

# The Naked Eye

## Kissing

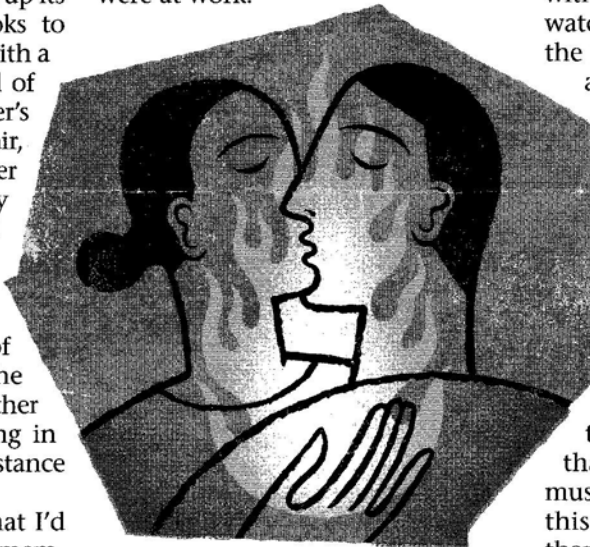
BY MARK MATOUSEK

*A measure of intimacy and passion can be lost when kissing is taken for granted.*

Across the street from where I live stands one of New York's most beautiful buildings, a turreted, spired, red brick library with gardens and a bell tower, a turn-of-the-century landmark that once housed a women's prison—Mae West was locked up there on charges of pornography. One chilly afternoon this fall, I found myself rushing up its stairs with an armful of books to return when I nearly collided with a pair of lovers, a boy and a girl of 18 or so, locked into each other's arms. He was stroking her hair, she held his face between her hands, and touching lips they seemed to be in a wonderful world all their own. I tried not to stare but couldn't help it. Their utter absorption in one another, the languor of their prolonged embrace, the beautiful sight of them together raised such unexpected longing in me that I had to pause at a distance and watch.

When was the last time that I'd kissed like that? I couldn't remember. It had been years since I'd even thought about kissing *seriously*, as a consummation unto itself, too long since I'd looked upon kissing the way those lovers were kissing each other. In fact, besides an awkward moment long ago when I tried to teach an inept lover to kiss in a way that I could stand, I hadn't contemplated this act since I was in fifth grade, being kissed on a park blanket by two girls from my class. They took turns showing me how to touch lips without pressing too hard. They showed me how to move my tongue and tilt my nose to avoid collision. When I felt myself being asphyxiated, they taught me to breathe through my

nose and after I got the hang of it, I started kissing anyone I could. In our neighborhood, we kissed everywhere: in swimming pools, cars and theaters, bowling alleys, malls, and bushes. Kissing was something we did for fun in that naive time before puberty, an innocent pastime for boring afternoons while our parents were at work.



This changed with the onslaught of sex. Hormones changed kissing from fun to foreplay, from a hobby to a means to an end; it was the entrance fee to the tunnel of love. Boys and girls were suddenly different; while girls liked to linger, boys were frustrated by the titillation. We wanted to get down to business, skip the hors d'oeuvres and taste the beef. I didn't notice this change at the time (except when someone said *slow down, please!*) nor did I consider how kissing was losing its zing. Yet, gone were the days when a kiss was enough to keep me dazzled for days afterward. As a young man looking for thrills and conquest, I craved

action, novelty, pleasure, escape. Kissing was great, I liked it just fine. But not as the main event.

Watching those lovers on the steps, I realized that times had changed. Now rather than carnal delight, I wanted to stand with my lover somewhere on a cold autumn day and kiss with no agenda at all, with no care as to who might be watching, as if we were meeting for the first time. I wanted to be swept away as those kids were. But this isn't easy at 41 with a lover I'd known for many years. It wasn't for lack of devotion or passion, both were stronger than ever between us. It wasn't for lack of intimacy; I'd never been understood so profoundly or opened more fully to anyone. Perhaps it was simply age that had done it and the unwelcome jading that comes with time, the fact that what we gain in experience must take its toll on innocence. But this longing made me feel older than my years, nostalgic for a time gone by, like the aging professor in *Death in Venice* in love with a vision of his youth. Had something precious slipped through my hands, never to be seen again? Surely that kiss was still within my reach. All I needed was the right moment.

The next time I was alone with L, I made my slow, self-conscious move. Our lips touched but parted too quickly. I tried again, the same thing happened. Feeling hurt, I pulled back and moped.

"What's wrong?" L asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Don't lie."

I felt like I was 14 years old, rejected by someone who didn't like

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Illustration by Timothy Cook

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me. L took my hand; I choked up. "Why don't we kiss as much anymore?"

"We kiss."

"I mean, kiss. Like teenagers kiss."

"You really want to know?" L asked.

"Tell me."

L made a face like an electrocuted lizard, mouth pulled back in a rictus of panic. "That's what you do when I kiss you too long."

"That's a lie."

"No it's not. You get uptight."

"You do," I said, trying to turn the tables. But it was no use; I knew L was right. I'm the nervous one in the family, the one in a hurry. I'm the one who cuts to the chase, jumps the gun, loses patience. How can you kiss a moving target, bond with a mouth that won't stop talking? I promised L that I'd try to change.

"You're fine. Don't worry."

But I knew I wasn't. It wasn't the kissing itself, but what it stood for that made me ache and think about defensiveness, the ways we use our bodies as armor. I remembered an interview with the Italian film director Lina Wertmuller in which she described the weeks it took her to persuade Candace Bergen to relax her lips for an onscreen kiss. "Her mouth was like a rock," said Wertmuller—or words to that effect—attributing the actress's stiffness to being American. I'd been struck by this comment at the time and remembered thinking that it wasn't nationality, but rather a certain kind of will that made Bergen's onscreen kiss so difficult, the rigid countenance of strong types who meet the world with a set jaw. I'd always met the world that way. Call it a survivor's withholding, a muscular defense against intruders; I had once needed this defense to function in a dangerous world where will and slammed doors were the only answer. But I'd assumed that I could throw off this armor when I wanted to. Now I suspected that I was mistaken; like the mime who

finds that his mask has stuck, I saw that my own defenses had trapped me. Remembering L's imitation, I shuddered. That was the face of this feeling I carried even with my beloved partner, when my boundaries were pushed too far; the place where I stopped, just short of surrender. How perfect that such a subtle withholding should make itself known not in sex, but in kissing; how perfect that for a man, at least, even the most intimate sex could seem less threatening than lips touching, eyes looking deep into your own. I once knew a man who would only kiss his wife, but slept conscience-free with other women. Maybe that's because a kiss is more penetrating, in terms of the heart, than intercourse could ever be. It's impossible to truly kiss a person (like those lovers on the library steps) without exposing your emotions. You can't fake it with stubborn lips or a stubborn heart.

Yesterday L and I saw *Beloved*, the film adaptation of Toni Morrison's novel. There's a poignant scene toward the beginning when the protagonist is lying in bed, sweating, exhausted, after frantic sex with an old friend. The last time she'd been touched by a man was with a whip, when she was a slave, and now she'd begun her long journey back to opening her body without fear. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted, inviting her lover to kiss her, but just as he leaned forward, she opened her eyes and he pulled back. Tenderness was still beyond her; it would take time for her terror to melt.

I took L's hand and thought about pain and how it hides inside of us. I thought about how simple it should be to kiss the person you love, with perfect trust. And yet, how difficult it can be. Oprah got that scene down pat. Two hours later, she kissed the man back with all the passion locked up inside her. I looked at L's face in the dark and thought about leaning in for a kiss. But there were people watching.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek has completed a sequel to his book *Sex Death Enlightenment*, which Riverhead Books will publish this year. He welcomes responses at MMatousek@aol.com.



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