

THE LAST KISS

If it had nothing else, my childhood had symmetry. Teeth brushed morning and night. Good deeds and sin. The bus to school and the bus back home. My mother and my father. Chores and play, light and dark, inside and out. Ale's Woods and the mowed grass of our lawn.

This symmetry seemed pervasive, an apparent law of nature. It extended to the kisses I got from my parents just before bed. First, my mother. At bedtime I would come to where she stood washing dishes, wiping the table, or, rarely, resting on the couch with her feet up.

"My poor dogs are barking," she'd sigh, smiling and leaning forward. To me, at least, our kisses were passionate moments that passed much too quickly. I was the oldest. She was the first woman I ever loved. A good night kiss from my mother meant a great big hug, as well; I learned that this was one way to extend the experience. Her cheek was smooth and soft. I walked away with the good, honest, hardworking smell of my mother's skin- along with the faint cigarette smokiness of her hair- in my nostrils.

All this happened in a matter of seconds. My mother's kisses contained potent medicine to ward off spirits of the night, but not potent enough. I was grateful to go next to my father. His goodnight kisses were more formal affairs, but that was all right. Formality was exactly what I wanted just before bed. And no accompanying body hug, either. Just this: his scent, the faintest remnants of morning aftershave lotion, and the whisker-stubby contour of his proffered cheek- a textured surface that made a satisfying contrast with my mother's cheek. Kissing my tall, handsome father always imbued me with a strong dose of masculine courage. Thus blessed, twice-kissed, I could go off safely to bed.

This arrangement worked very well indeed and lasted through kindergarten, first grade, and into second grade. It was such an intrinsic part of childhood- like making my bed or saying my prayers- that I never bothered to question it.

One night I went to kiss my mother goodnight. Mom was bottle-feeding the eternal Fletcher baby (Joey? Kathy?) at the time; I had to lean over the little one to get to my mother. She let the baby cradle on her lap while she kissed and hugged me. It was from embraces like this one that I would learn a first crucial rule of affection: Important kisses always take place with the eyes closed. In my case, the better to feel her strong arms, her warmth. The better to concentrate on her smell: perfume, dishwashing lotion, and the smell that was simply her.

Next I went to find my father. He was working down in the basement; he glanced up at me when I approached. My father knew exactly why I was there, but on this evening he became busy and commenced to energetically beat the dust out of some window screens with a whiskbroom. I watched him for a while, tapping my foot, trying to be patient. Several minutes passed.

"I'm going to bed, Dad," I said at last.

"Well, good night, then," he said, giving me a kind of half-smile, half-sigh that was peculiar to him. I was stunned. There was something in his voice that made me decide not to ask again.

I went to bed. Outside, sounds of the summer night: crickets, a sprinkler hissing, some neighborhood kids still playing, the ice-cream truck taunting kids with its twilight ringing.

Next night I decided to try my father again. Maybe last night's missed kiss was no more than a quirk. I went to him first this time and found him outside, behind his car, the truck opened, sorting through book samples he would need to make his sales call the next day. He was on the road a great deal; it was not unusual for him to be gone all week. It was nearly 8:30 and the lawn behind him was alive with fireflies. They drifted through the cool twilight like bits of phosphorescent jellyfish in the tide. I approached him noisily, clearing my throat, shuffling my feet.

"It's bed time," I murmured. I wonder, now, if he heard only those words or also the plea behind it, the desire for clarification. Maybe it was no more than the sound of quiet expectancy a child makes when he says: "I'm hungry." I don't know. I merely watched with sinking heart as my father's hands got busy again, not with me but with something else, this time stacking his book samples in cardboard boxes. He stood up and turned to me. He reached forward to touch my arm. He squeezed my shoulder.

"Good night, then," he said, turning away. I stood there a moment, while the fireflies pulsed in silence. I was eight years old. The thought my mind held was too large to formulate into a question, too vague to clearly recognize as loss.

It took several more nights, several more awkward tries, before the grim truth finally sunk in. I was too old to be kissed by my father. True, I could go to my mother and get a huge bearhug along with a kiss. But now that the smoothness of her cheek was not counterbalanced by my father's fine sandpaper, even her kisses felt different, not nearly so powerful, much more fragile. I would never again embrace her without some part of me wondering if I might not one day lose her kisses, as well.

Ralph Fletcher, What A Writer Needs.

