Lucky Lips

Marcus felt silly. He was embarrassed. But he knocked on the door anyway. There was no answer from inside the dark house. It was as silent as the grave. Then he noticed a movement behind the curtain; someone was watching him. He could see a dark eye peering through a chink in the curtain. There was a rustling noise inside that sounded like rats’ feet on a bare floor.

The door slowly opened and Ma Scritchet’s face appeared. It was true what people said – she looked like a witch. She had hair like straw and her nose was hooked and long. She smiled showing pointed, yellow teeth.

‘Come in,’ she said. ‘I have been waiting for you.’

Marcus was not going to let this old woman fool him. ‘How could you be expecting me?’ he answered. ‘No one knew I was coming here.’ He felt better
now. He could see that it was all a trick. She was a faker. A phoney. Did she really expect him to believe that she knew he was coming?

‘I knew you were coming,’ she said. ‘And I know why you have come.’

This time Marcus knew she was lying. He had not told anyone about his problem. There was not one person in the world that knew about it, it was too embarrassing. The other kids would laugh if they knew.

He decided to go home. But first he would stir this old bag up a bit. ‘Okay, Ma,’ he said. ‘Why have I come?’

She looked him straight in the eye. ‘You are sixteen years old,’ she told him. ‘And you have never been kissed.’

Marcus could feel his face turning red. He was blushing. She knew – she knew all about it. She must be able to read minds. The stories that were told about her must be true. He felt silly and small, and he didn’t know what to do.

Ma Scritchet started to laugh, a long cackling laugh. It made Marcus shiver. ‘Come with me,’ she said. She led him along a dark, narrow passage and up some wooden stairs. The house was filled with junk: broken TV sets and old bicycles, piles of books and empty bottles. The stair rails were covered in cobwebs. They went into a small room at the top of the house.

Inside the room was a couch and a chair. Nothing else. It was not what Marcus had expected. He thought there would be a crystal ball on a round table and lots of junk and equipment for telling fortunes. The room was almost bare.

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Ma Scritchet held out her hand. ‘This will cost you twenty dollars,’ she said to Marcus.

‘I pay after, not before,’ said Marcus. ‘This could be a trick.’

‘You pay before, not after,’ said Ma Scritchet. ‘I only help those that believe in me.’ Marcus looked into her eyes. They were cold and hard. He took out his wallet and gave her twenty dollars, and she tucked it inside her dress. Then she said, ‘Lie down on the couch.’

Marcus lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling. A tiny spider was spinning a web in the corner. Marcus felt foolish lying there on a couch in this
old woman's house. He wished he hadn't come; he wanted to go home. But there was something about Ma Scritchet that made him nervous. And now that he had paid his twenty dollars he was going to get his money's worth. 'Well,' he said. 'I suppose that you want me to tell you about my problem.'

'No,' said Ma Scritchet. 'I will tell you about it. You just stay there and listen.' Marcus did as she said.

'You have never kissed a girl,' said the old woman in a low voice. 'You have tried plenty of times. But they always turn you down. They think you are stuck up and selfish. They don't like the things you say about other people. Some girls go out with you once, but when you get home to their front door they always say, “Thank you” and go inside.'

Marcus listened in silence. Most of it was true. He knew he wasn't stuck up and selfish, but the rest of it was right. He tried everything he could think of. He would take a girl to the movies and buy her chocolates. He would even pay for her to get in. But then, right at the end when they were saying 'good night', he would close his eyes, pucker up his lips and lean forward, to find himself kissing the closed front door of the girl's house. It was maddening. It was enough to make him spit. And it had happened dozens of times. Not one girl would give him a kiss.

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'Well,' said Marcus to Ma Scritchet. 'Can you help me? That's what I gave you the twenty dollars for.'

She smiled but said nothing. It was not a nice smile. It was a smile that made Marcus feel foolish. She stood up without a word and left the room, and Marcus could hear her footsteps clumping down the stairs. A minute or so later he heard her coming back. She came into the room and held out a small tube. 'Take this,' she said. 'It's just what you need. This will do the trick.'

Marcus took it out of her hand and looked at it. It was a stick of lipstick in a small gold container. 'I'm not wearing lipstick,' Marcus told her. 'You must think I'm crazy.' He sat up and jumped off the couch. This had gone far enough. He wondered if he could get his money back.

'Sit down, boy,' said Ma Scritchet in a cold voice. 'And listen to me. You put that on your lips and you will get all the kisses you want. It has no colour. It's clear and no one will be able to see it. But it will do
the trick. It will work on any female. Just put some of that on your lips and the nearest girl will want to kiss you.'

Marcus looked at the tube of lipstick. He didn't know whether to believe it or not. It might work. Old Ma Scritchet could read his mind; she knew what his problem was without being told. This lipstick could be just what he needed. 'Okay,' he said. 'I'll give it a try. But it had better work. If it doesn't, I will be back for my twenty dollars.'

'It will work,' hissed Ma Scritchet. 'It will work better than you think. Now it's time for you to go. The session is over.' She led Marcus down the narrow stairs and along the passage to the front door. He stepped out into the sunlight. It was bright and made him blink. As Ma Scritchet closed the door she told Marcus one more thing. 'This lipstick will only work once on each person. One girl: one kiss. That's the way it works.'

She closed the door in his face without saying another thing. Once more the old house was quiet.

Marcus kept the lipstick for a week before he used it. When he got home to his room with his record player and the posters on the wall, the whole thing seemed like a dream. The old house and Ma Scritchet were from another world. He wondered whether or not the visit had really happened, but he had the lipstick to prove that it had.

He held it in his hand. It had a strange appearance and he found that it glowed in the dark. He put it in a drawer and left it there.

Later that week a new girl started at Marcus's school. Her name was Jill. Marcus didn't waste any time; he asked her out for a date on her first day at school. She didn't seem too keen about going with him, but she was shy and didn't want to seem unfriendly, especially as she didn't know anyone at the school. In the end she agreed to go to a disco with him on Friday night.

Marcus arranged to meet Jill inside the disco. That way he wouldn't have to pay for her to get in. It wasn't a bad turn and Jill seemed to enjoy it. As he danced Marcus could feel the lipstick in his pocket. He couldn't forget about it; it annoyed
him. It was like having a stone in his shoe.

At eleven o'clock they decided to go home. It was only a short walk back to Jill’s house. As they walked, Jill chatted happily; she was glad that she had made a new friend so quickly. Marcus started to feel a bit guilty. He fingered the lipstick in his pocket. Should he use it? He remembered something about stolen kisses. Was he stealing a kiss if he used the lipstick? Not really – if it worked Jill would be kissing him of her own free will. Anyway, it probably wouldn’t work. Old Ma Scritchet had probably played a trick on him. He would never know unless he tried it. He just had to know if the lipstick worked, and this was his big chance.

As they went inside the front gate of Jill’s house, Marcus pretended to bend down and do up his shoelace. He quickly pulled out the lipstick and smeared some on his lips. Then he stood up. His lips were tingling. He noticed that Jill was looking at him in a strange way; her eyes were wide open and staring. Then she rushed forward, threw her arms around Marcus’s neck and kissed him. Marcus was so surprised that he nearly fell over.

Jill jumped back as if she had been burned. She put her hand up to her mouth and went red in the face.

‘I, I, I’m sorry, Marcus. I don’t know what came over me. What must you think of me? I’ve never done anything like that before.’

‘Don’t worry about it. That sort of thing happens to me all the time. The girls find me irresistible.’

Jill didn’t know what to say. She was blushing. She couldn’t understand what had happened. ‘I’d better go in,’ she said. ‘I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.’ Then she turned around and rushed into the house.

Marcus whistled to himself as he walked home. ‘It works,’ he thought. ‘The lipstick really works.’ He couldn’t wait to try it on someone else.

It was not so easy for Marcus to find his next victim. None of the girls at school wanted to go out with him. It was no use asking Jill again, as the lipstick only worked once on each person. He asked ten girls to go to the pictures with him and they all said ‘no’.

He started to get cross. ‘Stuck up snobs,’ he said to himself. ‘I’ll teach them a lesson.’ He decided to make the most popular girl in the school kiss him. That would show them all. Her name was Fay Billings.
The trouble was that he knew she wouldn't go out on a date with him. Then he had a bright idea: he wouldn't even bother about a date. He would just go around to Fay's house and ask to see her. He would put the lipstick on before he arrived, and when she came to the door she would give him a big kiss. The news would soon get around and the other kids would think he had something good going. It would make him popular with the girls.

Marcus grinned. It was a great idea. He decided to put it into action straight away. He rode his bike around to Fay's house and leaned it against the fence. Then he took out the lipstick and put some on his lips. He walked up to the front door and rang the bell with a big smile on his face.

No one answered the door. He could hear a vacuum cleaner going inside so he rang the bell again. The sound of the vacuum cleaner stopped and Mrs Billings appeared at the door. She was about forty. She had a towel wrapped around her head and had dust on her face from the housework she had been doing. She had never seen Marcus before; he was not one of Fay's friends.

Mrs Billings was just going to ask Marcus what he wanted when a strange look came over her face.

Her eyes went large and round. They looked as if they were going to pop out. Then she threw her arms around Marcus's neck and kissed him on the mouth.

It was hard to say who was more surprised, Marcus or Mrs Billings. They sprang apart and looked around to see if anyone had seen what happened. Marcus didn't want anyone to see him being kissed by a forty-year-old woman. How embarrassing. 'My goodness,' said Mrs Billings. 'What am I doing? Kissing a perfect stranger. And you're so young. What has got into me? What would my husband think? Please excuse me. I must be ill. I think I had better go and have a little rest.' She turned around and walked slowly into the house. She shook her head as she went.

Marcus rode home slowly. He was not pleased. This was not working out the way he wanted. What if someone had seen him being kissed by an old lady like Mrs Billings? He would never live it down. He had had the lipstick for two weeks now and had only received one decent kiss. None of the girls
would go out with him. And he couldn’t wear the lipstick just anywhere—he didn’t want any other mothers kissing him.

He decided to make Fay Billings kiss him at school, in front of all the other kids. That would show them that he had something special. All the girls would be chasing him after that; he would be the most popular boy in the school.

He picked his moment carefully. He sat next to Fay for the Maths lesson the next day. She looked at him with a funny expression on her face but she didn’t say anything. Miss White was late for the class. She was a young teacher and was popular with the students, but she was always late. This was the chance that Marcus had been waiting for. He bent down under the desk and put on some of the lipstick. Then he sat up in the desk and looked at Fay.

The lipstick worked. Fay’s eyes went round and she threw herself onto Marcus and kissed him. Then she jumped back and gave a little cry. Marcus looked around with a grin on his face, but it did not last for long. All the girls’ eyes were wide and staring. Tissy came up and kissed him. And then Gerda and Helen and Betty and Maria. They climbed over each other in the rush to get to him. They shrieked and screamed and fought; they scratched and fought and bit. Marcus fell onto the floor under a struggling, squirming heap of girls.

When all the sixteen girls in the class had kissed him there was silence. They were in a state of shock—they couldn’t understand what had happened. They just sat there looking at each other. Marcus had his tie ripped off and his shirt was torn. He had a cut lip and a black eye.

Then Gerda yelled out, ‘I kissed Marcus! Arrgghh . . .’ She rushed over to the tap and started washing her mouth out. All the girls started wiping their mouths as if they had eaten something nasty. Then everybody started laughing. The boys laughed, and the girls laughed. They rolled around the floor holding their sides. Tears rolled out of their eyes. Everybody laughed, except Marcus.

He knew that they were laughing at him. And he didn’t think that it was funny.

After all the kissing at school everyone called Marcus ‘Lucky Lips’. Nobody liked Marcus any better than before and the girls still stayed away from him.
Everyone talked about the kissing session for a while; then they forgot about it and talked about other things. But Marcus didn't forget about it. He felt like a fool. Everyone had laughed at him. He was worse off now than he had been before.

He thought about taking the lipstick back to Ma Scritch and telling her what he thought about it, but he was too scared. There was something creepy about that old lady and he didn't really want to see her again.

Marcus didn't use the lipstick again for about a month. None of the girls would go out with him and he wasn't going to risk wearing it just anywhere. Not after what happened at school that day. But he always carried the lipstick with him, just in case.

The last time he used it was at the Royal Melbourne Show. The whole class at school went there on an excursion. They had to collect material for an assignment. Marcus and Fay Billings and two other boys walked around together. The others didn't really want Marcus with them; they thought he was a show off. But they let him tag along. They didn't want to hurt his feelings.

The favourite spots at the show were the sideshows. There were knock-em-downs and rides on the Mad Mouse. There was a fat lady and a mirror maze. There was a ghost train and dozens of other rides. One of the side shows had a sign up saying 'BIG BEN THE STRONGEST MAN IN THE WORLD'.

They all milled around looking at the tent. It was close to one of the animal pavilions. There was a great hall full of pigs nearby. 'Let's go and look at the pigs,' said Fay.

'No,' answered Marcus. 'Who wants to look at filthy pigs. Let's go and see Big Ben. He fights people. Anyone who can beat him wins one thousand dollars and gets to kiss the Queen Of The Show.'

'That would be just the thing for Lucky Lips,' said Fay. They all laughed, except Marcus. He went red in the face.

'I could get a kiss from the Queen Of The Show,' he said. They all laughed again. 'All right,' said Marcus. 'Just watch me.' He paid his dollar and went inside Big Ben's tent. The others all followed him; they wanted to see what was going to happen.

Inside the tent was a boxing ring. Big Ben was standing inside it waiting for someone to fight him and try to win the thousand dollars and a kiss from the Queen Of The Show. She sat on a high chair behind the ring. Marcus looked at her. She was
beautiful; he wouldn't mind a kiss from her. Then he looked at Big Ben. He was the biggest man Marcus had ever seen. He had huge muscles and was covered in tattoos. And he looked mean – very mean.

Marcus ducked around the ring to where the Queen Of The Show sat. He quickly put on some of the invisible lipstick, and at once the beauty queen jumped off her chair and kissed Marcus. Everyone laughed except Big Ben. He roared in fury. 'Trying to steal a kiss without a fight, are you?' he yelled. 'I'll teach you a lesson, my boy.'

Marcus tried to run away but he was not quick enough. Big Ben grabbed him and lifted Marcus high into the air. Then he walked outside the tent and across to the pig pavilion. Marcus wriggled and yelled, but it was no good; he couldn't get away. Big Ben carried Marcus over to one of the pig pens and threw him inside.

Marcus crashed to the floor of the pen. He felt dizzy. The world seemed to be spinning around. He tried to stand up, but he couldn't. The floor was covered in foul-smelling muck. In the corner Marcus could see the biggest pig that he had ever seen. It was eating rotten vegetables and slops from a trough. It was dribbling and slobbering as it ate. Its teeth were green. It turned around and looked at Marcus. It was a sow.

Marcus suddenly remembered something that Ma Scritchet had said about the lipstick. She had said: 'It will work on any female.' Marcus started to scream. 'Get me out. Get me out.'

But it was too late. The sow came over for her kiss.