

If there's a mission statement to the reinvention of Superman during the New 52, it's make him more like us. Youth and inexperience went a long way, but the writers have definitely taken pains to give him a wider range of emotional experience: the cockiness of knowing he's the powerful man in almost any room, the allure of pure sexual attraction, the grief of losing his parents. Pak has been a committed part of that wave, carefully tuning Clark's voice to sound like a human first, a superhuman second. Pak's hit a few off notes along the way, but since the end of *Doomed*, he really seems to have entered Clark's mind and found a real person there. Like most things, success is in the details. It's not enough for Clark to gloss over how hard his parents' death was; we assume that. What makes the experience personal is how he deals with his emotions afterward, recalling how he sought refuge with the Langs. "I sleep on your couch for a week. I don't think I say more than ten words. But your parents just smile and pat me on the head every time they pass...like I'm another cat or stray dog." It says a lot about Clark, but it also says quite a great deal about his relationship to Lana's parents, who hardly even feature in most Superman origin stories for any reason. Now, Pak is adding another rarely seen emotion to the list, one that is specific to Clark alone: fear. Superman stories almost never acknowledge that Clark's capable of feeling it in the first place, much less grapple with it as determinedly as he does here. The brilliant thing is Clark is afraid of the same things we are, a universal, soul-crushing dread Pak captures with perfect detail: "Like the moment as a child when you first grasp the concept of death. You let yourself really think about non-existence...and its total inevitability...and it's absolutely terrifying. So you let your mind slide around it, and you eat a sandwich, and it's okay." Yet Clark doesn't have the luxury to put this horror out of mind, not when the Ultra-Humanite threatens to feed off Lana and everyone else in Smallville if Clark doesn't offer himself first. The idea that Clark is forced to wallow in his worst fear—one which most of us share—is compelling enough, even if Kolins' art isn't entirely up to the task of communicating how damaging the it is for Clark (more on that later). Contrast between the Smallvillians' faith in his ability ("Don't worry, Jaden...he'll be just fine.") and his actual experience ("Aaarrrrrgghh!"). Where it really gets interesting is afterward, once things return to normal, relatively. Usually, around this point is when the typical Superman writer would sweep up his mess to clear room for a nice, cheerful ending. Pak does a bit of that, allowing Lana and Clark to put the tension between them to bed, but he doesn't entirely shut the door on the anxiety to which Clark opened himself so completely. Like any good friend, Lana takes Clark's burden even harder than he does. "How you grieve for your parents. And mine. And...and everyone on this whole stupid planet... I'm so, so sorry. It's just going to keep happening to you. Again and again, forever." "Maybe..." Clark admits, "but not today." It's not the neatest or brightest of endings, which is a big deal in itself for Superman. But it's also the only appropriate ending for the kind of arc Clark's just gone through. There's no eliminating this particular fear; there's only being grateful that he doesn't have to face it for now. We'd have a nearly perfect issue on our hands but for some defects in execution. The one that really stands out is the way John Henry ingeniously solves the emotional leeching problem by using his steel organics to restrain their heart rates and endocrine system, yet conflates this with neutering his actual thoughts and feelings: "But...I don't...I don't want to kill my heart. I don't want to...forget about Lana." I'm no expert, but I'm pretty sure that's not how the body works. And then there's the problem of Kolins' art, which I've never admired except in very genre-specific circumstances. His raggedy linework leaves a lot to be desired, with characters looking flimsy and weakly defined, the action chaotic, and the dramatic moments thin and uncommitted. Considering how powerfully Kuder handled Clark's nightmare scenario last issue, it's heartbreaking to get this

scrawny, unimpressive replacement. Some Musings:* I don't think I even remember seeing much of them in Smallville, despite the years Clark spent chasing Lana's tail. The post Action Comics #39 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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