

## The Kissing Boy

It's September 1<sup>st</sup> and the Kissing Boy seizes up and his whole body shakes in the rain when their faces meet. His mouth is wide, teeth out, tongue retracted so at least he doesn't slobber. Zoe sees him coming in, cranes her neck back and sees his pink lips part and zoom in on her whole face. She didn't plan on spending her first weeks in her new home like this. Their kiss is long and before their mouths retreat, Zoe feels him shake in her arms. He blushes when she smiles and laughs at him. They are both so new and unsure of what they did right or wrong with this small action. He steals her shoes, she gives him her phone number. This is strange for Zoe.

She's lived here for a month in Sedalia, Missouri. So far she's had a hard time adjusting to the slower, quieter lifestyle.

It's her freshman year at East Sedalia Public School, where every girl and boy looks exactly the same. The lockers are all sticky-note blue and the walls are painted egg-yolk yellow over cement block walls. This place is like the twilight zone. Her parents tell her to adapt, it'll all be fine. She met the Kissing Boy on her first weekend in Sedalia and he is the only person she has properly met at this point. Her classes are filled with faces of clones. But these are not porcelain dolls, that'd be too delicate. These are Lego Men, all shaded yellow like the walls and built with the same facial expressions. You can give each one a different hat or weapon, but they are all cut from the same cube of hard yellow plastic.

It's September 15th and the Kissing Boy doesn't show up. Zoe hasn't seen him at school either. She waits for him every Saturdays in the wheat field behind the CostCo. This is the second time he's been M.I.A.

Math Teacher:

Zoe's psychological status in class seems to be one of a day-dreamer. She rarely raises her hand unless it's to use the restroom, and she doesn't talk to the other kids in class. Normally I have to ask all of the girls to stop talking and pay attention. They can be so chatty sometimes. But Zoe is very quiet and reserved. She's doing fine on assignments and tests, but a girl at her age that doesn't talk is a little strange to me, don't you agree?

It's October 23<sup>rd</sup>, and Zoe meets the Kissing Boy in the field for the last time. She tells him that she wants to try using tongue and he makes a face at her like that's impossible.

"I met a boy." She says, "He knows how to do it." This new boy is what startles Kissing Boy more than his supposed ability to kiss with tongue. "I think I'm going to ask him how it works." She puts her hand on Kissing Boy's shoulder and stands up on her tip-toes to kiss him.

"Do you have any friends that are girls?" asks Kissing Boy, pulling away from her.

"No, not really."

"You should meet some."

"Why would I do that?" Zoe steps away from Kissing Boy. They are surrounded by wheat and it tickles Zoe's ankles. Kissing Boy sighs and he begins pulling wheat out of the ground.

"I'm sure most of the boys you know are morons." He finds a cricket and holds it in his palm. "I don't know why you hang out with them." He puts the cricket on top of his head and waits for it to leap.

"They're nice to me. But the girls are the real morons." They pause and Kissing Boy looks up at her. "Besides, I've got you. Aren't you happy with me?" Another cricket hops over her bare toes.

"This is temporary happiness."

Zoe:

I stopped seeing him at school. He was just never around. To be honest, I wasn't really sure he even went to my school. But he was my only friend when I first moved here. Now I'm kind of on my own. I'm fine this way, but a little bored every now and then. It's no fun going home and sitting in my room. I can hear my parents arguing downstairs, Mom telling Dad he needs to get a job out here before we go broke, Dad telling Mom that we're going broke anyways. Not exactly what you'd call heartwarming. But I pretend not to listen, and when I come downstairs for dinner, we all act like nothing happened.

It's the start of junior year and Zoe, Sandy, and Rachel wander through the halls arm in arm. They are all wearing their new matching knee-high socks with little rain boots. They've been friends for three whole months. Sandy – who's real name isn't Sandy, but it describes her

better – wants to meet a boy. It doesn't matter what boy, where he was from or who he likes. She is overly confident that any boy will like her. She is only right about 35% of the time.

“Just pick one.” Rachel suggests, pointing at the boys huddled around their lockers or outside the bathrooms.

“Rachel, that's rude! Don't point.” Zoe says, pulling Rachel's arm down.

“Oh, whatever, City Girl.” Rachel says, tightening her arm around Zoe's. They walk up and down one hallway and then the next. This is not a special day; it is just another day. The girls stop by their lockers, all right next to each other and lean against them. Zoe watches other students go by, shuffling into classrooms carrying books and binders. Her boyfriend, Adrian, comes up beside her. Rachel and Sandy turn to watch their exchange.

“You coming over tonight?” Adrian has her pinned up close against the locker and he is talking into her neck. Rachel and Sandy look excited and Zoe plays along. She wonders how he always smells like tobacco.

“Of course.” Zoe breathes, acting calm. She spends every weekend at his house. At this point her parents never see her. She calls up Rachel and Sandy every Sunday morning and tells them every detail. This has been repeated every weekend since she met her boyfriend at the start of junior year. He likes to get drunk and sneak around the soccer field at night, dragging Zoe along with him. At first she felt responsible for looking after him, but now it has become a chore.

“My parents are going to be out of town till Tuesday.” Her boyfriend is warm and sweaty. Zoe knows what all of this means without him having to actually say it.

“May I sleepover?” she asks, and looks up at him from under her eyelashes. She feels like she's in a bad porno.

“Sure, Babe.” He steps away from her and heads for the restroom, scratching his crotch and tugging at his saggy jeans. Zoe sighs and then remembers that Sandy and Rachel are still watching her. She puts on her excited face.

Mom:

Zoe didn't love it when we moved out here. But I couldn't blame her; it was a big change. She was so quiet about it. My husband, Ed, and I were so worried about her at first. We hoped that there would be lots of new kids just like her, so she wouldn't be the outcast or anything. I

mean, this is a trucker's town. No one really settles in here. But we were hoping that Zoe would be able to make this her home.

Then she met that boyfriend. Ed and I always knew she was too good for him. But we said whatever made her happy was fine by us. It was the least we could do after all the fighting and moving out here and all the pressure we put on her. I've stopped waiting for her to come home every night. I knit her a scarf but she gave it to Sandy's little sister and thought I wouldn't notice. She's a teenager, so this is all normal, I suppose. I can't keep worrying about her. Ed and I have our own issues. He's out of a job. I'm out of a job. This trucker town is falling apart. At least Zoe is enjoying herself. Her happiness is all that matters, right?

It's the summer after her senior year and Zoe grabs the car keys off the counter and drive's to Rachel's house. She's leaving for college today and Zoe hasn't said goodbye yet. Sandy left last weekend for freshman orientation and now Rachel's going too. Zoe sees Rachel's mother and little sister standing outside in the yard, hugging Rachel and giving her advice for how to succeed in college without sleeping with your professors. Zoe parks across the street and runs over into the yard and gives Rachel a big hug.

"Looks like you've got enough stuff." Zoe says, looking into the car on it's way to St. Louis. "I wish you could take me with you." Rachel laughs and grabs Zoe's hand.

"I'm so excited!" she shrieks, squeezing Zoe's hand till it's blue. Zoe eyes the sheets and the mini fridge and the desk lamp in the backseat of the car. She isn't smiling anymore and Rachel's mom takes notice. "I'll call you when I get there and tell you all about the dorm and the people and stuff." Rachel lets go of Zoe's hand and starts walking around to the driver's side of the car. Leaning into the passenger side window, Zoe laughs,

"Smells like Taco Bell and Ramen noodles already!" She jokes, looking around at the maps and sunglasses on the seat. "I'm wearing our socks, remember from Junior year?" Rachel doesn't look up from the map she's reading.

"Oh yeah! Mine are packed in the back somewhere."

"Cool. Well, good luck out there!" Zoe steps back from the car as Rachel turns the key and drives off.

Kissing Boy:

I drove to Zoe's school once. She was eating lunch outside with some girls. It's good she had girls to talk to. I know I wouldn't have made the best gossip or pedicure friend for her. She seemed happy enough, or at least better than where she was before. It's not healthy for someone to have only one friend, especially if that friendship is based on awkward sexual maturity. But my one observation was this, she isn't the same girl that I knew. If she saw me, she probably wouldn't have said anything. I reminisce about our days in the wheat fields, her stringy hair spider-webbing around my fingers and the way she'd smile a millisecond before each kiss. It was silly for us to be experimenting like that, but she needed the attention, someone to make sure her fragility wasn't taken advantage of. I stopped going to the wheat fields because I could see that she was already fading. She was talking to boys and she liked the way they looked at her. I suppose it's understandable. She wasn't mine to begin with, but I wanted her to be.

It's October and Zoe is not enjoying her "gap year". Rachel is in St. Louis and Sandy is in Chicago and Zoe is still in Sedalia. She works part time at a Walgreens but hates it because her boss is a 200 lb lesbian with fake nails and permanent meatball scent. They don't get along well so Zoe is always the one stacking tampon boxes and adult diapers.

Zoe leaves work and drives home where her mother is watching a documentary on the Holocaust in the living room. There are paper plates all over the kitchen counter and a pan of cheesy potatoes burning in the oven. The smell didn't occur to Zoe's mother and so they burned to a black crisp. She doesn't get off the couch when Zoe walks in, and doesn't turn to see what is causing all of the smoke when Zoe pulls the potatoes out of the oven. This is not a bad day; it is just another day. Her father has been gone for almost a month now. He left town with Zoe's Algebra II teacher after graduation, and her mother hasn't been doing very well since then. Actually, she hasn't been doing well for longer than that. Unemployment means perpetual boredom, and Zoe's mom doesn't have any hobbies to keep her occupied. She knit a scarf once. Zoe goes back out to the car and drives to Costco to purchase microwavable Chinese food and a cheese wedge with some bread. This is a standard meal for her these days.

Before driving home, Zoe parks behind the building and stares at the wheat field. Half of it has been plowed over, and is flat and desolate looking. The part that is still growing wheat looks thin and brittle at best. This is not the same field that she remembers from her first few months in Sedalia. She gets out of the car anyways and brings the loaf of bread with her. The

field is bordered by trees on two sides and a truck stop on the third. The backside of CostCo is moldy and littered with boxes and broken shopping carts. Zoe walks into the part of the field still covered in wheat. There aren't as many crickets anymore.

Zoe wants the Kissing Boy to be somewhere in this field. She could stumble upon him, corralling the crickets in a woven wheat fence like they used to make. He'd laugh and fall back into the dirt when one of the crickets jumped out of the fence and onto his skinny legs. She wonders if he every grew substantial leg hair. She would come up behind him and say, "What's going on here?" and he would stare up at her from the dirt and the crickets and say nothing. He'd reach out a hand for her to help him up, and once on his feet, he would squeeze her around the shoulders till her spine cracks. Zoe imagines herself biting into his shoulder till he let go of her. He'd keep laughing and her face would turn maraschino cherry-red.

She wants him to be in this field, but even if she walked through every square foot, he wouldn't be here. He's probably off and away like the rest of them. She should go quit her job at Walgreens. She should get her mother off the couch and turn off those damn Holocaust shows she's always watching. They aren't even Jewish. Zoe stops somewhere near the middle of the field and sits down to eat her bread. A cricket comes and sits on top of one of the crumbs that drops from her mouth. This is not the Kissing Boy, not enough of a companion. She picks up the cricket and the crumb it is perched on and flicks it off into the rest of the field.

Zoe:

I wanted to go to college, really I did. There was a plan, there were steps, there were ways to get out of Sedalia. But then I got boobs, which meant I got a boyfriend, which meant I lost all innocence that I had before. Okay, I can't blame puberty for the whole thing, I know I made the choices that got me here. It's the summer after my senior year and I should be studying in a huge library with hundreds of other students. Students with glasses, with red hair, green eyes, dark skin, smart people who want to learn as much as I do. But I missed out and it's my own fault. When Mom and Dad reached rock bottom, before he left with Mrs. Nelder, I spent every night at my boyfriend's house. And it wasn't the boy from the wheat field, I wish I knew his name. It was the boy who followed me to gym class, starring at my ass, and asked me out the next day. And I made all the wrong choices. I am an amateur at life, a novice at best. I have pitiful examples to look up to, and yes I'm complaining because I don't know what else there is

to do at this point. I hate working at Walgreens, I hate seeing my Mother piss her life away, I hate thinking that my Father is off screwing the woman who taught me logarithms, I hate knowing that I could have changed all of this. And I wish the boy from the fields came back for me. Because he liked me before the boobs and the boyfriend and the matching clothes. He liked me when I was nervous and unsure of myself, before I turned left at every corner instead of right.

#### Kissing Boy:

Zoe was scared. She retreated to the field with me because our friends were the crickets and we made ourselves a nest between the wheat. We kissed because that's the only thing she was willing to try. She didn't like change. I can understand that. We kissed because she was lonely and tired. She wouldn't tell you this, but I could see it. We didn't share much with each other. I don't know her birthday or where she went to school or if she has siblings. Then again, I doubt she even knows my name. She liked it when I said her name right before we kissed because it made her feel like a real person. At least, that's the reason she gave me. I think it made her feel important, like someone cared for her, wanted her. She acted like it was silly of us to be kissing, but did it anyways. We felt like adults some days. She didn't like it when I said this was temporary happiness because it was too true. She went and met girls to be friends with, boys to have sex with. She spun away from me, arms out, grazing against new friends. I don't know where she is now, but she let go of me and kept spinning. If this weren't a metaphorical dance, she'd have a wide-sweeping skirt the color of a July sunset. If this weren't a metaphorical dance, then perhaps I could have spun her back in, elbows locked like corners of a room, one hand behind her back and the other placed upright with hers.