What Happened Then

Catherine Agar
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"She knew a man whose face was thin, with little hollows beneath the cheek bones. A little wrinkle near his ear, a little grey hair growing there, a little soft flesh: she imagined pressing her lips to it. Just a kiss. or maybe she would wrap her arms around him and hug him, lay her head on his chest. and maybe then a kiss, and maybe then, well, maybe then."

Cover Page Footnote

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There was also a man, a younger man, not handsome, but with clear blue eyes and lines around them as though he had some suffering in his life, and she would kiss his cheek, too, and the sides of his mouth, and his mouth, and he would tell her how he got the lines, and maybe then, well, maybe then.

She was released, free, from all the complications of youth, from wanting or needing a boyfriend, from wondering what sex meant or didn’t mean, from waiting for phone calls, from the fast heady rush of love like a river in spring thaw; she’d had her boyfriends and she had her husband, and her children, too; she had raised a family and loved them all deeply, had devoted many years to them, willingly, gladly. She regretted not a moment of her wanton youth nor her years of settledness; regretted maybe only the aching, yearning in-between time when tied down with babies, but still young enough and pretty enough to want a look or compliment from a man. But that desire, like her youth, had faded. Now she knew that people were all flotsam on a foggy ocean and that the laying on of hugs was even more healing than the laying on of hands; if a kiss or hug could comfort, then she would kiss and hug, and more than that, she would wrap her arms around securely, lie next to, spend the night; for what else was there when planes flew into buildings and nuclear bombs were poised to rain invisible poison, when people sickened and died, when wars claimed and maimed young men, when old women went months without being touched and old men shuffled where they once had stepped eager and virile, when hospitals warehoused people who never had visitors, when everyone was hurtling toward oblivion, what else was there? Then she would hold, and hold tightly, and maybe then, well, maybe then.

So it was that she woke up one morning to find the bed unoccupied except for herself; the house was empty; the street outside, too, was quiet. Her husband’s car was in the garage. She called his office, her mother, her brothers’ offices, her children, ten calls, twenty, hanging up when she got answering machines or endless rings. She turned on the television; there was static on every channel. She dressed, got into her car, and drove all around town on deserted roads. The grocery store was wide open, the produce all in ordered rows, and not a soul was moving anywhere, anywhere that she could see. At her husband’s office, the parking lot was empty, the doors were locked. She drove to the homes of everyone she knew, her parents, brothers, friends. She rang doorbells, banged on doors, peered inside. No one came.

In her house she locked the doors, wedging chairs underneath the knobs, pulling down the blinds and closing curtains. She sat in the living room, in a chair near a front window, her hand on the curtain, holding it open just a crack, looking out, looking for a
car or person or any sign of life. When sleep made her head heavy, she pulled her husband’s coat from the closet and brought it back to the chair, draping it across her body.

The next day was just the same, and the next. She sat behind her front window watching, waiting, until finally she took some extra clothes and food and piled things into her car, crazy things, blankets and pillows and candles and photographs and a box of stored-away baby clothes, and she got on a main route headed south and drove for days, town after town, without seeing a single person. She drove through red lights, slowly; she strained to look into every house and building and across every far horizon; she was almost to Washington before she realized that she never would see another person, so she stopped.

She was near a field where some low-growing springy plants had recently been cultivated. She walked out into the field and lay down in the plants, on her back. She had never heard such utter silence before in her life, and only once before seen the sky so bereft of planes. There was no traffic noise, no birds, just a slight breeze that ruffled the plants around her ears and sounded like a million far-away whispering voices.

She lay there all day. The sky darkened gradually, from azure to periwinkle to purple. The air cooled and stars began to appear. They were so far away she couldn’t comprehend the numbers, millions upon millions of light years, and they looked like every one of them as cold and distant as a mountain peak. She was thinking of going back to the car for the night when a comet arced across the black sky. Its tail blazed a brilliant orange and then the whole ball, as though hit by a sudden blast of wind, blossomed into orange flame; it grew bigger and bigger until it filled the orbits of her eyes with its color, and still it came toward her in a raging conflagration of glory as she lay there among the bean plants, pinned to the earth by the awe of it. Then it rushed towards her, blotting out the sky, and it seemed to break over her head like a firework; she was suffused with intense warmth, and right before she was consumed completely her eyes opened wider and she reached out both arms and said, simply, “There you are.”