

Man of Steel

WOMAN OF KLEENEX

Written by Larry Niven • Illustrated by Curt Swan

ABOUT

"**Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex**" is a 1969 essay in which science fiction author Larry Niven details the problems that Superman would face in sexual intercourse and reproducing with "a human woman designated LL for convenience," using arguments based on humorous reconciliation between physics, biology, and the abilities of Kryptonians as presented in Superman comic books at the time of its first publication.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

The essay was first published in the men's magazine Knight in 1969 and then collected in Niven's 1971 collection, **All the Myriad Ways**.

The article was republished in the 1978 anthology SuperHeroes edited by Michel Parry and noted with a star burst on the cover: "SPECIAL BONUS FEATURE! Intimate details of Superman's sex life revealed!"

In 1986, the essay was reposted onto Usenet; this led to what is thought to be the very first online report of copyright violation. I have yet to find any facts to support this claim, outside of a discussion group talking about the copyright violation, but there was a cease-and-desist letter sent from Niven and his lawyers to a Mr. Elf Sternberg over the use of one of his characters, the Kzinti, in a slash story that was posted on Usenet.

The essay was also reprinted in the 1990 Niven compilation N-Space.

A comic book-style adaptation - illustrated by Curt Swan. The veteran Superman artist was sought out to illustrate this decidedly non-canonical investigation into the amorous details of Kryptonian life on earth. They are decidedly Not-Safe-For-Work illustrations with all identifying logos and names removed. - was published in a 1995 edition of Penthouse Comix.

The number of reprints would also explain why some copies of the essay displays different ages for our Kryptonian. Ages 31 and 40 have been noted. For this slight update and reposting I will use the original age of 31.



He's faster than a speeding bullet. He's more powerful than a locomotive. He's able to leap tall buildings at a single bound. Why can't he get a girl?

At the ripe old age of thirty-one¹ Kal-El (alias Superman, alias Clark Kent) is still unmarried. Almost certainly he is still a virgin. This is a serious matter. The species itself is in danger!

An unwed Superman is a mobile Superman. Thus it has been alleged that those who chronicle the Man of Steel's adventures are responsible for his condition. But the cartoonists are not to blame.

Nor is Superman handicapped by psychological problems.

Granted that that poor oaf is not entirely sane. How can he be? He is an orphan, a refugee, and an alien. His homeland no longer exists in any form, save for gigatons upon gigatons of dangerous, prettily colored rocks.

¹ Superman first appeared in *Action Comics*, June 1938. This essay was first published in 1978. (Now, thanks to 'Zero Hour', all history at DC Comics has been thrown out...again. This time it'll be perfect and they'll never do it again...yeah..this time for sure.) - GKC

As a child and young adult, Kal-El must have been hard put to find an adequate father-figure. What human could control his antisocial behavior? What human would dare try to punish him? His actual, highly social behavior during this period indicates an inhuman self-restraint.

What wonder if Superman drifted gradually into schizophrenia? Torn between his human and kryptonian identities, he chose to be both, keeping his split personalities rigidly separate. A psychotic desperation is evident in his defense of his "secret identity."

But Superman's sex problems are strictly physiological, and quite real.

The purpose of this article is to point out some medical drawbacks to being a kryptonian among human beings, and to suggest some possible solutions. The kryptonian humanoid must not be allowed to go the way of the pterodactyl and the passenger pigeon.

I

What turns on a kryptonian?

Superman is an alien, an extraterrestrial. His humanoid frame is doubtless the result of parallel evolution as the marsupials of Australia resemble their mammalian counterparts. A specific niche in the ecology calls for a certain size, certain capabilities, certain eating habits.

Be not deceived by appearances. Superman is no relative to homo sapiens.

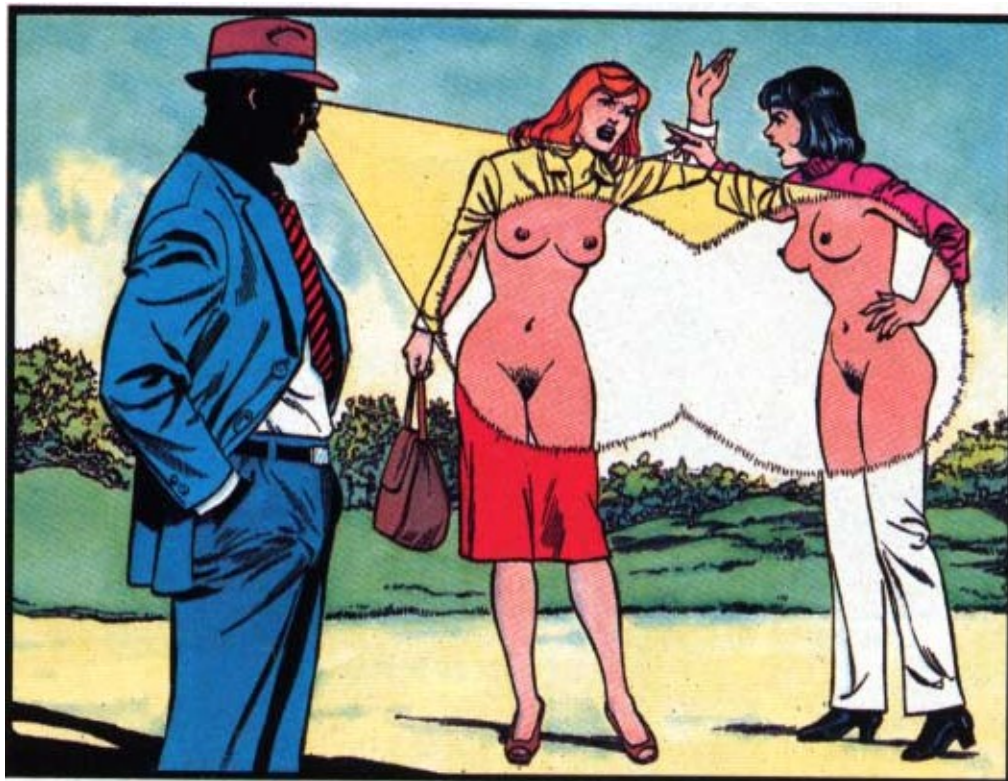
What arouses Kal-El's mating urge? Did kryptonian women carry some subtle mating cue at appropriate times of the year? Whatever it is Lois Lane probably didn't have it. We may speculate that she smells wrong. Less like kryptonian woman than like a terrestrial monkey. A mating between Superman and Lois Lane would feel like sodomy - and would be, of course, by church and common law.

II

Assume a mating between Superman and human woman designated LL for convenience.

Either Superman has gone completely schizo and believes himself to be Clark Kent: or he knows what he's doing, but no longer gives a damn. Thirty-one years is a long time. For Superman it has been even longer. He has X-ray vision: he knows just what he's missing².

2 One should not think of Superman as a Peeping Tom. A biological ability must be used. As a child Superman may never have known that things had surfaces, unless he learned to suppress his X-ray vision. If millions of people tend shamelessly to wear clothing with no lead in the weave, that is hardly Superman's fault.



**...AND THIS IS ABSOLUTELY NOT SUPERMAN. WHY NOT?
BECAUSE SUPERMAN IS © & ® 1994 DC COMICS.**

The problem is this. Electroencephalograms taken of men and women during sexual intercourse show that orgasm resembles “a kind of pleasurable epileptic attack.” One loses control over one's muscles.

Superman has been known to leave his fingerprints in steel and in hardened concrete, accidentally. What would he do to the woman in his arms during that amounts to an epileptic fit?

III

Consider the driving urge between a man and a woman, the monomaniacal urge to achieve greater and greater penetration. Remember also that we are dealing with kryptonian muscles.

Superman would literally crush LL's body in his arms, while simultaneously ripping her open from crotch to sternum, gutting her like a trout.

IV

Lastly, he'd blow off the top of her head. Ejaculation of semen is entirely involuntary in the human

male, and all other forms of terrestrial life. It would be unreasonable to assume otherwise for a kryptonian. But with kryptonian muscles behind it, Kal-El's semen would emerge with the the muzzle velocity of a machine gun bullet³.

In view of the foregoing, normal sex is impossible between LL and Superman.

Artificial insemination may give us better results.



V

First we must collect the semen. The globules will emerge at transonic speeds. Superman must first ejaculate, then fly frantically after the stuff to catch it in a test tube. We assume that he is on the Moon, both for privacy and to prevent the semen from exploding into vapor on hitting [the] air at such speeds.

He can catch semen, of course, before it evaporates in vacuum. He's faster than a speeding bullet.

But can he keep it?

³ One can imagine that the Kent home in Smallville was riddled with holes during Superboy's puberty. And why did Lana Lang never notice *that*?

All known forms of kryptonian life have super powers. The same must hold true of living kryptonian sperm. We may reasonably assume that kryptonian sperm are vulnerable only to starvation and to green kryptonite: that they travel with equal ease through water, air, vacuum, glass, brick, boiling steel, liquid helium, or the core of a star; and that they are capable of translight velocities.

What kind of a test tube will hold such beasties?

Kryptonian sperm and their unusual powers will give us further trouble. For the moment we will assume (because we must) that they tend to stay in the seminal fluid, which tends to stay in a simple glass tube. Thus Superman and LL can perform artificial insemination.

At least there will be another generation of kryptonians.

Or will there?

VI

A ripened but unfertilized egg leaves LL's ovary, begins its voyage down her Fallopian tube.

Some time later tens of millions of sperm, released from a test tube begin their own voyage up LL's Fallopian tube.

The magic moment approaches...

Can [a] human breed with [a] kryptonian? Do we even use the same genetic code? On the face of it, LL could more easily breed with an ear of corn than with Kal-El. But coincidence does happen. If the genes match...

One sperm arrives before the others, it penetrates the egg, forms a lump on its surface. The cell wall now thickens to prevent other sperm from entering. Within the now-fertilized egg, changes take place.

And ten million kryptonian sperm arrive slightly late.

Were they human sperm, they would have been out of luck. But these tiny blind things are more powerful than a locomotive. A thickened cell wall won't stop them. They will *all* enter the egg, obliterating it entirely in an orgy of microscopic gang rape. So much artificial insemination.

But LL's problems are just beginning.

VII

Within her body there are still tens of millions of frustrated kryptonian sperm. The single egg is now too diffuse to be a target. The sperm scatter.

They scatter without regard to what is in their path. They leave curved channels, microscopically small. Presently all will have found their way into the open air.

That leaves LL with several million microscopic perforations all leading deep into her abdomen. Most of the channels will intersect one or more loops of intestine.

Peritonitis is inevitable. LL becomes desperately ill.

Meanwhile, tens of millions of sperm swarm in the air over Metropolis.

VIII

This is more serious than it looks.

Consider: these sperm are virtually indestructible. Within days or weeks they will die from lack of nourishment.

Meanwhile they cannot be affected by heat by heat, cold, vacuum, toxins or anything short of green kryptonite⁴.

There they are, minuscule but dangerous; for each has supernormal powers.

Metropolis is shaken by tiny sonic booms. Worm-holes, charred by meteoric heat, sprout magically in all kinds of things: plate glass, masonry, antique ceramics, electric mixers, wood, household pets, and citizens. Some of the sperm will crack light speed. The Metropolis night becomes alive with network of narrow, eerie blue lines of Cherenkov radiation.

And women whom Superman has never met find themselves in a delicate condition.

Consider: LL won't get pregnant because there were too many of the blind, mindless beasts. But whenever one sperm approaches an unfertilized human egg in its panic flight, it will attack.

How close is close enough? A few centimeters? Are sperm attracted by chemical cues? It seems likely. Metropolis had a population of millions; and a kryptonian sperm could travel a long and crooked path,

⁴ And other forms of kryptonite. For instance, there are chunks of red kryptonite that make giants of kryptonians. Imagine ten million earthworm-sized spermatozoa swarming over a Metropolis beach, diving to fertilize the beach balls...but I digress.

billions of miles, before it gives up and dies.

Several thousand blessed events seen not unlikely⁵.

Several thousand lawsuits would follow. Not that Superman can't afford to pay. There's a trick were you squeeze a lump of coal into its allotropic diamond form...

IX

The above analysis gives us part of the answer. In our experiment in artificial insemination, we must use a single sperm. This present no difficulty. Superman may use his microscopic vision and a pair of tiny tweezers to pluck sperm from the swarm.

X

In its eagerness, the single sperm may crash through LL's abdomen at transsonic speeds, wreaking havoc. Is there any way to slow it down?

There is. We can expose it to gold kryptonite.

Gold kryptonite, we remember, robs a kryptonian of all of his super normal powers, permanently. Were we to expose Superman himself to gold kryptonite, we would solve all his sex problems, but he would be Clark Kent forever. We may regard his solution as somewhat drastic.

But we can expose the test tube of seminal fluid to gold kryptonite, then use the standard techniques for artificial insemination.

By any of these methods we can get LL pregnant, without killing her. Are we out of the woods yet?

XI

Though exposed to gold kryptonite, the perm still carries kryptonian genes. If these are recessive, the LL carries a developing human fetus. There will be no more Supermen; but at least we need not worry about the mother's health.

But if some of the kryptonian genes are dominant...

Can the fetus use his X-ray vision before birth? After all, with such a power, he could probably see through his own closed eyelids. That would leave LL sterile. If the kid starts using heat vision things

⁵ If the pubescent Superboy plays with himself, we have the same problem over Smallville.

start to get even worse.

But when he starts to kick, its all over. He will kick his way out into the open air, killing himself and his mother.

XII

Is there a solution?

There are several. Each has its drawbacks.

We can make LL wear a kryptonite⁶ belt around her waist. But too little kryptonite may allow the child to damage her, while too much may damage or kill the child. Intermediate amounts may do both! And there is no safe way to experiment.

A better solution is to find a host mother.

We have not yet considered the existence of Supergirl⁷. She could carry the child without harm. But Supergirl has a secret identity, and her secret identity is no more married than Supergirl herself. If she turned up pregnant, she would probably be thrown out of school.

A better solution may be to implant the growing fetus in Superman himself. There are places in a man's abdomen where a fetus could draw adequate nourishment, growing as a parasite, and where it would not cause undue harm to surrounding organs. Presumably Clark Kent can take a leave of absence more easily than Supergirl's school girl alter ego.

When the time comes, the child would be removed by Cesarean section. It would have to be removed early, but there would be no problem with incubators as long as it was fed. I leave the problem of cutting through Superman's invulnerable skin as an exercise for the alert reader.

The mind boggles at the image of a pregnant Superman cruising the skies of Metropolis. Batman would refuse to be seen with him; strange new jokes would circulate the prisons ... and the race of Krypton would be safe at last.

⁶ For our purposes, all forms of kryptonite are available in unlimited quantities. It has been estimated, from the startling tonnage of kryptonite fallen to Earth since the explosion of Krypton, that the planet must have out weighted our entire solar system. Doubtless the "planet" Krypton was a cooling black dwarf star, one of a binary pair, the other member being a red giant.

⁷ She can't mate with Superman because she's his first cousin. And only a cad would suggest differently.



From All the Myriad Ways ©1971 BY LARRY NIVEN.

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OTHER USES

Many of the points given in this essay are reused and paraphrased in Kevin Smith's 1995 movie Mallrats.

In Frank Miller's comic Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again, Superman touches on the theme of the essay when asked about sex by Lara, his teenage daughter by Wonder Woman.

In issue 6 of The Boys, Butcher mentions that his human wife was killed when, after being impregnated by a super-human, the super-powered fetus kicked its way out of her abdomen.

Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman normally avoided the issue, even during the titular characters' marriage. The exception was one case when Superman lost fine control over his powers due to red kryptonite exposure. In that episode, Clark accidentally gave Lois a bruise when hugging her, and did not dare to sleep in the same bedroom until the problem passed.

The television series Smallville also cited the same argument to explain why Clark refused to sleep with Lana Lang when he was in possession of his super powers. They were, however, able to be intimate when she also had super-powers in season eight. In the season nine episode "Escape", Clark tells Chloe Sullivan that he has been learning how to control his powers so that he would not harm a human during intimacy.

In Garth Ennis's one-shot superhero comic parody The Pro, the title character gives oral sex to the Saint, a Superman caricature, after he saves her baby's life. At the point of climax, the Saint shouts "In God's name, move your head!" just as his ejaculation blasts through the wall, flies hundreds of feet in the air, and clips the wing off a passing airplane. The Saint saves the plane from crashing but is humiliated when the passengers realize he's still naked from the waist down.

A deleted scene from the 2008 movie Hancock illustrates a similar "dangerous ejaculation" scenario when Hancock throws his partner aside before his ejaculation blows three large holes in the roof of his trailer.

Filker Tom Smith's "Superman Sex-Life Boogie" recounts the problem from Superman's perspective.

The 2012 graphic novel Superman: Earth One, Volume Two has Jonathan Kent trying to warn an awkward teenage Clark about sex, saying "Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex. That's all I'm saying."

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