International and the tall mid-westerner would have stood quietly by as Lois Lane became Mrs. Richard White. Clark would have become 'Uncle Clark,' and Superman would have been the same distant hero to her son that he was to everyone else. *Would that have been better? I don't know. But I miss Richard so much. I really have to get those decorations down, for Jason's sake. Richard would have wanted that. Damn - all the trees are going to be picked over...*

The drapes were drawn across the living room windows as she pulled into the driveway, although light was peeping out along the edges telling her 'the boys' were probably inside. The garage door opened and she drove in.

She could smell pizza as she walked through the kitchen. *I knew it.* The oven was on and the timer indicated there were still a few minutes left to go before it was ready. The lights in the dining room were turned off but there was an odd glow from the living room reflecting off the pale walls. She could hear Jason giggling and Clark shushing him.

Curiosity piqued, she dropped her coat and purse on the dining table and continued into the living room.

She gasped at what she saw. Christmas had arrived. Clark and Jimmy had found all the decorations in the storage area and the room was aglow with lights and garlands. There was a tree standing in the corner and four decorated stockings hung above the fireplace. Lois stared at her son.

"Unca' Clark and Unca' Jimmy don't have fireplaces, so I said they could hang their stockings here," Jason told her proudly.

"We all figure Santa's smart enough to figure it out," Jimmy added. He and Clark both had on red elf caps with white tassels and they looked like they were waiting for her approval.

"Uh, where did you find a tree?" Lois managed to ask. She was certain there wasn't a decent looking tree left for sale in all of greater Metropolis. And the one in the corner was more than simply 'decent'. It was so perfect that if it hadn't smelled of spruce she would have thought it was artificial.

Clark cleared his throat and Lois was sure she saw a faint blush climbing into his face. "Um, they, uh, still had a pretty good selection in U-cut place where Jason and I went," Clark managed to stammer out.

"Uh huh... And where was that?"

Jimmy seemed to be making a show of keeping his mouth shut. Jason was giggling. Clark stared at his feet a long moment before looking over at her. "North of Vancouver."

"Canada? You went to Canada for a Christmas tree?"

"Um, you know, Lois, there is a Vancouver in the U.S., too," Clark said.

"It's in Washington," Jason chimed in. "It's in Clark County, and there's even a Kent in Washington. Isn't that neat?"

"Is that where you guys went?" Lois asked. Clark was watching her as if he expected to

be yelled at for taking the responsibility himself for getting the tree.

"I picked out the tree, Mommy," Jason volunteered. "It was in a forest with a lot of other trees and Unca' Clark used a chain saw to cut it down. And before that we had hot chocolate with real marshmallows at a place called Victoria. It's on an island."

"I wanted to take him to high tea at the Empress, but they were booked up," Clark explained. "So we stopped at a little tea shop I know so Jason could get warmed up."

"In Victoria?"

Clark nodded, blue eyes wide behind his glasses.

"In Canada?"

Clark nodded again.

"I should be furious with you," Lois stated. She looked around the room. They had done a marvelous job. Jason looked so happy. Clark and Jimmy were waiting for her approval. "But I can't believe you guys did this."

"Jason told us you'd been too tired to decorate," Jimmy explained. "So we decided to help."

"It's beautiful," Lois said. The oven beeped.

"Pizza!" Jason yelled.

"I guess dinner is ready," Clark announced, following Jason to the kitchen.

*Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air;
But his mother only
In her maiden bliss
Worshipped the beloved
With a kiss...*

"I still can't believe you guys did this," Lois repeated after dinner was done - two take-n-bake pizzas from the neighborhood pizzeria, salad, and soda. She waved her hand to indicate the decorated living room.

"We wanted to do it," Clark said. "And I know this time of year is hard for a lot of people, and I know how many hours you've been putting in at work."

"And you two haven't been putting in just as many hours?" she asked. The investigation into the activities and identity of the mysterious crime lord known only as 'the Boss' had been taking a lot of their time. Since it wasn't something Perry had approved, she and Clark still had to keep up with their normal reporting duties on the city beat. And Clark still had his 'other job' to worry about.

"Perry gave Jimmy and me the afternoon off since we're working Sunday and Monday," Clark told her. "You know how it goes. I'm still low man on the totem pole in the newsroom, so I'm working the holidays. And if it means somebody else can spend the time with their family, I'm okay with that."

"And ever since, you know, Angela... the Planet *is* my family," Jimmy said. "I don't have any place else to be, not really. Besides, it was fun putting up the decorations, even though I ended up doing a lot of it by myself." He shrugged, giving Clark a grin before turning back to Lois. "When Clark said he was taking Jason to get a tree, I wasn't expecting them to be gone for three hours." He chuckled. "But Canada? Do I want to know how the devil you two got to

Canada?"

"Unca' Jimmy!" Jason protested with a giggle.

"Oh, yeah..." Jimmy said with a chuckle. "Superman to the rescue. I'd like to have gotten a picture of that."

"Jimmy..." Lois warned.

"The local lots were pretty well picked over," Clark said. He pushed his glasses up his nose. Lois knew it was a nervous habit. In fact, she had even seen him, as Superman, catching himself lifting his hand to his face to adjust nonexistent glasses.

"Well, next time, remember to make reservations before you fly out for high tea at the Empress," Lois joked.

"It was a spur of the moment thing," Clark admitted sheepishly. "But tonight isn't."

Lois eyed him speculatively. "And what's happening tonight?"

"Jason mentioned he liked skating, and there's an ice skating rink over at Lafayette Park," Clark said. "So I thought... If you want to..."

"I'd love to," Lois said.

It was still snowing off and on, fat white flakes that obscured the landscape, turning the streets and houses into a winter fantasy. Lafayette Park was a few blocks away - not a long walk, even in the snow. They were all bundled up in ski jackets and scarves, except for Clark who was wearing a long gray overcoat. Lois hadn't been able to talk him into getting something less formal.

Jason kept running ahead then back, exhorting the adults to hurry as he danced in the snow. He stomped in the small snowdrifts at the edge of the sidewalk, showing off his red snow boots. Tonight was the first chance he'd had to wear them outside.

"What I wouldn't give to have that much energy," Jimmy commented. "I'm getting tired just watching him."

Lois and Clark both laughed. Jimmy was several years younger than Lois and was famous around the newsroom for his boundless energy. But Jason was running rings around him.

The skating rink was a busy place. The parks department had strung floodlights throughout the open area around the frozen wading pool, giving the illusion of daylight. Wollcott High School was raising money for the school band by running a concession stand renting out ice skates and selling coffee, hot cocoa, and cookies. One of teens was running a sound system, playing dance music and Christmas songs through loud speakers.

Lois rented a pair of skates for Jason and made sure the laces were properly tied before sending him along with Jimmy.

"You're not going skating?" Clark asked her. He brushed the snow off one of the benches overlooking the rink.

"In a little bit," she told him as she sat beside him. "It's just..." *It's not the same without Richard.* "It's just that the first time I went ice skating as an adult, it was with Richard. I was four months pregnant, but I was refusing to take it easy, refusing to cut back. Richard made it his mission to make sure I took care of myself, got enough rest, had some fun. Every Saturday he'd find someplace different to go, something to see or do that I'd never do on my own. You remember what a workaholic I was."

"I remember. It took Superman to keep up with you."

Lois managed to chuckle. "Yeah, but Richard certainly tried. I miss him. I wake up at night and he's not there and then I remember why." She couldn't help it. A tear escaped,

running down her cheek. After two and a half months of living alone with just Jason, she still woke up in the middle of the night to reach over to the other side of the bed only to find it empty. There were still nights that she cried herself to sleep and she knew that Jason missed his daddy terribly.

"He was a good man," Clark said simply. He stared off into the distance, eyes focussing on something she couldn't see. She knew from his faint frown that something was happening that might need Superman's attention.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Apartment high-rise in Midtown."

He was gone almost before he had finished speaking. *I wonder if I'll ever get used to that. Clark Kent moonlights as Superman. Richard asked me if I still loved Superman and I said 'no'. I lied. I just didn't know it.*

"Where's CK off to this time?" Jimmy asked from somewhere close.

Lois looked up to see Jimmy and Jason, cheeks red from the cold and exertion, standing in front of her.

"Oh, you know Clark," she managed to say, trying to sound nonchalant. "Something about an apartment high-rise in Midtown?"

Jimmy's shoulders sagged. "Clark knows the chief's been on my case to get some good shots of Superman in action."

"Well, I suspect it would have been a little hard for you to explain showing up in Midtown wearing ice skates," Lois said.

"Well..." After a moment he began to chuckle. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right," she told him. "I'll get you guys some cocoa. You look like you could use a warm up."

The line at the concession wasn't too long and she was back very shortly with three cups of cocoa.

"So, Monsieur Porthos, have you finished your Christmas shopping?" she asked settling back onto the bench.

"Oh, that's hot," Jimmy complained after taking a sip of his cocoa. Lois noted that he hadn't answered her as he took the plastic top off the cup to allow it to cool a little.

Finally he said, "Christmas shopping isn't all that hard when all you have for relatives is a maiden aunt who collects cats... But yeah, I'm pretty well set. I've got my secret Santa gift taken care of, at least. How about you?"

Lois sighed. "I'm pretty much done, I guess. The secret Santa thing's handled. I wasn't planning on doing much else, since... Well, Christmas was more Richard's thing. I still can't believe you and Clark gave up your afternoon off to decorate my house. Didn't Clark ever tell you I was the original Missus Grinch?"

"Mommee! You're not green," Jason protested. "The Grinch is *green!*"

"Oh, I forgot..."

Jason giggled and finished his cocoa. Then: "Mommy, come skate with me?"

"Sure, munchkin," Lois agreed. She put on her own skates then took his small mittened hand as he led her onto the ice.

A waltz was blaring through the speakers as Lois attempted to keep her balance. Suddenly a pair of strong hands grabbed her from behind and steadied her. She looked back over her shoulder to see Clark.

"Thanks. I guess I'm a little out of practice... Did everything go okay?"

Clark nodded. "Lot of smoke but nobody was hurt... They got lucky."

As a reporter she felt the conflict between hoping everyone was safe and knowing that death and disaster sold papers and that was her job - to report on the death and disasters. She knew Clark felt it too, probably more than most. As Superman he'd seen so many deadly disasters and as Clark he'd also ended up writing about them. But she knew he also wished they had never happened, that he'd been able to get there in time to keep the fires and the gun battles and the hostage situations from becoming deadly.

"I'm glad everything was okay," Lois told him. "So, got your Christmas shopping done?"

He grinned as he guided her around the rink. "Yeah. I shipped Mom's package off a couple weeks ago, actually. Secret Santa's taken care of and I got some little things for the guys in IT since they've been so patient with me."

She chuckled. She'd caught Clark, more than once in the past months, glaring at his monitor as he tried to figure out why his computer wasn't doing what he wanted it to do. IT had replaced his keyboard at least twice - once because it had shattered and once after it had actually caught fire. The memory of the befuddled look on his face when she poured her coffee on the flames to put them out still made her laugh.

The music changed to something a little faster and Clark picked up the pace, pulling her along with him. "You skate almost as well as you dance," she commented.

"I learned to skate when I was about Jason's age," Clark told her. "And you already know about the dancing."

'I learned from a Nigerian princess who studied ballroom dancing in England,' he had told her the day before, at the Mayor's Winter Ball.

"Maybe I should send your princess a thank you note."

"It was a long time ago. I doubt she even remembers me," Clark said.

You might be surprised, Clark.

"So, I assume you got something for Perry, even though he said not to?" she said aloud.

"Of course," Clark said. "I'm still not sure why he bothered to hire me back. He didn't have to."

"Of course he did," she told him. "Perry wasn't about to lose the second best reporter on the East Coast to the competition, not even the Smallville Gazette."

"Ledger," Clark corrected. "Smallville Ledger. So, if he thinks I'm so good, why did he put me on obits?"

"Well, he did need to prove a point since you walked out last time and it was either obits or the Shack. And he knows how you feel about the Shack." The Shack was a converted storeroom on the sixth floor of the building that housed the MPD's Special Crimes Unit. It was dank, poorly lit and the Planet, the Star, and the Metropolis Weekly maintained a presence there as part of the police beat. The SCU was openly disdainful of the arrangement and the reporters assigned to the Shack considered it purgatory. Reporters assigned there were either on their way up, on their way down, or on their way out.

Clark had been assigned there for all of a month early in his career with the Daily Planet. His short stay was part of SCU legend - he fell out of one of their black helicopters into a dumpster on his first day at the Shack. It was an achievement no one else had dared to top. Most people at the Planet knew better than to mention the Shack to Clark.

"So, what did you get Perry?" she demanded.

"Um, a framed copy of the Paradoxical Commandments," Clark told her. "You know the ones. 'People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.'"

"Sounds like Mother Theresa," Lois commented.

"I think she was a fan."

A slower song began to play and Clark's expression turned more pensive. "I hope you don't mind, but I put my present for Jason under your tree." He gave her a worried look. "You really are okay that we went ahead and decorated for you, aren't you? I know that Christmas isn't one of your favorite holidays."

"Clark, you and Jimmy taking care of the decorations is probably one of the best Christmas presents I've had in a long time. And I know you two made Jason really happy."

"I'm glad. I was a little worried we might have, you know, over-stepped?"

"It really is fine," Lois assured him. "But tell me, you got Jason something, but did you get me anything?"

He grinned at her. "Funny you should ask that." He stopped in front of her, reached into his coat and brought out a shallow box wrapped in silver paper trimmed with a red ribbon. His head was bowed and his expression had grown solemn again. "I wanted to give you this tonight since I know I won't see you until the office party and it wouldn't be appropriate then..."

Her curiosity piqued, she tore open the wrapping, stuffing the paper into her coat pocket. She slipped the lid off the box. Inside was a copy of the photograph that had gone missing from her desk two and a half months before. The photo was matted and in a simple metal frame with engraving below the picture: *Richard, Jason and Lois*.

"Oh, Clark..." she breathed. "I thought... I thought it was gone."

"I accidentally broke the frame my first day back," Clark admitted. "The photo got damaged during the crystalquake. I had Jimmy scan it and fix it. He did a really good job, I think."

"You and Jimmy...?" she murmured. She felt the tears coming into her eyes, threatening to spill onto her cheeks. "It's beautiful. What did I ever do to deserve friends like you two?"

"Hey, I figure us Musketeers have got to stick together."

It wasn't exactly the response she'd expected, but Clark had a habit of throwing walls around himself when things got too much. But then, so did she. *We make quite a pair. We have a child together, but neither of us can get past the fact that I'm basically a widow, or that he walked out of my life six years ago. 'Richard is a good man. And you've been gone a long time...'*

She reached up and pulled his head closer. "Thank you for being my friend..." She kissed his cheek.

"I'll always be your friend, Lois..."

And maybe, someday, I'll deserve you...

"Merry Christmas, Clark."

"Merry Christmas, Lois."

What can I give him,

Poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd,

I would bring a lamb;

If I were I wise man,

I would do my part;

Yet what I can I give him...

Give my heart.

In the Bleak Midwinter, words by Christina Rossetti