

# The Last Good Kiss

Sean Prentiss

The girl's fifteen dollar fishing rod drags a line through the Delaware River, which runs placid but where her tippet drags through river-water.

The girl (twenty-one years old and beautiful) and the boy (just twenty-three) sit in an old aluminum canoe (dented and welded from an old wreck in the rapids).

The boy and girl ring around a hundred foot long eddy—Cool Eddy.

The dented canoe spirals up and down the edge of the river, moving them in lazy circles.

With the girl's rod against the bow, the girl stares downriver—past McElany Island, the Belvidere Bridge, Oliver's Beach—at Foul Rift (where whitecaps cascade over whitecaps).

Slowly, the river's current grabs (gently, as if with soft fingers) the girl's line, and then the bow of the canoe, pulling the canoe from Cool Eddy.

With a stroke of his paddle, the boy (weed thin and still putting on weight) turns the canoe back into Cool Eddy, and they eddy again (circling loose-skinned sycamores, the steep shale bank, a broken lawn chair where summer fisherman sometimes sit).

The girl (thin hipped, wide shouldered) runs her fingers along the gunwales, turns her head (her hair brown and wavy) until she stares upriver (at a slow-sloping hill, faraway cornfields, those herons' rooks).

She squints her eyes from that thin sun breaking a sky filled with diffuse cirrus clouds.

The girl stares off as an April breeze turns the canoe sideways.

Then the girl starts speaking.

The girl asks, *If I owned that cabin upriver, would you marry me?*

The question is not asked quietly, still, somehow, this question almost floats away.

The girl's reed-like fingers trace the rough welds that seal a dozen leaks (from when the boy and his cousin rolled this canoe in Foul Rift so many years ago—god, almost ten).

The boy is completely unprepared for this question.

*If I owned that cabin.*

This is what it is like when the world stops.

From the shore, leafless, skeletal elms cast long shadows across the bow of the canoe.

Last winter's flood-trash clings to the banks (a bald tire, a bloated muskee, a dock torn in half).

The boy (stunned—and still stunned twelve years later) says nothing, not a word.

It's as if he lets the breeze carry the question away.

But so simply, he could say, Yes—he could.

All he needs to do is open his mouth and let the words (like birds) flutter out.

If the boy did say Yes, then at night, the girl would smoke her Marlboro Lights on the cabin porch before coming inside to a house warmed by their own trees.

The boy would bring in hardwood (birch, elm, maple) to feed the woodstove.

Sunday mornings (those beautiful Sunday mornings) the girl would oil paint the

Delaware while the boy sits on the deck and writes poems about being stuck in eddies.  
They could do this; they could.

Before the boy answers (or even understands how to answer) the girl, the current again tugs the canoe, the boy, the girl (everything, everything) from the eddy toward that downriver rift.

The boy pulls the paddle from the water and rests it on his thighs.

Though the boy does not say a single word, he thinks, *Let the current take us.*

Droplets of river-water fall from the paddle onto the boy's legs.

Droplets fall into the river (breaking the boy's view of smooth rocks staring up from the riverbed).

*Let the current take us.*

It's all so simple—just open up your mouth and say, Yes.

Say it, please—please.

The boy runs his hands across the grains of the wooden paddle (so smooth) and stares at the light wood glued to dark wood.

The girl brushes sand from her thin ankles as the canoe leaves Cool Eddy.

The boy and the girl in the damaged canoe float toward the center of the Delaware, pulled downriver—heading toward the Atlantic a hundred and fifty miles away.

The girl silently reels in her line as they near McElany Island and the Belvidere Bridge.

A hundred or two hundred yards away, the rapids of Foul Rift break.

The boy and the girl hear the waves (a sound of almost violent sadness).

The boy remembers when he wrapped this canoe around a rock, god, over a decade ago.

But now the boy imagines that instead of being with his cousin, he was with the girl.

The boy imagines he and the girl flipping the canoe then swimming for their lives—clinging to moss-covered rocks.

Fingertips slipping, river-water on her lips, a half mile of rapids ahead.

Upriver, a lone heron jumps from the shore (its wings breaking the water) as it flies toward a sun that bleeds through thin spring clouds.

The heron, it moves on its way (like water).

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It is the dark hours of winter where you now live (twenty-five hundred miles from that girl you call Bones).

Though you speak to Bones (at most) once a year, you know that she's been laid off from the candy factory, living with a new lover in that little town you once called home.

As for you—you are thirty-five and single, teaching at some western university.

You are unsure about so much.

Where you live, the sun has set so many hours ago, so you put down the western poet you've been reading and prepare for bed.

In the emptiness of this apartment (with its worn out white walls), you circle back and back to one of the lines read tonight: *The last good kiss you had was years ago.*

The math is easy: 1996 to 2008. Twelve years.

God, to be twenty-three years old again.

To be twenty-three forever.

Walking through empty rooms (the empty, empty rooms of your apartment), you shut off the lights one by one (by one by one).

The darkness chases you from room to empty room.

This house is sad like you are sad.

Brushing your teeth, you think about the powerful (and haunting) nature of memories.

Then you turn the heat down to 55 and wonder how to create some meaning from that river day so that the last twelve years haven't been a waste.

You hold the line in your hand (it sits in your palm)—*the last good kiss you had was years ago, while lying to yourself, it's better this way—it never could have worked.*

As you lock your front door, you remember another quote from tonight's book.

The author, a long dead western poet, wrote, *Sorry, sorry, sorry.*

Who would you say those words to (The girl? The river? The boy?)?

You drop the blinds (separating darkness from darkness) and tell yourself that there were better fits (though tonight you cannot think of a single girl better).

Tonight (just like last night and tomorrow night) there are no other girls, no other lovers that compare.

But you tell yourself that Bones was just some childhood love and that memories always (always, always) ache more than the moment, especially when it is a winter with cold nights and long days of darkness and you've got all the time in the winter to remember and remember.

You (by now and after all these years) understand all about the inner workings of lies.

With nothing left to do (no lights to turn off, your teeth brushed, the door locked) you crawl into bed (the sheets so February chilled).

As you lay in bed (awake), you speak to yourself (just to hear a noise in your apartment), *Listen, Prentiss . . .* before you trail off.

Your words, these words, they should not be spoken out loud (and never alone at night).

# Review



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