



# Valentine's blush

Bob Carlos Clarke, who died nearly three years ago, was best known for his impossibly glamorous, unapologetically sexy nudes. But, as these images from 'notoriously orgiastic' public school balls attest, he was also a consummate photojournalist

This page: *The Agony and the Ecstasy*.  
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Having coaxed strippers, shop-girls and secretaries back to my studio, I've learnt that it's sometimes better to shoot people in their own environment. Somewhere in transit they can lose their magic, like taking an animal out of the wild and into a zoo. When the majestic Somali stripper who entranced you through a small-hours haze of smoke and alcohol arrives on your doorstep wig-less and weary in the cold light of day,

you'll know what I mean.

In 1994 I heard about the Public School Balls, which are notoriously orgiastic parties for rich kids. So I went to check one out, loitering conspicuously at the bar of a swelteringly hot club on Charing Cross Road, trying not to look like a parent or a pervert. Outside, a long line of Jaguars and BMWs were disgorging noisy offspring with anxious chauffeur-parents attempting half-ignored goodbyes.



A queue materialised of a thousand floppy-haired youths in black ties and Daddy's dinner jackets, shirt-tails flapping above falling-down trousers and filthy trainers. The girls were cool by comparison, predatory and self-assured, pouting and sucking on Marlboro Lights, hungry for fun and new sensation.

Later, when I realised what the events were about, I was torn between paternal feelings and the demands of photojournalism.



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I longed to shout crazy warnings to the doomed parents: 'For God's sake don't send your precious baby in there!' Meanwhile, the professional part of me was willing the queue through the doors of Hades and onto the tangled crush of nubile bodies.

Watching from an indiscreet distance, I felt a twinge of voyeuristic guilt mixed with a sudden, poignant recollection of

my own adolescent fumbings. Above all, I sensed the thrill of an anthropologist chancing upon the bizarre mating ritual of the children of the English upper middle class.

A cherubic brunette, tightly-trussed in her velvet party-dress, pushed past me, head up, cheeks flushed. Minutes later, she was sprawled on the floor between the end of a shabby banquette



seat and a cigarette-machine. At her head, a small, red-faced boy busily alternated his attention between her lips and the plump breast that he had extricated from beneath her pushed-up brassiere. His colleague employed his hands on her nether regions, the left wedged somewhere deep beneath her buttocks, the right trapped between the mesh of her tights and the waistband of her

pants. Like worker-bees they administered to their swooning queen bee, oblivious to the semicircle of goggle-eyed boys jostling for a better view.

Without further delay I collected my camera from the car and returned to the club for a series of photographs that revealed some of the peculiar side-effects of a British public school education. The series was

first published as a cover story in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, and later went worldwide to *Stern* and a bunch of other glossies and books. Eight years on, it's amusing to observe people's reactions when they recognise themselves in the shots. They're usually quite wistful, remembering the night when they finally and irretrievably abandoned their innocence. **BJP**

**On show**  
This text was originally published in *Shooting Sex, The Definitive Guide to Undressing Beautiful Strangers*, written, photographed and published by Bob Carlos Clarke (ISBN: 0-9543462-0-3). Thirteen images from Carlos Clarke's *Paradise Lost* series are on show in the group exhibition *Kiss* until 28 March at The Little Black Gallery, London. Visit [thelittleblackgallery.com](http://thelittleblackgallery.com) for details.