

Doing That

‘We used to hold hands,’ Grandpa whispered. ‘We kissed.’

‘No!’ I said. I was shocked. I wanted to ask him what it was like but I decided against.

‘It was...’ He paused and shook his head. ‘No. I shouldn’t really say. I’ve said too much already.’

I could see that his hands were trembling and his face was pale. Even with the energy levels turned down low and the screen flickering and twitching, he looked nervous, rattled.

‘Maybe we should change the subject now,’ he said. ‘Maybe you ought to tell me about your day instead.’

‘OK, Grandpa. That’s cool.’

What had my day been like? Much the same as usual. Working on my literature coursework. Reading, downloading, highlighting, annotating, logging, saving, filing, copying, pasting, sometimes trashing. Quite a lot of trashing actually. It wasn’t going well. Lunch? A hot

cheesy thing, a glass of thick chocolate milk. Oh yes and my morning fish-oil capsule, for a bit more brain power, and my vitamin D tablet, of course, and my sex dampener. No choice. Just take what's given.

'My day's been fine, Grandpa. Same as always. Working on my essay for the Old Lit course.'

I was being careful. I didn't want to say too much. Just like him. Careful.

What I really wanted to say was that after I'd eaten my lunch, my day had taken a surprising turn. I wanted to ask him about it. After all, he'd lived a long time. He knew things I didn't. He might be able to calm the thundering in my ears, the blood that kept rushing to my face, the uncomfortable stirrings. I wanted to say, 'This afternoon, something very strange happened, Grandpa. That's why I asked you about that other thing, the thing I shouldn't have asked you. The thing about you and Grandma that I shouldn't have said. I came across something...'

But I'd clearly already said enough. I couldn't say more.

'I've got to go now, Ben,' Grandpa said. 'There's a couple of people queued up to speak to me online.'

He seemed in a hurry to get away. I wondered why. He was usually keen for a chat. He waved to me and touched his hand to his lips, in a touchingly old-fashioned gesture.

'Bye, Ben, my boy. Call again soon! Oh, and forget that thing I said to you earlier about your grandma and me. It was nothing.'

Then his image on the screen froze, there was the usual lurching whurrrup and he was gone.

He'd kissed her. Wow. It was a surprise. A shock. I'd known Grandma Myers before she died and I really

couldn't imagine it, Grandpa and her doing that! I'd read about it of course. There'd been a worksheet once at school, with hints of other things too, even more extreme. But it didn't go into detail and that had seemed no bad thing. The kissing idea was quite enough for me to take in.

To think that only fifty or sixty years ago it had been happening regularly, and even Grandpa and Grandma had done it. To be honest it made me feel a little nauseous, dizzy. The table and the chairs seemed to have given up their gravity. They were rippling around the room. I was glad he'd signed off without saying more.

'Calm down,' I said out loud to myself. 'This is just silly.' But it was hard to get that picture out of my head – Granny and him. And what for? That was the most difficult thing to understand. Why? When all the downsides were so obvious.

My parents had never gone in for that kind of thing, I was absolutely sure of that. Mother had always been quite straight with me about personal relationships. She believed in honesty. No point in hiding things and giving a child all kinds of psychological hang-ups. She'd met my father in the usual way and stuck by the rules. They'd admired each other's doctoral theses, liked each other's styles of writing, felt a strong connection in their love of music. They'd had a lovely old-school wedding, bringing all their friends together for a party online, choosing music downloads from their favourite era. I'd watched my parents' wedding a few times on playback. It was sweet. But also, if I'm honest, a little embarrassing, listening to those bands with those out-of-tune plinkety-plonkety guitars and funny old booming drum kits. Fine for a music history course maybe but not much more.

Mother and Father weren't kissers, I was sure of that. No way. And just suppose they'd wanted to be, it'd have been pretty hard to organise. Finding each other and meeting up, just for starters. The penalties, even in those days, would have been harsh. It wouldn't have been worth it.

The kissing thing, like all the rest of what they did way back then, had never really been of great interest to me. You know what they say, what you don't know about you don't miss. And the screen stuff they provide usually does the trick, if I'm ever feeling a bit in need of something, or if the sex dampener hasn't quite kicked in. Though reading those novels for the Old Lit course had sometimes got me wondering. What exactly were those blacked-out bits? Why bother doing all that shading out of the text if it was all so dull and completely valueless? Redaction for redaction's sake didn't make much sense.

That thing – kissing – hadn't seemed very important at the time, though. But now, since lunchtime, it's just about all I can think about.

You see, straight after lunch I went back to my essay. I was doing my usual search on the web, just looking for a few references to add to my footnotes, when I came across this site. It shouldn't have been there. It should have been blocked, or had warnings in place at the very least. I shouldn't have been curious. I shouldn't have opened it. And if I'd opened it, I shouldn't have read it. But I did. I did open it and I did read it.

It was a short story by a Russian. An old one, from way back when. We're not supposed to read his work because it's not significant apparently. That's what the teachers say. This Russian, Anton, from Chekhov or somewhere, took

fiction in a bad direction, all the critics agree, so his stories are not on the syllabus. Not worth studying, they say. But there it was, open on my desktop, and there was the title and there was the print, sitting on the screen, in Times New Roman of all the stupid things, just begging me to read it. So, I did. I read it.

‘The Kiss’. That’s what it was called. A long time ago – even further back than when Grandpa and Grandma Myers were young – when women wore long dresses and men carried guns and fought in real wars, a young man goes to a party and a young woman mistakes him for someone else and kisses him. And then all he can think about is that kiss. His whole life narrows down to that one moment, when her arms are around his neck and she kisses him. He imagines meeting her again and the disappointment, oh the ache of sadness when he goes back and nothing happens. Zilch. All that yearning for her comes to nothing. For a kiss. Just a pointless, germy old kiss.

I read it all, in one sitting, just like that. My face was hot. Did I have a fever or something? I got the thermometer out from the cupboard. It was normal. My pulse was hammering. There was something very odd going on in my head. I didn’t feel good. But then I didn’t feel bad either. The man in the story by that old writer, from Chekhov or somewhere, had been a complete fool, an idiot. So why did I like him? And why did I want, so very badly, for the young woman, whoever she was, to kiss him again?

Now I’m sitting at my desk in front of the screen and I can’t concentrate on my essay and I can’t stop thinking about it, about the young man who wanted to kiss the girl again. And about Grandpa and Grandma and all those other people way back then.

I should get on with my work. I'm late with my essay and I'll get penalty marks if it's not in by tomorrow. But I'm looking for that site. I want to read that story again. I want to find out why the kiss was so important, why the young man had to kiss the girl again. But I'm searching for the site and I'm frantically looking at my online history and the screen's twitching and flickering and sparking and I'm trying to remember the search words and when I finally do, all I find is my screen telling me, in big red letters, 'SITE CLOSED INDEFINITELY FOR MAINTENANCE'.

So that's it then. Deleted. Not even redacted. Completely wiped. Gone.

I go back to my essay and swallow my afternoon energy capsule and message my friends and text my mother to say hi and fire off a little help bomb to the engineers to tell them my screen's playing up and I want it fixed.

And then I send a little video greeting to Gramps to say sorry if I made him concerned earlier, with all my questions. And that I'm fine. Honestly. And not to worry about the thing I asked him about, the thing that he and Grandma Myers once did. It was nothing. I've forgotten about it already. It really wasn't important. Honestly, it wasn't important. Not important at all.