

What Kiss

by Ann Bogle

You laugh about it. It was an investigation. My lips pressed to the delicate, seeming lips of the street person. He was not living on the street but was walking home on it when he saw us in my car. I was driving a little drunk. You were my drunk passenger. There was little traffic. There was some traffic. We had thought of getting breakfast, but you seemed too drunk to go inside. I had worried that you would stumble in the aisles of the restaurant and sit in the booth with your mouth open.

I myself had become literary. At the bar, I had said, "See that man?" And you did, but it was the man behind you and the man next to him that concerned you. There was a history with these two, though slight. We had conversed. With one of them I had eaten breakfast in a crowd. That one was saying to the other one, "It's an interesting story. I'll tell you." I interrupted myself in my own story to tell them, "It's not that interesting."

That man with the man behind you may have been thinking of the kiss. After the breakfast, in the back seat of my friend's car, I had kissed him, with some feeling. In the time since, some weeks or months, he had asked me why I hate him. He had asked my friends, "Why does she hate me?"

I could go on in some detail telling this one slight history.

In the beginning, he had bought me a beer, but I had not felt kinship to it. I referred to him later as "the nondescript man." But he would not have known that. His feeling that I hate him was exaggerated in the particular.

I had enjoyed, during the breakfast, deriding him for thinking that I would go home with him, but I had been humorous about it. I did not know then that he felt self-conscious about his mouth.

Later, when he got new teeth, he bared them to me: Now you will want me, he seemed to think. But nothing had changed. In fact, I hadn't noticed the first time that he was missing teeth.

I was pointing out a different man to you. I had become free in my body talking to you. I had created two impressions: legs and a talking head. I had stopped thinking about my skirt, where on my thigh it was falling. It was going up while I was talking. You were listening with your mouth open. I was talking to you, about what I want with you—an egg, a walnut casing, a container for a life, a space we honor, guard, believe. You seemed lost in your head.

I said, "See that man? He wants my legs, a la carte. What to do?"

I finished my graffiti in the women's room. A man had come to talk to you, and with him you seemed sober. You were not including me or introducing me because the subject was his rock band and your rock band. As I told you the last time the subject was rock bands, for ten years I played reeds. Not that I wanted to bang a tambourine in your rock band.

A woman with a black long thing in her mouth. Is that ugly? Is that ugly? Only if you focus on it. The woman saxophonist—the player my composer boyfriend had a sweetheart crush on—Jane Ira Bloom—played the Blue Note with her all-male back-up band. There was a long brass thing in her mouth, but people accepted it and paid her to do it.

The women were increasing their writing in the restroom. I asked you later why women only talk on restroom walls, and you said, why do men only talk on restroom walls? I told you as much as I could remember of what had been written, because, practically speaking, you couldn't go in there yourself. I thought it was a more interesting story than the nondescript man's story about our kiss, but you didn't seem to take it in.

The first time, the writing was: "Brothers, give up the power. If you aren't fighting the power, you're dissin' the sisters."

That time I wrote two separate things.

In the restroom there's a feeling that you don't have to explain everything, and also that the utensils are crude, the ink doesn't take easily, so you simplify.

That time I was drinking beer in the afternoon with my woman friend. Bald men were playing pool and wanting to talk to us, but we were feeling unreceptive to it. I had, that week, given up talking to men, so the need was just beginning again, and feeling it without doing something about it felt new again.

A little boy had found us and was demanding our attention. His parents were somewhere in the bar. I was not very interested in him, but my friend was thrilled by his simplicity and his directness. The little boy got in her lap and stayed there, tangling his hands in her hair. She let her hair hang in her face. She said she liked feeling that witchy. The boy told her, "I want you for my mother. I hate my mother."

Possible fathers wandered in and out of the pool room, but no one was claiming him. We heard someone say that the boy's father was one of the British men, though not one of the bald men, who were also British. When the boy's father came in, we said he was handsome. He wore a gold wedding band on the appropriate finger.

In the restroom I wrote, "Bald men have pheromones. We like those." Next to the comment about power, I wrote, "And sisters, give up power. Joy is better than power."

While you talked with the man about rock bands, I read the new graffiti. I felt it was a culture. While I had been away, it had grown. Someone had written, next to pheromones: "Biologist, eh?"

Next to the remark about joy, someone had written: "On what planet?"

And someone else had continued: "New Age feminist yahoo. You can't fight the power until you have power (which you don't)."

I had only a stick pen, so it was hard to write: "Live it. Be it. The rest will follow. If it doesn't, it doesn't. Fuck 'em."

And added: "I hate these dismissals: Fuck 'em."

When I came back from the restroom, you were sitting by yourself and no longer talking to the man. You asked me if everything was all right.

We left the bar and drove to the restaurant, where I realized that you were too drunk to go inside. I said, "Let's go home," and started to drive to my house without feeling that anything more might happen.

The street man was crossing the street when he saw me through my windshield. I stayed stopped, even though the light had turned green, and rolled down my window to talk to him.

You got out of the car and came around to my side to stand next to him. I put on the hazard lights, even though no one was behind us.

He said, "Who is she to you? Friend? Sister? Wife? Life?"

"On what planet," I was thinking. You didn't answer so I said, "Life," and smiled. Everything seemed okay. I watched you talk to him.

"What?" the man said to me, "my skin too dark for you?"

"Oh, no," I said. "We are the people. That's what I'm interested in. The people."

"Are you the people? Who's the people? You mean this raging war?"

"I don't like war," I told him. "It's not over, not for years. They killed all those people. Those are the people. That's what I'm talking about."

Things had started up again. I was thinking that this man's friends could meet our friends, and we could all have a

picnic. That was the image, someone turning a piece of chicken on the grill.

“How do I know you're the kind of people you say you are?”

I gave him your phone number, so he could leave a message.

Then I said, “Should we eat? I'm hungry.”

You got back in the car, and he got in the back seat, and we drove back to the restaurant. Mid-parking lot, you wandered off, leaving me alone with him, though I thought you were walking behind us.

The cars were parked at tight angles. We picked our way back among them to see where we had lost you. You came out from behind a building. You looked sick. The man asked if you were sick. Yes, you said, but not that sick.

“Time to go,” I said. I told the man that we would have to leave without eating.

You and I got back in the car. The man crouched beside my open door. “Come with me,” he said. “Just you and me.”

“No,” I said, “not like that. Not one-on-one. The people.”

Then he kissed me, and it was surprisingly sweet, but rather short.

You got out of the car and walked off again. I locked the car and went after you. He came with me. He said, “He's not far. He'll be back.”

“He would walk home,” I said. “And that would be very bad.”

The man put his arm around my waist. He asked me why it stayed so small. “It's not like eighteen inches,” I told him.

I thought that if you had started to walk home that I should try to find you. Then I thought that if you had not gone far I should wait.

After a few minutes I saw you walking with another man. You had gone in the restaurant and come back for me.

The restaurant man said, "Would you like a table? Would you like to come inside?" And I laughed, because he was trying to seat us, but we were in the parking lot.

I said, "Are you the host? You came all the way out here to seat us?"

Then there was a drop-buck silence, all around. I had been the one caught laughing. I had mistaken war for peace again. I put my arms around your neck and kissed your face and ear. "Let's go," I said.

The street man and the host walked away, together at first, then apart, the street man to the street, the host to the door.

I tried to drive home, but you were threatening to jump out of the moving car. I had to keep pulling over. You were opening your car door and yelling at me. I was yelling, too, and crying, in alternating fits, and hitting your arm, so you would not jump.

