



COURTSHIP DANCE OF FLAMINGOS, CAMARGUE REGION, FRANCE.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM HAUF.

## Trail of a Kiss

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*Passion, I see, is catching.*

—Mark Antony, *Julius Caesar*

When he cupped my face in his hands and kissed me for pleasure, my body, weightless, sensed only the effusion of lips and tongues that found each other naturally. His fingers moved affectionately to the nape of my neck, and my arms wrapped comfortably around his shoulders. Sitting outdoors on the bench in the middle of the night, we kissed and kissed without thought of an end. Nothing could be more filling. Nothing could taste as good. It was all we wanted—not fondling, probing, penetration. Forever. Kissing him was pure desire, wanting and being wanted.

I've kissed many men since Chris McKillop, but none as satisfyingly. It was the mid-'60s. We were, I don't know, fourteen or fifteen? A few of my friends and I had sneaked out of a sleep-over at one of our houses and met up with our boyfriends in the nearby park. If Chris wanted to feel his way inside my shirt—and I can't now imagine that he didn't—I wasn't aware of it. There we were, on the cusp of the sexual revolution, and I had only a few years to go before another boyfriend, a year ahead of me in school, would pressure me sexually. Either Chris and I were too young and inexperienced at that moment to perceive ourselves

as fully sexual beings, or he was simply as enamored of kissing as I was. He made me feel as if kissing me fed him. I'll always love him for that.

Soon after high school graduation, Chris died of a drug overdose. A few years earlier, when we'd met in the park, he was innocent, good, and possibly the most intelligent boy I knew. When I look back, I think kissing each other was a physical expression of our intellectual compatibility. We delighted in each others' minds. Rumors that sexual intercourse is the ultimate form of intimacy are countered by experience. If kissing weren't the epitome of emotional closeness, it wouldn't be taboo for prostitutes in some cultures. Anyone—any animal—can copulate, and must to perpetuate the species. Kissing, real kissing between two people, is of a higher nature. It embodies uniquely human affection, not just the raw attraction of licking, but nuanced enjoyment. It's an angelic language.

It's also intimate because it involves risk—arguably more risk than even intercourse posed during my youth, before the prevalent threat of AIDS, hepatitis C, herpes, and HPV. Everything sexual tumbles from kissing, as if unlocked. To venture into the first kiss—to stake so much hope on the chemistry of touching lips—takes guts. “To me,” says Janeane Garofalo, “there is no greater act of courage than being the one who kisses first.” A failed attempt may be overcome, but it can just as easily doom a connection that might have been. And a good fit between two kissers, while it can masquerade as other kinds of compatibility (and therefore mislead), is a luscious discovery, intimating good things to come.

One of my friends tells me in confidence that she dreads intercourse with her husband because she can't stand to kiss him. She feels trapped by his mouth and can't wait for the whole ordeal that sex has become to end. Kissing is a foreword to a story. The better at the beginning of a relationship, the more sorely missed later on. A good friend

of mine always asks the same question when she finds out that one of her women friends has started seeing a man. “Good kisser?” I've heard women complain that, soon after sexual intimacy has launched, their male partners lose interest in kissing and go straight to caressing breasts and genitals. Why do men cut that all but essential corner? To save time? To avoid luxuriating in closeness? Like freshly whipped cream on Irish coffee, kissing flavors everything underneath.

“I believe in long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last three days,” says Crash Davis to Annie Savoy in *Bull Durham*. Deep down (and maybe even closer to the surface), Annie knows that Crash's distaste for her dalliance with “Nuke” LaLoosh is a marker of her own preferences. Nuke discards his clothes so quickly that Annie insists he rewind and take his time. “He fucks like he pitches—” says Millie of her early-season, locker-room assignation with Nuke, “sorta all over the place.” Crash, though, knows how to unfasten a garter strap without looking and unbutton a dress down the back with one hand. *Bull Durham* pits Crash's brains, heart, and yearning for a partner against Nuke's clueless and enormous, although good-natured, narcissism. A story about belief, whether Annie's in the “church of baseball” or Crash's lack thereof in “quantum physics when it comes to matters of the heart,” it stakes its faith in both the team concept and the mutual attraction and affection that the perfect three-day kiss represents.

Songs that celebrate kisses range from sappy to saucy, sweet to sultry. If Faith Hill's “This Kiss” ranks as the most boring, saccharine song ever—outmatched only by its music video—the Pointers' and Springsteen's “When we kiss, ooooo, fire” is almost as sexy as the real thing. If, in *Casablanca*, a kiss endures the passage of time, in '60s pop songs, it reveals the truth about love. “It's in his kiss,” vouched Betty Everett in the 1963 “Shoop Shoop Song,” covered by superstars Cher, Linda Ronstadt,

Aretha Franklin, and The Supremes. A year earlier, Brian Hyland promised undying love “sealed with a kiss.” The defining moment in the Crystals’ “Then He Kissed Me” was a fortunate afterthought: the song’s first version, originally recorded for Phil Spector, was entitled “He Hit Me (And It Felt Like a Kiss).” For Lucinda Williams and Mary Chapin Carpenter, one is not enough. “Shouldn’t I have all this and passionate kisses from you?” The answer to a rhetorical question never seemed more obvious. When, in 2003, Madonna kissed Britney and Christina at the MTV Video Music Awards, a barrier shattered, for both better and worse. Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl and I Liked It,” for example, is amusing camp, which the song’s video, laden with Perry’s self-enthralled mugs, lacks, along with any semblance of a kiss.

I’d say my generational taste is showing in the list above like a slip below my hem, except that I’m partial to Des’ree’s “Kissing You,” from Baz Luhrman’s 1996 movie *Romeo + Juliet*. If that doesn’t seem recent enough to vindicate me, Beyoncé liked the song enough to cover it just a couple of years ago.

In stories, too, kissing spreads across the spectrum of innocence and experience that it spans in life. Sleeping Beauty awakens to life with a kiss. “Where one drop of blood drains a castle,” reads the fairy tale, “so one kiss can bring it alive again.” Who has ever watched *Lady and the Tramp* nibble a string of spaghetti until their lips brush to the tune of “Belle Notte” without feeling the ardor? Disney’s Prince Eric need only “Kiss de Girl” to reverse Ariel’s muteness, but in the original story, by Hans Christian Andersen, the Little Mermaid may kiss her Prince but never regains speech once the evil sea witch has cut out her tongue. Ever since Christ was betrayed by Judas, the kiss has had the capacity to mislead and to seal another’s doom. In the second of Coppola’s *Godfather* movies, Michael Corleone grabs his brother’s face and, forcing a violent kiss on him, says, “I

know it was you, Fredo. You broke my heart.” He pushes him away. “You broke my heart.”

Shakespeare offers myriad instances of kisses—and no wonder, since social historians reveal that the nature of kissing underwent a transition in his historical period from ceremonial to erotic. Romeo and Juliet’s love affair begins with the purest of kisses, one that purges sin, and it ends with another, Romeo’s dying kiss, which blends desperation and devotion beyond the blunders of this life. Othello lingers over Desdemona’s sleeping body, kissing her before smothering her for adultery that she hasn’t committed. “O balmy breath,” he says, “that dost almost persuade / Justice to break her sword.” Benedick prevents Beatrice’s talking back to him simply by otherwise occupying her. “Peace!” he says, “I will stop your mouth.” Ingrid Bergman had the same idea when she said, “A kiss is a lovely idea designed by nature to stop speech when words become superfluous.”

As *You Like It* bears out Bergman, while illustrating that timing, as in so many instances, is also crucial in this one. “Come, woo me, woo me,” presses Rosalind on her future husband, Orlando, “for now I am in a holiday humor and like enough to consent.” Disguised as the boy Ganymede, she is pretending to be Rosalind herself in order to give Orlando a much-needed tutorial on the etiquette of courtship. She presses further. “What would you say to me now, and I were your very very Rosalind?” At once taking the bait and exposing his ineptitude, Orlando responds, “I would kiss before I spoke.” Rosalind puts him straight: “Nay, you were better speak first, and when you were graveled for lack of matter, you might take occasion to kiss.” Save kissing, in other words, for when you’ve run out of things to say. Build up to it.

Or use it to create opportunity. Philematologists—scientists who study the chemistry of kissing—have learned that the saliva-slathering kisses men prefer spread testosterone that women’s skin absorbs. Because

testosterone enhances the sex drive in both men and women, sloppy kissing arouses women's interest. "When you kiss," says researcher and professor of neuroscience Wendy Hill, "an enormous part of your brain becomes active." Helen Fisher, who studies kissing at Rutgers University, has been experimenting with how two people receive information during a kiss about each other's immune systems, thus determining subconsciously whether they want another go-around. Most of us can produce anecdotal evidence supporting Fisher's research, especially if we define "immune system" broadly. I remember discovering a mismatch at the end of a date, when, intending to emerge from the guy's car unscathed, I instead found myself staving off an attack of something akin to a disease.

The Kinsey Institute has already researched kissing. Leonore Tiefer's lecture "The Kiss," which commemorated the Institute's fiftieth anniversary in 1998 and is now in print, bubbles over with enthusiasm, both personal and professional, for her subject. "I like kisses," she avers at the start. "I have always liked kisses!" Lest some doubter question Tiefer's pleasure in kissing, she continues to exclaim. "You might begin to doubt that I am not at heart an appreciative participant! Put that thought to rest!" Okay! Got it!

We learn that kisses feel good partly because they recapitulate infantile suckling. For both good and ill, then, says Tiefer, "Kissing can arouse powerful regressive longings for intimacy." It also creates adult attachment, leading to bonding and even to settling down with a partner for a long spell, if not for life. It blends sexuality and affection into comfort. While, in Renaissance portrayals, pretentious English courtiers and precious lovers indulge in the effeminate affectation of kissing their own hands, the mockery directed their way all but announces that, in our culture, kissing has long been associated with a twosome. As Tiefer testifies, it can create a couple.