

I Kiss You

A timed exercise

by Juliet Robinson

I kiss you for the first time, and it starts to rain.

The kind of rain that soaks you within minutes, no point in running from it. We stood there, laughing and kissing. Soaked through to our undies. You asked me back to yours, and even though I wanted to say yes, I said I couldn't. I knew where this would go and I hadn't shaved my legs, and I was wearing knickers you wouldn't want paramedics cutting off you. I hadn't dressed with romance in mind, I had dressed according to what was clean.

We arranged to meet later that week, dinner, and something. Something left open and I know what we both hoped it would become.

The weeks rolled by and we became an item, though nothing was ever specified. We just fell into a couple. And it worked. We bought a place on Leopold Way, it was grotty beyond belief, but we fixed that over the years. I will never not regret the purple kitchen though, you were right and I was wrong, it was awful. Then the students downstairs set fire to the whole tenement building - chip pan fire and we decided to take the plunge and move to the country.

Cats and dogs entered our life here and your new obsession with growing vegetables. We adopted a donkey, then another because they like company. Two years later we found, Jing-Yi who came to us all the way from China. She grew and grew and now lives in New York. Thank goodness for Facetime, it hides the distance and softens the blow of her not being here anymore.

We didn't notice when cancer first came calling. I had booked you a massage for your fiftieth birthday, your therapist spotted the lump. It was small, it was found early and was treated quickly. Remission, five years, six, seven and whilst we never quite found the peace we had before, peace of a sort returned to us.

Looking back, I think I loved you the moment I first saw you. Your hair all scrapped up into a bun, not a neat one and you constantly pulled at it as you poured over a textbook on the coffee shop table. By the time you had finished your coffee almost all your hair was down. We skirted each other, as friends. I didn't know who I was properly, just that when I was with you, I felt that I might one day dare to be the person I buried inside.

The kiss, that kiss, the rain, that rain, that took six years. And what unfolded after was a lifetime.

Mornings, cups of tea, the rush to get to work, disagreements over internet providers, whose family we should spend Christmas with – always mine, never yours. Your mother never accepted us, though when she passed on your father did.

The second time cancer entered our lives, it was like we had always know it would return. Perhaps we never shut the door properly after it left the first time. This time it came with a battle plan and an agenda - unfinished business. You fought, I fought with you, in my own way. Holding your hand through treatments, helping you shave your head, shaving mine with you, my red curls falling amongst your black locks in the sink. Cooking all those healthy soups that you politely tried to stomach.

The hospice, not our haven, not our home. But peaceful. A place you could let go and you did.

I kiss you for the last time, and I can't stop crying. I whisper to you as I lean over your sunken face.

'I kiss you for the first time, and it starts to rain.'

You whisper as you kiss stilled face.

I remember that rain, magical rain, the kind that only happens in films. Romantic films. Until that point my life had been free of such kisses and rain.

You're kissing me for the last time and I watch, though not from my worn and ruined body, from somewhere else. I'm not me anymore, but part of me still lingers, its here in you and you keep that fragment of me tightly bound. Not for a moment do you loosen that grip. That is why I am still here.

Your tears fall heavily on the papery skin of my face, you cover with me with those tears. It seems that you could wash away my feeble remains with that flood.

You take me with you when Jing-yi drives you home. I am the pain in your chest, the breath that can't quite catch in your lungs. The hollowed-out space inside you. You curl up on my side of the bed and cling to my pillow like a shipwrecked mariner would to a life belt. Press your face into it, absorb the small scent of me that still rests in the goose down.

But I am not that perfume, all that remains of me is what endures in you.