



THE KISS

Intimacies from Writers

Edited by **BRIAN TURNER**

INTERLUDE

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For some reason, young, sometimes young and drunk, strangers are drawn to me. That night I was at a club in New York with my brother Gary, listening to jazz. I stepped outside with a hitter of pot he'd handed me. I sheltered from the rain under a small overhang and lit up, then stood a few minutes longer, watching the lit needles of rain dissolving into Sixth Avenue. A twenty-something blond boy veered over. He was Norwegian, he said, and visiting the city alone. He was adorable and also, clearly, wasted. I was several decades older, but there was no mistaking the fact that he was flirting with me.

"So, what are you doing the rest of the night?" he asked.

"I have to go back inside to my boyfriend," I lied. I had no boyfriend. I was wondering if I'd ever have one again. When you are a woman over sixty, even one who looks, if I may say so, pretty damned good, the boyfriends are scarce. How long had it been since I'd kissed a man? Let's just call it a while. As for the rest of what might naturally

follow a kiss between two lonely people—let’s call it a long while. I have several women friends near my age who are counting it in years; one has a decade under her belt. So to speak. “My life is over,” she wailed recently. This is an exceedingly smart, talented, witty, lovely woman. She makes me desperately wish we were both gay. Unfortunately for us, we are drawn to people with penises.

And here was one swaying before me, ready for a night on the town. I could have taken him home and had my way with him, but what did I really want? Let’s call it more than an inebriated fuck. Let’s go ahead and call it love, real love, the kind I’d experienced more than once in my life, and missed now.

So here I was, pleasantly stoned, about to blow off this guy instead of blow him, or worse.

Then I had an impulse.

I took his face in my hands and kissed him on his pillowy Norwegian lips. They were cold, and tasted like beer and rain. He closed his eyes in delight. I closed mine, too, our bodies a few inches apart, the faint sounds of the band mixing with passing voices and tires on wet asphalt.

How long did it last? Less than a minute. A few of his molecules waltzed into my mouth; a few of mine whirled into his. Then I turned and ran back inside.

Later, I thought about Chekhov’s mournful Officer Ryabovich in “The Kiss,” who remembers his “little adventure” with a stranger in a dark room. First he thinks the kiss will change his life; then he concludes it was trivial, and is confirmed in his own sense of inadequacy. Finally the world seems “an unintelligible, aimless jest.”

The world often strikes me the same way. But I prefer to find the joke funny. And to believe, in the weird and sometimes happy accidents

that result—in this case—in kissing a beautiful stranger in the rain. It didn't really change anything, but it wasn't trivial. It was one of those encounters that rises up out of nowhere and sinks back into it, giving off light and energy as it goes. It reminded me that my life isn't over. That we can't know what's next. Let's call that a reason to be happy, alone, enjoying a night out with a brother you love, listening to musicians improvise over the changes.