

So It Goes

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"One Last Kiss for Karl"

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Karl's father, Mr. Miller, had built an elaborate model train set with a mountain scene, tunnels and tracks, that ran for a full half mile in their basement. Karl and I both loved that set, but no one loved it more than Mr. Miller.

Mrs. Miller did not share our boyish enchantment with the train set. On weekends, we "men" would be downstairs having our fun, and Mrs. Miller would be drinking martinis in the living room. She was a beautiful woman – amber hair, a flawless figure. She dressed like every night alone in her living room was an event. Mrs. Miller seemed like a woman who couldn't possibly be a mother – a word that I associated with hard work, frown lines, and sharp words. Each night at some point, Mrs. Miller's strides became stumbles, and her voice called for Karl to come give her a kiss. Karl, red-faced, obliged. I couldn't understand his embarrassment. The longing I felt whenever Karl tromped up the stairs was easy for me to identify. My mother had never uttered the words, "Come give me a kiss, Conrad."

One winter evening, I was at Karl's house. At nine o'clock, we heard the siren song.

"Karl? Come give me a kiss."

Her voice was colorless and low. Karl's mouth formed a flat line.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing."

Mr. Miller's jaw clenched.

The lavish room was hazy. Mrs. Miller lay on the chaise lounge, a cocktail glass in one hand, a cigarette in the other. Dark streaks made tracks down her face. She'd cried recently.

"Give me a kiss, Karl."

"Ma," he complained. "I'm too old for kisses."

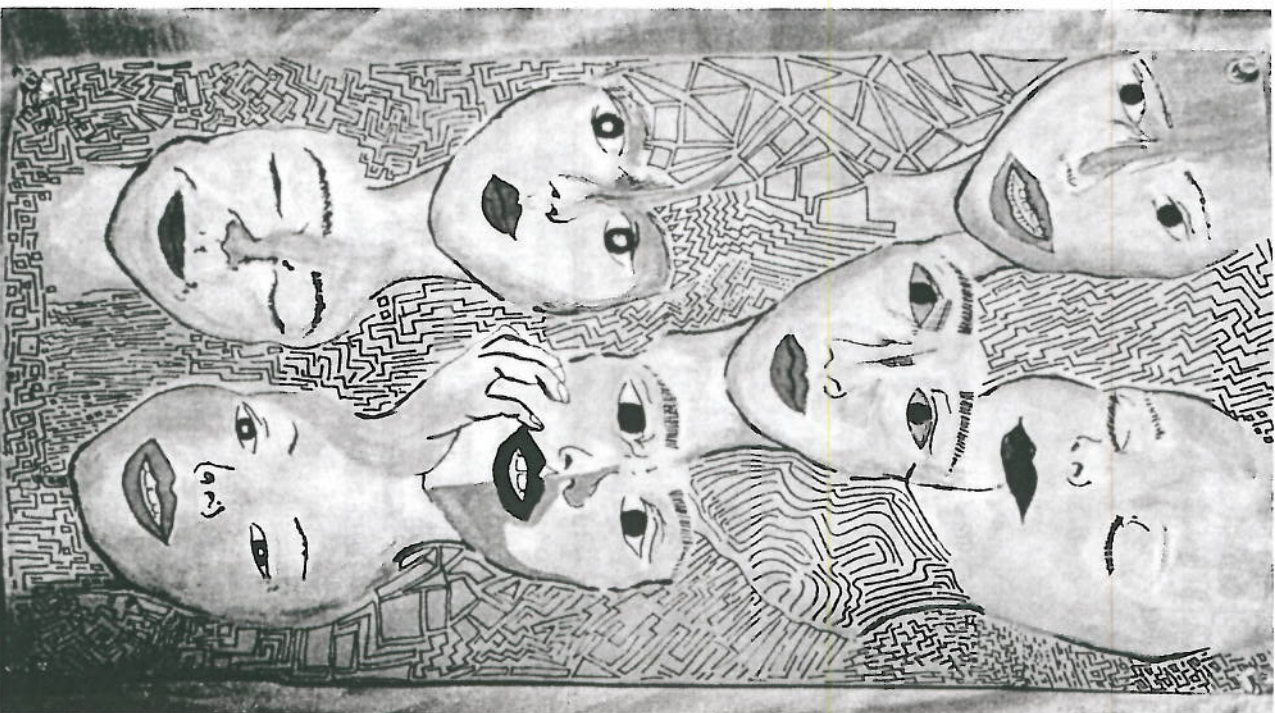
"Oh come on," she poured. "One last kiss for Karl before you're a grown man, all right?"

"All right," he relented. He bent to touch his cheek to hers.

"Two kisses, like the French," she said. "I love you, Karl."

He said nothing.

"Conrad," she turned to me, cajoling despite her appearance.



Face Collection

"Aren't you supposed to be home?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was just getting ready to go."

"Would you like a ride home, Conrad? I can take you."

Mr. Miller had just bought her a brand new Volkswagen Beetle, cream colored, for her thirtieth birthday. Now, they owned two cars and a television. Not many people in Indianapolis were doing as well as the Millers.

"I have my bike, ma'am," I said. "But thanks."

"If you change your mind..." Her eyes rolled as her head fell against her arm. Her cigarette dropped to the floor.

Karl dashed after it. He stamped it into the ashtray. I stomped on the smoldering part of the floor.

I held my breath, looking at Mrs. Miller. She was breathing lightly, her mouth open, showing her perfect teeth.

"Night," I said.

I left feeling strange. I was only at their house for the trains. I could leave any time. Karl lived there. I never asked how he felt about that. I assumed having a mother and a father – a father that actually played with him – made Karl the luckiest kid in town.

When I got home, my mother was sitting at the kitchen table, reading. She nodded at me.

"Good time at the Miller's?"

"Pretty good," I said. "Karl spilled paint on the floor, but Mr. Miller said they'd have the maid fix it."

Her blond hair, pulled back into a bun, frizzed around her ears. She looked worn.

"You spend a lot of time at the Miller's."

I looked at my shoes.

"I thought, maybe," she went on, "That you'd like to spend some time with me tomorrow."

"Oh."

"Thought we might go to the Ayres downtown, see the Christmas decorations."

Speechless, I nodded.

"There's a train there," she said.

"Can I ride it?"

"I think we can make that happen."

"Can Karl come with us? Please?"

She looked at me. Her face always looked too thin. Her mouth rugged.

"Maybe next time. Tomorrow, let's just us go."

"I bet his folks would give him money, if that's –"

"Conrad."

I knew not to argue.

We sat at the table together – mother behind a newspaper, me staring at the facing page. It seemed like an eternity before she lowered the flimsy sheets.

"Do you need to go to the bathroom before we go?" she asked.

"No, ma'am."

"I'll get my purse."

We had a twenty-minute drive ahead of us. Mother hummed along with Elvis. At a stoplight, she even smiled at me.

On 52nd Street, we stopped to wait at a set of train tracks. A long line was ahead of us, with no train in sight. Still, the lights flashed and bells clanged. At a great distance, a train whistle blew.

We edged forward as cars began to race across the tracks.

Five cars back, we stopped.

"I'm not going any further," mother said, taking the car out of gear.

"This looks dangerous to me."

She lit a cigarette as a car behind her honked. Mother turned her head to throw a rude look over her shoulder as I watched the car at the front of the line jerk forward and stop on the tracks.

I stared at the car. Why wasn't it moving?

"Mother?" I said. I pointed at the car.

"What Conrad?" she asked, turning around. Her eyes followed my outstretched finger to the cream colored Volkswagen Beetle on the tracks.

"Is that Mrs. Miller's car?"

The question hung in the air for mere seconds before the train appeared, knocking the Beetle into the air like a baseball. It slammed into a pole, and tumbled top over tires to the ground where it rolled to an upright position. The wheels on the driver's side were flattened, the car leaned to one side. Glass covered the surrounding pavement and vibrated with the ferocity of the passing train.

It didn't stop.

I don't know how long we sat there, but others got out of their cars before we did. The man who honked at my mother ran past our car. I watched him go before I realized that I should try to breathe. I panted, quietly, the windshield fogging in front of me. My hands gripped the seat and my fingers tingled at the tips. I couldn't take my eyes away from the car, where people were beginning to swarm.

Quietly, my mother said, "Stay here." She got out of the car and stood for a moment, hand poised above the door, holding her un-ashed cigarette.

"Stay here," she said again, swinging the door shut.

I could smell the remainder of her smoke and perfume and had no inclination to leave. I wiped the windshield with my scarf, and watched mother's narrow frame passing through the crowd. Then, she peered into the driver's door. She swallowed hard, her hand covering her mouth. She turned to come back to our car, watching the pavement as she walked. People knocked into her as they approached the scene. She dragged on her cigarette. Ashes fell onto her coat.

She got back into the car and turned it on.

"Where are we going?"

"Downtown," she said. "We're turning around and finding another way."

"We're still going?"

"Yes, we are." She turned toward me, a frantic look in her eyes.

"You still want to go, don't you? There's a tra—"

I looked at the floorboard.

"Who was in the car?" I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to control myself if she said what I feared.

"It was Anna Miller," she said.

"Just..."

"Just her," she said.

I thought of Karl putting out his mother's cigarette last night, how I stomped on the embers burning the carpet. The look of embarrassed exasperation on his face.

"Was she alive?" I asked.

My mother looked at me quickly.

"There was a lot of blood."

Neither of us spoke for the rest of the car ride.

Many years later, I can still see that car flying in the air, but the only thing I remember about Ayres is that I no longer wanted to ride the train.

Karl's father married his secretary, Roberta Carmichael, about a month after the funeral. The trains sat abandoned in the dark basement. Mr. Miller had a new toy.

But I wondered about Mrs. Miller a lot. Her perfect hair, perfect nails, perfect teeth. The image of a perfect life – the one I never imagined beyond kisses and accepted as an ideal fact. Then one night, mascara made tracks down her cheeks, and the next day, she was gone.

I wondered if Roberta Carmichael had anything to do with those tears and those tracks.

The Millers sold their house and bought a new one without a basement. When I visited Karl's new house, all of the furniture was unfamiliar and so were the drapes and dishes. There was no trace left of their former lives. Roberta Carmichael replaced everything. It was as if the perfect Mrs. Miller I'd admired and wished were my own mother had never existed.

Maybe she hadn't.