

# Kiss and Tell

By Allie Sipe

I haven't had a lot of outstanding kisses in my twenty-two years. After an almost four year long relationship when I was fifteen—one that screwed me over in terms of understanding what a functioning adult relationship should look like—I'm now accustomed to being perpetually single, without a lot of memorable kissing experiences.

The big-lip-virginity dethroning happened on my sixteenth birthday, when my said boyfriend and I were painting a silver tree on my bedroom wall. The tree's still up there. I get to stare at it every time I visit my parents' house and lay on my childhood bed. The swirly, silver branches stretch across the entire blue gray wall, accompanied by a little smiley face brushed on the ceiling. Ryan painted that, probably after painting the tip of my nose, or something equally cute and disgusting. At the time, the smiley face was endearing, a cherished memento. Now I kind of wish it would go away. It's nothing personal—I'm just not a huge fan of my ex-boyfriend smiling down at me at night.

My first ever kiss was rather unmemorable. Rumors had been circulating our friend group that Ryan would kiss me on my birthday. Sure enough, taking a break from our painting, he mentioned the rumors. I charmingly pretended that I hadn't heard them yet. He asked if I wanted to kiss him. I said *yep*. We kissed.

We got better at it later, but dang—Disney had me prepared for floating lanterns and singing aquatic life when really it was just two young teenagers with raging hormones and unpracticed lips fumbling about. Underwhelming, to say the least. We moved from kissing to sex without any fanfare. I was sixteen.

Kissing and sex improved over the years, but there were still rocky patches. Probably because I was young, incredibly insecure about my body, and unable to communicate. A recipe for a good sexual time.

The first guy I kissed in college—after breaking up with the long term boyfriend—was sandy haired, sad eyed Joe. He was incredibly lonely, which I gleaned from the fact that we had a morose conversation about how people don't hug or touch each other much in college. I suppose I, rather lonely at the time as well, found that attractive. Or at least relatable.

One night, we were kissing in my dorm room, fully clothed, when he stuck his hand down my pants and up my vagina. I was shocked and freaked out, but I was also inexperienced and confused. And—ugh—I still wanted him to like me.

So I didn't say anything. My roommate came back soon after, and he left. Shaken up, I texted him something about not being ready for any kind of commitment the next day. I never told anyone my reasons, and I never fully processed how that encounter made me incredibly cautious towards intimacy and sex.

Still, I had fun first kissing other young gentlemen after that. I was finally single at the same time as Adam, my long time secret crush lifeguard with perfect silky skin, so we had some steamy make outs under the stars, a purely physical relationship which instantly dissipated at the end of the summer.

And I'll always be proud of myself for snagging Nick Daniel's attention—a silly experience which had the unexpected consequence of proving to me that I could honestly do anything I set my mind to, as that experience involved me approaching him in the library with a tub of Vaseline. For context's sake, although in many ways this story is actually better without context, his Tinder profile said something like "Sometimes I like to cover myself in Vaseline and roll around my yard like a slug. Looking for someone with similar interests."

After that bizarre yet endearing experience, we shared some rather cannabis-y kisses while watching "The Dinner Party" episode of *The Office*. But, alas—weed and motivation don't really go hand in hand, so that relationship went nowhere.

Over time, I built my confidence, explored more, and learned what I liked. That helped me communicate what I wanted in addition to following my partner's lead—very important and basic skills that are not emphasized enough to people entering the vast sexual jungle.

But in every physical relationship I pursued, something basic was missing. I finally figured out that I didn't emotionally or intellectually connect to any of the guys that I had these physical entanglements with, and the kissing just wasn't that stellar. Out of a combination of shyness and unlucky timing, I seemed to have a propensity for romantic failure. Eventually, I started using dating apps, looking, rather wearily, for an intelligent mind.

Believe it or not, using Tinder when I was living short term in New Mexico actually worked—kind of. At least, Tinder introduced me Harrison Sim, which I am both grateful for and irritated about depending on the given day.

We met at Winning's, a cozy coffee shop tucked into the food district across the street from the university in Albuquerque. As per New Mexican usual, Harrison was running late, so I was reading Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* instead of focusing on the fact that I was feeling empty and sad inside after having just had sex with a different guy the night before.

I wondered why I was even bothering to try to keep dating and considered leaving or messaging Harrison to call it off. But something made me stay. Maybe it was because I didn't want Harrison to think I was a jerk; maybe it was because there were only so many eligible bachelors on Tinder, and I didn't want to completely blow my dating pool; maybe it was because of my ridiculous determination to date. Whatever my reasoning, this meeting with Harrison turned out to be a critical turning point in my life, and I'm glad that I stayed.

Harrison walked in looking tall and disheveled but friendly. "Hi, I'm Harrison." He greeted me with a hug. "Can I get you some coffee?" We were off to a good start.

We then had the most non-awkward first date conversation, through which I learned that Harrison Sim was an endearing human. A writer, director, and actor. A feminist and self-proclaimed libtard, passionate about politics, the environment, and social rights.

I found myself challenged to keep up with him intellectually. The thing was, though, that I could keep up with him. And so it felt good—really good—to talk with him. It was almost like putting all of my most accomplished scholarship and university knowledge into practice, but through an actual conversation with a human being. We were both surprised and impressed. After a hug goodbye, we eagerly made plans to see each other a few days later.

Our second date started at a brewery. We sat on the outdoor patio at Marble, the sharp night air drifting around us as we drank hoppy beers and talked about everything from smoking weed for the first time to the current political climate.

In Albuquerque, there is a heightened level of urgency to talk about political issues. It's a border state, diverse, and number one in the country in less than ideal statistics. As a result, there is a feeling among the people that the issues at hand cannot be ignored, that they must be talked about. Coming from an insulated town in Oregon, I hadn't felt the level of urgency and immediacy that New Mexicans have grown up with, so talking with Harrison was one of my first exposures to this. Plus, this was two months before the 2016 presidential election, which heightened the intensity of our conversations.

A couple hours later, walking down the sidewalk on that free feeling Friday night, we laughed and bantered until, when in midstride, Harrison turned to me and said, “I’m going to kiss you now.”

And then he pulled me against him, put his hands on my face, and kissed me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. He pushed me against the alley wall and kept kissing me.

It was incredibly exciting to kiss him. And we were attracted to each other on some level—likely an intellectual one. But despite the fact that it was one of the more dramatic moments in my life that I will forever cherish for its sheer cinematographic brilliance, neither of us was totally blown away.

Part of that may have been that fact that he was an actor. Actors probably have these make outs all the time, which is awesome, but at the same time, at what point does a kiss just become going through the motions?

Still, we liked talking to each other so much that we kept seeing each other. We went to tons of movies and breweries and even hung out in the theater where he worked. Somehow I got to know myself through my conversations with Harrison.

I found out that I love IPAs. Sure, they taste like skunk butt, but in the most excellent way possible. There’s something so classy about ordering an IPA, getting a buzz going after just one beer and hearing awesome, political words spewing out of your own mouth as a direct result.

Talking with Harrison, I realized that I had been settling with my career aspirations and had been trying to think of more practical options. I admitted to him that I honestly just wanted to write creative nonfiction for a living. He read some of my work, and he told me that, in his opinion, I was one of the new emerging voices of feminism. It felt incredible to be validated by someone whom I intellectually respected.

Two months later, Harrison disappeared out my life right forever just before I left to go back to Ashland, Oregon and leave New Mexico for good. We had agreed that we weren’t dating, weren’t exclusive, and weren’t in any way serious, but it still hurt that he cut himself out without communicating a reason why. I felt disposable. Forgettable.

Through time—and after getting a reality check from Harrison’s best friend—I accepted that I couldn’t control Harrison’s actions. Moreover, he wasn’t worth worrying about. My life was moving forward; I had bigger fish to fry and better kisses to find. This was my story—not his.

All of this to say that my previous romantic relationships did not adequately prepare me for dating later on. I was intimate with partners before I had the chance to intimately know myself and realize what I wanted. I was settling, worrying, and hopelessly lost.

And I don't think I'm the only one who feels this way. We need to be more prepared to cope with ourselves and recognize our own needs before flinging our problems onto others. That goes for me and for every partner who I have been with. We can—and must—do better for each other.

Sometimes we meet people in the liminal times in our lives. There's no past or future. But there are experiences and lessons that they teach us. We can only be our most prepared selves, stay open for first kisses, and stand up for ourselves.

After all, the perfect first kiss may be in the liminal space between frustration, heartbreak, or violation of the last.