Kiss the Girl

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 Ever since I was a kid, I always knew I was into girls just as much as guys. It took until my senior year in high school to really accept it after years of pushing the thought aside out of fear of being different from my family and a majority of the kids at school. Through high school I found friends who encouraged me, I found the passive aggressiveness of smalltown homophobia, and I found my sexual identity.

My school was very small, rural, conservative, and most of all, judgmental. It seemed every year a new story would erupt. A kid in the middle school came out as transgender and the whole school was put into an uproar. Two guys from the track team kissed in the hallway in between periods one day and everyone talked about it for a week. Teenage pregnancy was more common than someone coming out as anything but straight and cis. This was the school I went to, and one of the reasons why I never officially came out as bisexual.

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Energy surged through our bodies as the school bus shook with the movement of fifty teenage singers returning from a triumphant choral competition in Massachusetts. I sat in the back of the bus with some friends, wide smiles on each of our faces, chatting excitedly about our win. Erika sat across the aisle from me and pulled out her iPod. She began to play Toto’s “Africa” and the entire rear end of the bus exploded in joy to hear the song that brought us to victory. The altos and sopranos erupted into the opening notes and our voices blended.

We sang along to all of the songs Erika played and then Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl” came on. We shouted as loudly as we could, “No, I don't even know your name, it doesn't matter. You're my experimental game, just human nature. It's not what, good girls do, not how they should behave. My head gets so confused, hard to obey.”

We all looked at each other and giggled. Ninth grade had been a time of experimentation for us. It seemed as though there was a barrier between us and the rest of the bus. Nobody paid attention to our small group of singing freshmen girls so we were free to be ourselves without the judgmental glares we often saw in school.

“I’m pretty sure this is our anthem,” I joked. “We’ve all kissed a girl.”

Erika looked at me and smiled, most likely remembering the time we had kissed at a friend’s birthday sleepover. Most of the girls nodded and laughed in agreement, except for Stephanie.

Out of all the girls in our small group on the back of the bus, Stephanie was the most innocent. She had been sheltered throughout her life and her personality reflected that. She often wore very conservative clothes, never wore makeup, and never had a boyfriend. She was sweet, but a little annoying at times because she often tried too hard to win our approval by frequently copying the jokes we made.

“I’ve never kissed a girl!” Stephanie exclaimed with a sheepish smile on her face. Stephanie was frequently left out from the rest of our group and I often felt bad that she was ignored by the other girls. I had known Steph since we were three years old so I always had a soft spot for her.

“I can fix that,” I said quickly and before she could react, I pulled her face close to mine and pecked her on the lips for a few seconds. I smiled and laughed, and we all went back to singing about girls with cherry Chapstick. Stephanie froze for a moment, fixed her wire-frame glasses on her face and blushed, but then smiled widely at being included in the group of bi-curious chorus girls.

The next day at school the topic of conversation buzzing from the mouths of half the class of 2015 revolved around how I had “made out” with Stephanie on the back of the bus. I had been so sure no one from the front had been paying attention to us, but someone apparently had and jumped to conclusions.

I sat in the art room working on my painting when Austin tapped on my shoulder. I looked up saw his icy blue eyes piercing through me. I heard his friends laughing so I turned around with a look of both annoyance and confusion on my face. I never spoke with Austin much even though we had been in the same class since kindergarten.

“Are you a lesbian? I heard you were making out with Stephanie yesterday,” he said with a wide, cruel smile on his face. Austin had the ability to make fun of anyone for any reason, but he had never targeted me before. I felt my face rush with color as I quickly became enraged.

“No, and even if I was, it would be none of your business,” I snapped back at him.

He raised his hands in defense as if he had asked for the red paint and I had yelled at him. Austin turned back around to the table with his four followers and they burst out into laughter. I spun around on my chair and looked at my friend.

“Don’t worry about it, Kass. Austin’s an asshole,” she said soothingly as she glared past my head towards Austin’s table.

My friend looked like she was mentally strangling Austin, an expression she often made. I felt a hot tear form in my eye and I quickly brushed it away before anyone could see that this was affecting me. My friend was the only one who saw my moment of weakness and she broke her scowl to shoot me a reassuring smile. She knew how much I hated being talked about.

At that point I was still trying to convince myself that I was straight. I felt ashamed that I had been caught in an intimate display of affection with another girl. I knew it was perfectly acceptable for other people to not be strictly heterosexual, but I did not want to accept it myself.

After the period was up, I sought out Stephanie. I thought perhaps she had been talking about it like it was a badge of honor to kiss another girl. I saw her brown and pink polka dot backpack bobbing down the hall and rushed past the students in the hallways to reach her.

“Why did Austin just ask me if I’m a lesbian?” I asked her in an accusing tone.

“Oh, hey,” she said. “Someone asked me the same thing in Spanish. He asked if I made out with you, I said ‘I guess,’ and he high-fived me,” she said nonchalantly with a little laugh. She seemed to be happy that someone acknowledged her existence, and even more ecstatic that he cared enough to question her.

“Who saw us?” I interrogated further. Obviously I was more upset about this than Stephanie was. Her expression told me she was just excited to be the topic of the day.

Stephanie shrugged her thin shoulders and bounced off to class. I huffed and stood in the middle of the hallway for a few seconds while I tried to compose my thoughts. Fear rushed through my brain. If half the class already knew, how long would it take for the rest of the class, then the school, then my mom? Mom worked in my high school and knew almost everything.

Thankfully this was the one rumor that she did not hear, or at least she never said anything,

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Erika was the first girl I developed a crush on and she was the first girl I kissed. I sat next to her in a circle of eight friends in a chilly garage late at night. I could feel the warmth coming off of her thin body from the short distance I sat away from her in a lawn chair. She wore a black hoodie, a pair of dark wash jeans, and DC sneakers. She looked beautiful and radiated teenage angst and rebellion. Her blonde hair reflected in the light coming from the exposed light bulbs hanging from the ceiling.

 “Kass, truth or dare?” one friend said. I broke my gaze from Erika and looked around for the source of the question.

 “Dare,” I said confidently.

 “I dare you to make out with Erika.”

 I felt the blood rush to my cheeks and returned my gaze to Erika. She smiled brightly and nodded in agreement. The three teenage boys in the room shifted to the edge of their seats to get a better view. I internally cringed a bit when I saw them shift, but it did not dull my excitement to kiss Erika.

 I straightened my back and my heart began to pound harder. Suddenly I thought about the chapstick I had in my bookbag, but it was too late for that. If I had known I would be kissing Erika, I would have put it on, but I licked my lips to try and make up for the dryness. She leaned her face towards mine and closing her green eyes, Erika wove her skinny fingers in my hair on the back of my head. I cupped my hand over her smooth cheek and took a quick breath in. Our lips met, parted, and then seemingly out of nowhere, I felt her tongue glide against mine. I felt her smile and then pull away from my face.

I sat frozen for a few moments as it sunk in that I not only kissed a girl, but an exceptionally beautiful one at that. The three boys sat with their mouths slightly open and I could feel my face pull together uncomfortably.

“How was it?” one of the boys managed to say.

“She has really soft lips,” Erika said with a quick laugh. “Sean, truth or dare?”

And just like that, it was over. I licked my lips again and settled back into the lawn chair, hoping to get that same dare again.

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In my family, bisexuality does not exist. In their minds, you are either straight or gay. There are no other orientations. Since my aunt is gay, they have learned to accept her and the women she has had in her life. My Aunt Barb had a long term girlfriend for a large portion of my life, and her name was Kelly. No one particularly liked Kelly because of her obnoxious laugh and her control over my aunt, so we were not at all surprised or upset when they broke up.

I remember sitting in the living room of my grandmother’s apartment a few weeks after Aunt Barb and Kelly broke up. I sat on the worn green velvet couch that has been sat in too much over the years next to my mother. Mom looked at me and gave me the face signifying to help her get out of my grandmother’s apartment. Gram had been talking about Aunt Barb and Kelly for the past thirty minutes or so and did not seem to be close to stopping.

“Oh, I was talking to Barbie Ann yesterday. She still seems upset. I don’t know why. She finally got that bitch out of her life,” Gram said maliciously as she picked up her white chihuahua, Sweet Pea, who looked more like fat rat than a dog.

Mom rolled her eyes towards me and sighed. Gram normally praised Kelly, that was most certainly not the case that day.

“Ma, will you just drop it? This was weeks ago. Kelly is seeing some guy now,” my mother said, trying to prevent an inevitable fit.

“What?” Gram yelled.

“You didn’t know?”

“No, I thought she was a lesbian. Now she’s not?”

“I don’t know, Ma. Look, I have to get home so I can make dinner.”

“I’m gonna call that fake-lesbian and give her a piece of my mind,” my grandmother huffed as she picked up the phone next to her on the coffee table.

My breathing paused as I processed what she had said. Even though I could not stand Kelly, I felt bad for her. No one deserved to have their sexuality questioned. I knew how awful it felt, but instead of sticking up for Kelly, I sat in silence. I let the stigma continue to protect myself from the judgmental wrath of my grandmother.

“Mom, stop. You calling Kelly isn’t going to do anything. Just knock it off,” Mom said as she stood up and gathered her coat.

“Bye, Gram,” I mumbled, still uncomfortable about my silence. I kissed her on the cheek and walked out the door.

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My mother’s side of the family is not as bad as my father’s side. No one is openly gay on my father’s side. I am already the black sheep in the family because of my liberal views, so if my father’s family were to find out that I am not straight, I would most likely not be welcomed at family functions.

One night during my junior year in high school, I sat in my bed at home and was scrolling through Facebook on my laptop. The usual posts from Have a Gay Day popped up and I read the inspiring stories. Then, I saw a picture my younger cousin posted. There in front of me was a large picture of a rainbow circle with a red X through it with the words, “Share if you don’t support gay marriage.” My eyes welled up with fury.

It took a lot of willpower not to start a fight with my cousin right then and there. I wanted to say, “You know this is wrong, right? If I came up to you and said I was getting married to the woman I love, you wouldn’t support me? There is a good chance that I will marry a girl, so when I do, don’t expect an invitation.”

Those were the words I wanted to say. I wished I could shame him, to let him know how much that hurt me, the cousin he had played with since birth. But I did not. I said nothing to protect myself from the judgmental wrath of my cousins and eventually my grandparents, my uncles, my aunts, even my own brothers. The next time I saw my cousin at a large family function, I did not make eye contact with him.

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 The only person in my family to know of my sexuality is my 13-year-old nephew, Jakob. Jakob has always been like a younger brother rather than a nephew. We grew up together and as much as we hate each other at times, we are closer than I am with any of my own siblings.

 During one of my weekends home from my first year in college, I had driven Jakob and my younger nephew, Jayse, to the park in my town. Jayse’s green eyes squinted with joy and Jakob’s brown eyes rolled with boredom. Out of any siblings I had ever seen, these brothers were the most extreme of polar opposites, and as a result, fought furiously. Jayse slid down the slide and climbed back up it, regardless of my repeated instructions to climb up correctly. Jakob pushed me on the swing. It started to get warmer out, but I had promised Jayse to play at the park for as long as he wanted.

 “Can we go now? I have to update my Xbox,” Jakob said with irritation.

 “What do you say, bud. Wanna get going? I can make you a snack,” I said over my shoulder to Jayse.

 “Just a little while longer,” Jayse shouted from the slide.

 I looked at Jake and shrugged my shoulders. He let out a long frustrated sigh.

 “Come on! I want to go!” Jakob yelled at Jayse. When Jayse ignored him, he took off his shoe and threw it violently at his head and missed. Jayse laughed and threw it back at him.

 “Okay, that’s enough! Knock it off, both of you.”

 “Tell that little asshole to get the fuck down so we can go,” Jakob said angrily.

 “Don’t swear, and we can go in a few minutes.”

 He ignored me and threw his shoe once again at his brother’s head. This time it hit him right in the face. Jayse screamed in anger and rushed down the slide for pay back.

“Jake, really? Come on. Get your shoes on and we’ll go.”

Jayse threw it back at Jake and hit him in the leg. This set Jakob’s temper off and he went after his brother, pushed him to the ground, and punched him repeatedly in the arm.

I pulled Jakob off of him and tried to separate the two as best as I could considering both of them were almost bigger than me.

“Faggot!” Jakob yelled as he punched at the air.

“Jake, I’ve told you again and again. Don’t use that word!” I said angrily.

“He is a fucking faggot!” he huffed.

At this point, I had grown enraged. Without thinking, I drew my hand back and slapped him across the face, not as hard as I wanted, but harder than I anticipated. I immediately felt guilty, but it at least made him stop for a minute.

“Walk home and cool off!” I shouted as I led Jayse to my car. My sister’s house was only a few blocks away so it would give him the time he needed to calm down. The extra time also gave me time to breathe and think. I knew it was wrong of me to slap him. I knew I should have shrugged the derogative name off, but I could not.

That night I sat him on the couch in my sister’s house to talk about what he did at the park that day. At that point he had calmed down.

“Do you know why I don’t like you saying ‘faggot’?” I calmly asked Jakob.

“Because Aunt Barb is gay?”

“Well, that, and another thing. I need you to keep a secret.”

“What?” he asked as he furrowed his dark eyebrows.

“I’m bisexual.”

“But you date guys.”

“Yes, I know, but I also like girls.”

“Oh, okay,” he said with a little discomfort on his face.

“Promise me you won’t tell anyone. You know what our family is like. They can’t know. You’re the only one besides a few of my friends to know.”

“Okay, I promise,” he said as he squeezed my hand and shot me a small smile.

Jakob never said a word to anyone about what I told him and I was grateful for that.

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 It terrified me when I was younger and I developed crushes on both boys and girls because I did not know which was real. I ignored the feelings I had for girls, including Erika, because it was so much easier to appear to be straight for my family.

 It was my senior year when I got the nerve to come out to my small group of three close friends. We sat in the finished basement of one of my friend’s houses. I had several possible conversation transitions that could have lead to me telling them, but every time I had worked up the nerve, the topic had changed. Then finally there was a pause in the perpetual chatter of teenage girls.

 “Hey guys, I have something I want to tell you,” I managed to squeak out. This grabbed their attention and it was too late to back out.

 “What is it?” one asked.

 I suddenly found myself incapable of speaking. I had never outright said that I was bisexual, not even to myself. The friend who was sitting closest to me moved over and held my hand. She knew what I was trying to say. I was pretty sure the rest knew too. My friends had been trying to convince me that I was bi since the ninth grade.

 “Can you?” I asked the friend holding my hand.

 “Of course,” she said, turning to the two on the couch across from us, “Kass is trying to say that she’s bi.”

The other two smiled widely and got up to hug me, surrounding me in love and acceptance. In that moment I felt safe and happy in my own skin. I did not feel pressured to deny who I was. I did not feel ashamed for who I found attractive. I was free to just finally be myself, bisexual and proud.

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 A time will come where I am ready to come out to my family. Perhaps we will all sit down on the couch and it will be said nonchalantly. Perhaps I will make it a funny occasion and bake them a cake that says “Guess Who Isn’t Straight.” Perhaps it will come out during a serious time or maybe during a fun family game night. Either way, it will be said eventually, but only when I feel secure enough.

One thing I know for sure though, I cannot listen to Katy Perry without being taken back to early high school and the days where I began to find myself. As soon as I hear “I kissed a girl and I liked it, the taste of her cherry chapstick,” I burst out into song and laughter.