

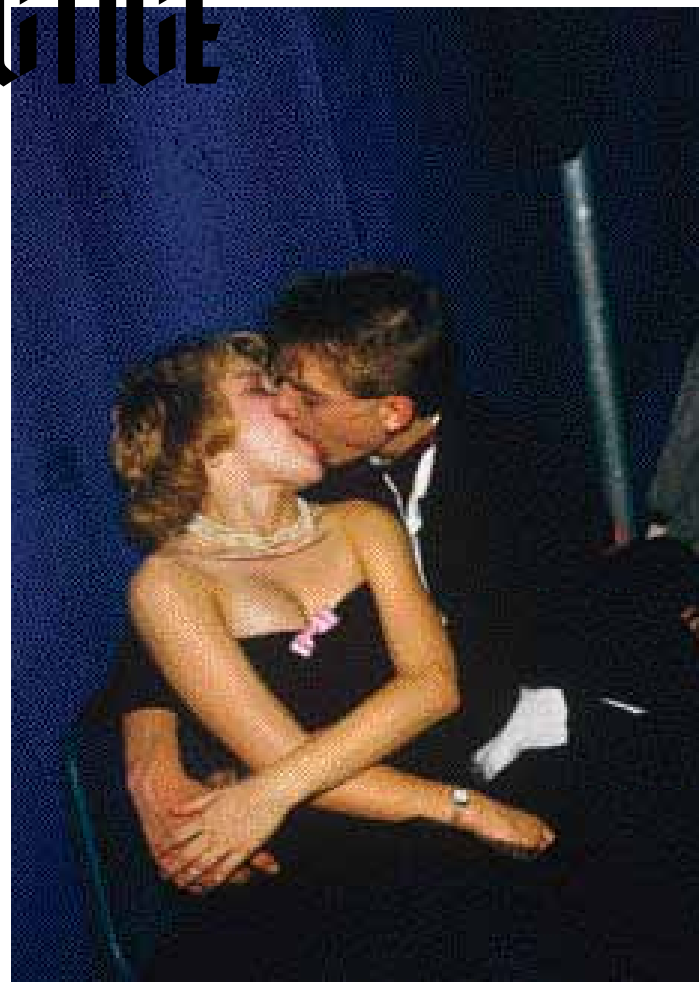
by Max Blagg

KISSING PRACTICE

KEN SCULLY WAS A ROUGH LAD WHO EVENTUALLY JOINED THE ARMY AND GOT KILLED IN SOME GODFORSAKEN PLACE, ADEN, WHEREVER THAT IS, AROUND THE TIME SGT PEPPER CAME OUT, IN THE LAST GASP OF EMPIRE BEFORE THE BRITISH WITHDREW IN DISGRACE. BEFORE HE JOINED UP, KEN USED TO HANG ABOUT THE YOUTH CLUB DOWN AT THE CHURCH HALL WITH US YOUNGER LADS, TERRIFYING US WITH HINTS AND INNUENDO ABOUT OUR IMMINENT ENCOUNTERS WITH THE OPPOSITE SEX.

JUST THE WORD SEX was liable to throw us into a state of panic and unbearable excitement. "Aye, yer'll be wanking yersens silly soon enough," he said with a knowing smirk, "and yer mam'll be tellin' yer ter stop blowin' yer nose on t'sheets." I nodded thoughtfully, though I had no clue what wanking was, or how it was connected to blowing your nose. Ten kids slumped around the ping pong table at the youth club couldn't make head nor tail of it.

Since I was very small my mum had let me stay up until she went to bed, an event signalled by the ritual covering of the budgies' cages. Never tell your mates you have budgies, they'll think you're weak. But these nights I wanted to get to bed before the birds slept; there were pressing matters upstairs. Books to read by flashlight under the covers, and extended bouts of kissing



practice for the rapidly approaching future. I had a list of girls I liked and rated them from one to 10 in a small spiral notebook kept for this purpose, much of it written in primitive French and German, so that my mum couldn't read it. Or Latinized versions of English words, such as "osculate", meaning to kiss, an act I had never performed but often practised. After the lights were out I waited for my brother Rodney, who shared this old double bed, to fall asleep.

When I heard his measured breathing I turned to my arm outstretched on the pillow next to me. Hello, beautiful arm, or rather, hello beautiful Lorraine or Vicky or Sylvia. A motley parade of girls' faces passed in front of me, acquaintances and friends and strangers from the market place, fresh-faced girls and older women, especially women in silk head-scarves, all of them completely unaware of my intentions. Each face came up clearly, like Audie Murphy's dead pals in *To Hell and Back*, which I had just seen with Wilkin at the Majestic, the same night old Mr Illingworth lost his glass eye and everyone was looking for it under the seats while Audie was mowing down Germans like a scythe cutting down stalks of hay.

Did the upward turn of Sylvia's lower lip promise laughter and fun among the hay bales? Were those rumours of kids rolling in the hay in Baxter's barn true? Or was that just another mysterious phrase, a roll in the hay, hey, hey, we're the

monkeys, people say we monkey around. Everything was in a secret code I still could not decipher. And sweet Lorraine, the spitting image of her mother, who wore high heels on weekends. Standing by the garden gate, waiting for the bus, her mum turned and knelt to adjust Lorraine's shoe, and observing the curve of her back down to the stiletto heel, my stomach flipped as if I had just performed the running somersault I was attempting to perfect in



gym class, the line of beauty suddenly vivid and clear. This and other images from my small mental collection helped prepare for the assault on my arm, stirred some vague but pleasant sediment in my stomach, as I pressed my body firmly against the mattress I pulled the disembodied limb toward me, then began stroking the smooth inner arm with my right hand, caressing it in what I assumed was a professional manner, as I prepared for the kiss. A languid approach, lips grazing the skin, slowly bearing down, mouth opening slyly, and the eyes smushed shut, this apparently an essential ingredient of a properly delivered smacker, no peeping allowed. Ken had assured me that if I opened my eyes during the act, my penis would shrink down to nothing. But that I shouldn't worry about that just yet.

As I made contact, like a spaceship landing on a distant planet, the moment was electric, a shuddering thrill vibrating through my body, a warm sensation verging on the sentimental, a blissful mental state. Could life be like this, this strange anticipation? My teeth grazing the arm, my mouth soft against my skin—was this what girls' mouths felt like? Their lips, how smooth, silky they must surely be, smooth as the old silk pillow on the couch downstairs. But where did tongues belong? How to insert them into the matching mouth? My own tongue now darted out and licked against the skin of my arm, causing a pleasant tingling all over me, ooh, I must be doing it right. My

tongue emerged into the air again, and saliva was beginning to gather in my gob, when my brother's voice shocked me into an upright position.

"What the bloody 'ell are you doing?" Rodney said in a stage whisper. "Kissing your bloody arm! Yer not all there, you're not." He had been leaning over me, observing my technique, while I thought he was sleeping.

"I was just practising, for the school play. I have to kiss somebody and I wanted to get it right."

"Bloody queer, you are. Have yer forgot yer go to a boys' school? What's yer arm's name then? Does she 'ave a name? Have you been seeing her long?"

I didn't answer. My brother persisted. "Hey, if yer like your arm, wait and see what yer 'and can do. Now get to sleep. Yer late for school every day as it is..."

Embarrassed at being caught in this fake snogging session, I let my arm drift away from me, the girls' faces faded from close-up into a distant montage, like an old black and white film, dim, jerky, faraway. I tried to round them up again—Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, be my guides, little TV cowboys spinning lariats, gather up my girls, corral them. Coralie, Caroline, Christine, so many creatures out there, walking the streets of the town, standing around in nervous little clusters in the market place, their mothers never far away, clucking like hens if the girls dared to talk to passing boys. Lorraine is an elfin girl who wears shoes with 4in soles, supposedly the height of fashion, but they give her the appearance of a toy, a Pinocchio figurine, elevated past her status... In the Saturday market place she had her legs up on the seat of a public bench, the shoes enormous on her tiny feet, her legs bare almost down to the crack between her limber thighs, close to the bone of it all, something almost revealed. What new configuration of flesh might be exposed where the thighs meet the body and the curves continue upward like the curves on the bodies on a vase in the encyclopedia?

Her sister Rosie, taller, longer, way past my bedtime Rosie, big wet mouth. I saw that mouth once form an O, round as a Polo mint—so that's where the tongue goes, inside that rubbery halo? And then what? What strange exercise takes place? How does one tongue avoid the other in such close confines? Do they coil around each other like snakes in a David Attenborough documentary? And where do the teeth fit in with all these gymnastics—are they put to use as well? I had seen red bruises on Rosie's swan-like neck, and on the necks of other boys and girls, displayed like trophies of a violent battle. Ken was a reliable source of knowledge but to extract facts from him usually meant enduring five minutes of mocking insults before he provided an answer, which often turned out to be totally false, like the time he convinced me that you needed a licence to wear a motorcycle jacket.

After much badgering, he explained that these raw bruises were known as lovebites, which resulted from gnawing on your partner's neck like a dog chews on a bone. They also served as a mark of possession, a notification to the other dogs hanging around the front gate that the branded girl was already somebody's property, so run along, Rover. The involvement of the teeth widened the scope of my operations. Gathering this important information was such a painfully slow project. But here in my bed at night, I was making my own discoveries. Further experiment was required, including some nibbling on my arm. Hopefully it wouldn't hurt, my teeth were quite sharp. I had bitten my tongue recently and that really hurt. My brother's heavy breathing seemed to indicate he had fallen back to sleep. I grabbed my arm, a little roughly perhaps, and began to practise again.