

FIRST KISS

*Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances.*

Robert Hass, Meditations at Lagunitas

I remember the plastic shiver of Monopoly pieces when you shook the box, falling to and fro against the board game inside. That the air outside was slightly chilled like a hard red wine. That church bells rang. It may have been Sunday. I was not in my uniform that day. Or out looking for the customary earthworms or stealing wood for our clubhouse or torturing ants and neighborhood rabbits – some people still kept rabbits. In any event, it had been raining. It was after a cool, brief shower, the sky metallic, the sun high. There was the smell of decay, as the wet September wood ripened. And the trees had already turned their leaves, flashing orange spines.

I was in the cellar, listening to the flick-flack, inhaling the grease, of my brother's much envied Lionel trains. As compensation for being a train-less girl, I was fixing myself a treat, baking a miniature cake in what now would be considered quite a dangerous toy for a child – a Susie Homemaker plastic oven. As I moved about in my makeshift kitchen, I narrowly avoided the Escher-like weave of the metal stints of my mother's starburst wall clock. The clock, which no longer worked, had been relegated to an old flowerbox, half of its ill-machined, sharp edges sticking out, a menace that had more than once caught my knees.

The windows of the cellar, tiny as they were, barely above-ground, were open. There was no breeze. In a house like ours there was never any breeze. Crazy families exist, furless creatures, their skins hot to the touch. Emotional friction is a given. But

wind, even a hurricane that causes tumult in a calmer place, can rush right through and get on with it. I had probably been crying. I was always crying in those days. My mother was upstairs walking the halls, shouting at no one. My father was on the couch, throwing slippers at her as she rounded the corner from the living room to the kitchen and back like a windmill, not knowing what to do with her hands, her legs, her mouth. Everything was crashing. It was the steady state of affairs.

Perhaps I had just peeled my cake, none too expertly, from the hot pan, taking care not to burn my fingers and was standing on the rocking chair to replace the Monopoly game, or was pulling open the doors of the engine of the Lionel train – or caboose – I liked cabooses -- when I heard a sharp screech of tires, brakes none too expertly applied, and a thud outside. No crash. No attendant tinkle of broken glass or second set of tires squealing from the opposite direction. Just a screech and a soft thump like a fist pummeling a pillow.

“My God! One of the kid’s been hit,” my mother gasped, weirdly lucid. I could hear her through the open basement door. She and my father were upstairs.

“You’re outta your mind, Pauline!” yelled my father.

I was so startled I jumped, scraping my leg on the stint of the clock. “It’s nothing, ma!” I called up, annoyed. She was, after all, crazy, always sounding the alarm: rabbits had teeth, ribbons could strangle. Canned foods could leap up and bite you in the neck. I was forever pulling her back from crossing streets on red lights, tossing out money – she had a propensity for throwing twenties into the waste basket, and that was when a twenty bought a month’s worth of groceries – and walking away from stoves after she’d turned on the gas, returning and then lighting up the kitchen. The cops, the firemen, the local

“dons” were all too familiar with our family. I knew how to deal with crises. I had called them many times.

Then there was silence.

“No, it is... one of the kids!” she insisted. “I’m going outside.”

“Wait!” I said. “I’m going with you.” In those days I had good, if scarred, knees and took the stairs two at a time.

Michael was lying in the street. It was Michael. I say this because it was Michael then. It was not Michael just a moment later. He was not conscious. His heart was beating. My father checked his pulse. “It’s beating”, he said. “But he’s not breathing.” It was him and then it was not.

Michael had gum in his mouth. I knew this because my father knelt down, pulled it out, stuck it to the street and, holding Michael’s nose, like he had probably seen in the movies, began to breathe into his mouth. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I did not know it could be such a shock. I wanted to stop him, to say, “It’s all right”, because these things only happened in the movies. But it was not a movie now. I wanted to pull him off and say, “Let him be! Leave him alone!”

My friend looked quiet, sleeping. Not asleep exactly, but peaceful, as he might have looked if I had spooned him in my arms. I still thought that someday we would do that, Michael and I, my father breathing into him.

It did not occur to me then that my father had been in battle and would actually know how to resuscitate anyone. I thought he was just doing what he had seen on Dr. Kildare, my father, who had not protected me, all those years. Or rather I knew that he had been in the Korean War and seen men die, but somehow this did not equate with his

having had a life apart from us, where he learned how to do what he was doing to Michael now. I did not know then that he was the sort of man who would stand by my mother, brother and me, for better or for worse, which was mostly worse, for a lifetime. These truths did not occur to me, as they occur to me now.

A pink Cadillac with a dent in its grid had pulled over to the side of the road, three frightened kids, 16 or 17, one girl and two boys in it. The skinniest boy gripped the wheel, his knuckles white. The girl was screaming, trying to get out of the car. The fat boy held her back. The windows were closed. I could not hear their shouts reverberating off the rolled up windows. The car was like the inside of my head, something struggling to take shape, flailing, dissembling, like a cloud. Nothing coming out. We were vaporized. All of us. Shadows caught in thin air. I just stood there. My mother did not take my hand.

“Stand back! Give ‘em room!” someone, a man, was shouting. A crowd had gathered around my father and Michael, a great semi-circle tching and tooking, making sounds of frightened birds, which mixed with shouts and squeals, “Call an ambulance!” “Did anyone call an ambulance?” For a moment it was chaos. A pig-tailed girl pulled up on a banana seat bicycle and whirly-gigged to a halt, not even noticing her dress caught in its wheel. She narrowly missed a small man in a wife beater t-shirt, stumbling to the curb, where he sat and, obviously drunk, cradled his narrow face in his hands. “Is that man going to vomit?” the butcher’s son, 4-year old Cousin asked. A freckle-faced mother, the juice of cabbage and corned beef staining her apron, wrung out her hands and covered the eyes of her little girl, Mauve, who clutched the jacket of a Beatles album.

No one stood at my father's back. Everyone wanted to see the boy. Parents pulled their smallest children into their aprons, but did not turn their eyes away themselves. Cries of "Whose boy? Which boy?" mingled with "Call an ambulance!" "Give 'em room to breathe!" Drawn by what they feared, the crowd moved in closer wearing those masks people wear when rubbernecking, a wish for good and prayer that evil pass. There they stood, neighbors, shopkeepers, friends and passersby, in sacrilegious intimacy, a rose of fear and shame. They needed only to hold hands, but they did not. The sun shone, obscene.

I pushed through the crowd, little hands parting hairy legs, smooth skirts, muscled thighs, through, through to the front of the pack. Michael was bleeding from the mouth, just a trickle like the veins in the autumn leaves, the ones that had already turned earthward away from the skies. Perhaps he would, like the seasons, like summer, like my Grandmother's velvet roses that waned and waxed, perhaps he would come back? Any moment now, he would breathe and open his eyes.

My father stopped and took a breath. I could see that his mouth was red... he was... Michael was... it was Michael's blood on my father's mouth. It was Michael... on my father's mouth. It was the boy I had kissed only days before, on one of the rare occasions when I was not crying. My first kiss. Red as the red on the checkerboard Michael had used to shield our heads, in the kiss, from no one in particular. There was no one there. Lovers whisper even when there is no one to hear except God.

He was a brown boy. A mocca boy. A sweetness. His skin like coffee cream. We were all brown the end of that summer. Not from the beach. We had had none of that. We were too poor for trips to the ocean or lakes or summer camp. We were simply

brown from kicking around all the time outside. If you stripped off our clothes, apart from the bruises, we were all white chests and butts and backs. Striped like little flags.

The asphalt was warm. My feet were bare. I tugged at my dress. His t-shirt slipped. Michael's. His bare shoulder flashed like milk on the asphalt. I wanted to touch it, make it red, bring him back.

Bottlecaps stuck there in the asphalt and bits of green and yellow glass. In my many walks I had learned, even then, that that is how you can tell a good neighborhood from bad. In New York today there are fewer streets like that. In New York today few neighborhoods are bad.

My mother ran to get blankets, to get bandages, to get doctors, to get sane. I broke away and followed her, the errant lamb. We banged on doors. "Is there a doctor? We need a doctor?" Doors that did not open, or rather, one door opened but the doctor would not come out. "Please," I said. "He's just a boy, a little boy. He's only 10." "I'm sorry, I can't," said the man. His voice faded like the voices of all adults that turn responsibility aside. "You're a doctor, please!" He showed the whites of his palms. "Liability..." he said, coughed and closed the door.

We circled back. Jimmy and Tommy, long-limbed, lean, Michael's younger brothers, were hunched against the red brick of the corner candy store, looking sick. Looking like the face of my mother, lips askew, cheeks wrenched, skin fallen aside. My brother stood over them, hands pressed against the Coca-Cola sign, saying soothing things. I could tell by the way he pursed his lips and the fact that he stared straight at them, like people do when they lie. "He'll be OK, you'll see," he was saying. Perhaps he did not believe he was lying. Perhaps it was not, to him, a lie. The boys had been

shouting, gesticulating wildly – “And then the car hit and he flew up in the air”. But they were quiet now.

“Ahhhh!” Seeing my Aunt Terry, Michael’s mother approach, my mother turned away from the crowd. “Ahhhhh!” She ran to Terry who dropped her groceries, milk and eggs spattering the grass. Terry’s face blanched. She whispered a single word, “No!” then collapsed, my mother clutching her.

Michael’s heart stopped beating. The ambulance had not arrived. My father kept going at a frantic pace, breathing into Michael. Deeper. Deeper. “Slow down, Sammie, slow down!” A young woman -- she was young, though I thought she was very grown up at the time -- slipped her hand into my father’s and moved him aside. She wore a threadbare sweater and a slip. She had run from one of the Irish houses to my father’s side. I was led to understand that she was a nurse, a professional, that she did this for a living. She asked me and my mother to get a sharp knife and some towels. “What for?” I asked. “A tracheotomy”, she said.

I knew what a tracheotomy was and I knew it was bad. I had almost had one once when I had asthma as a child. Growing up with a mother who frequently set fire to the kitchen was one reason I did not want to breathe. When things are bad, children collapse inside. But they collapse like flowers, which have no choice but to live again, watching, waiting for the sun, for life, for rain. Pet turtles die. Old people die. Bad witches die, but not children.

I felt strange. Michael, my Michael... but he was not my Michael. It was only a kiss, my first kiss. OK, two or three kisses. I did not know where one kiss ended and another began. In my mind we were still kissing. The girl I was that summer believed

that now he would stand up, take my hand and smile that bashful toothy smile. The smile that a boy gives the Tomboy he grew up with, when he first sees her as a girl and not just a co-conspirator. Not just from below climbing up a tree or pushing him into a mud patch or whacking him over the head with something that could do real damage, if he didn't know how to stop her. Michael would rise and take my hand and we would run away. I just knew it. Run back. Run down that street together and through each successive step, one block at a time, seconds ticking by. And after 5 blocks we would be standing, facing that oncoming car before it ever got to our street, before it ever turned our corner and nosed its way toward him. That pink Cadillac would pass us by. At that moment, holding in memory that sweet boy's hand, in memory, I felt I could change everything. Run. Back to the kiss behind the checkerboard. To baseball cards and jump ropes and Willie Mays. To egg throws and ice cream bars and playing tag and "May I" and "spin the bottle". To our own version of strip poker – we had no idea what stripping was -- where the only thing anyone ever lost was a Mickey Mantle baseball card. I would even go back to my mother shouting at me all day long, and getting my teeth knocked out and being tossed down the stairs. If he wouldn't leave. Just. Please. God.

I went into the house, dreamlike. To my bedroom and scrunched my face into the pillows. I tried to cry, but oddly couldn't. It is like when you get a nail in your foot but it isn't bleeding yet. It will bleed if you pull the nail out. But I left mine in for, oh, say, 40 years. Children do have extraordinary willpower. It was then I lost my pride. I began to make deals with the one person I did not believe in. "God, if you let Michael live, I won't ever yell at my mother again." "God, if you let Michael live, I will do all my chores everyday." "God, if you let Michael live, I will never ever kiss anyone ever again.

I will become a nun. I promise.” I grabbed my rosary beads and got on my knees. But God didn’t want me. No one wanted me. God was on the side of the doctors, the priests, the cops and the firemen, who came and went, leaving me behind.

There was a terrific roar outside. A giant, Uncle Mike – we called everyone Aunt or Uncle -- had broken through the crowd. Three men were trying to restrain him but he was a great bull of a man. He dragged them down, even pushing my father aside. He was shouting, screaming. At his son. The boy. Michael. “How many times have I told you not to cross the street without looking?... Michael, how many times?... How many times! ... Goddammit, answer me!” He rose to his full height, the bright sun on his back and made a fist, big as a moon, eyes wild. “Answer me or I’ll kill you myself goddammit! I’ll kill you! So help me God!” He didn’t really know what he would do, so he palmed his fist in his other hand. The crowd contracted, letting out a collective sob.

“Mike”, said my father, softly... so... so softly.

Uncle Mike took a step, then another, his knees gave way. A wounded animal, he tried to circle back. But his legs kept walking. “Mike, please,” my father cried. But Uncle Mike ran to the frightened kids in the pink Cadillac. He saw them all, the skinny boy, the fat boy, the girl, fearful but alive. With all his might, he began pounding with his fists on the car, beating the hood, slamming the roof, slapping the windows. I could feel him on my back. We could all feel him. It was the rage of a man who knew he had not built this world, not one tiny part of it. “I’ll kill you! So help me God, I’ll kill you all!” The kids were screaming inside. He hit and bashed and roared. Until he was spent. Until his fists were are red as his eyes. After that, Uncle Mike was never the same again. Nothing was ever the same.

In a last ditch effort, my mother handed the nurse the knife – a vegetable peeler – and the towels. Without anesthetic the nurse cut into Michael. The mocca skin. Avoiding the vein on the throat I had kissed. It was as if she understood the sacred bond we shared and the kiss that sealed it. Her freckles stood out against her pale cheeks. She pushed her red hair back. There was very little blood at the opening. She was finishing the tracheotomy, trying to enlarge the hole, avoiding his Adam's apple. She was taking care, making sure if he woke again, his voice box would not be broken. Then she bent and breathed into the hole.

Under the mimosa tree with its soft pink flowers, I held my breath and watched. Michael's chest rose and fell, rose and fell, to the rhythm of the nurse's in-and-exhalations. Only to that. I watched myself, watching. Always to that. She was his breath. Even Uncle Mike, his shoulders trembling, knew that. And then there was another self, watching us all, a bird flying up into the sky. The realization hit and I felt myself, whatever there was left of me, divide.

I have had that feeling many times since. Whenever something I believed in, something or someone I trusted, failed me. When my first husband left. When 9/11 hit. When I know my life must change.

One part of me joined Michael, gone these 40 some-odd years. Another joined the crowd, amenable, beaten. And a third hung stubbornly back. On the lawn, under that mimosa tree, wet grass tickling my toes.

It is often in life, and in negotiations, that people kick and scream the most when they are about to turn over, give it up, face the truth. Any interrogator will tell you that. Even the ones on TV. My heart, my lungs, my kidneys – they were doing this now. A

last rush of adrenaline shook me, a little sound escaped my lips. It was like the word “no” only way way smaller, like “mmmmnnnnn”, longer but smaller somehow.

Then it was over. They pulled a sheet over his head. People began to disperse. The nurse returned to us the bloody towels, the peeler. We clung to them, as four attendants loaded Michael into the ambulance. Twenty minutes too late, it had arrived.

I went into the kitchen. My father sat at the table, shaking, his head bowed in his hands and I sat beside him. Something like a sob came out of him. I brought coffee and the donuts he liked, with jelly in the middle. My legs and arms were moving. My hands were calm. I remember thinking that my father was crying, the only time I ever saw my father cry. His cup was warm at the bottom and cold at the top. I remember it was melmac, a funny clangy plastic. I had forgotten the sugar. The bottom of the cup, steeped in coffee, had turned for a moment hot, then not. That was the beauty of melmac.

Stunned, we did not toss the towels and peeler, but laundered and scrubbed and cleaned. As if that would bring Michael back. Or because we had so little in the first place.

In those days, they did not send children to therapy. No one thought what would become of our club house, or stickball games. Of penny candy or Pensy Pinkies. Or the Mickey Mantle baseball cards we so eagerly traded for a Roger Maris or a Whitey Ford. Children like Michael, first sons full of brilliance, belonged to their parents back where I was born, so it was the grief of the parents, the grown-ups, to which we would attend. My father’s grief. My mother’s grief. The grieving of his parents, my Aunt Terry and Uncle Mike. Not the grief of children. Children were children. They lived. They were happy. They did not grieve. But we were children who loved one another, who never

knew it until then. And who, because of that love and a thing unspoken, would never play together or be together again.

The months that followed were not good ones. Aunt Terry contracted cancer and wouldn't come out of the house. Uncle Mike turned to drink. My father continued to bark at my mother who disintegrated at an ever more rapid pace. My brother sat down every night at the table and refused to speak. "How was your day?" my dad would say, seeking in his son what Uncle Mike had lost, but my brother could not answer. He had turned on, tuned in and dropped out.

I never told anyone about the kiss. The kiss that could have meant a family and a new beginning. The kiss that meant I had been chosen, by someone I knew who knew me, as something of value. The kiss that was my secret. For a long, long time, through many turnings of the leaves, and sunny summers and snowy winters, I held onto the memory of that kiss. It was like clutching my Velveteen rabbit. I wore that kiss out, scratched its fur until there were patches, poked out its eyes, pulled on its tail and sucked it up, through everything. Through the rape that took my innocence. Through the many friends and family who fell away. Through the acid trip, that put my best friend in a sanitarium for life and left me convinced we all – all of us walking the earth – were really dead.

What we are to become happens anyway. Sometimes quietly. Sometimes with violence – when we are thrust away from what we most want. Our need for love is secondary to our need for being seen for who we are. For being heard. For having some evidence of our own ephemeral existence. The rest is the purview of angels, gods and

heroes. They are not who you think. They walk among us. Peculiar. Gifted.
Improbable. A brilliant flash... a touch... and then they are gone...