THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF KENNY EVERETT

JAMES HOGG & ROBERT SELLERS

About the Book

Spontaneous, hilarious, irrepressible and, of course, trailblazing – Kenny Everett's work in radio and television comedy was revolutionary. The great Spike Milligan even called him a genius. It was Kenny who pioneered the radio-show format with which we are so familiar – a mix of music, jingles, funny voices and sound effects. When Kenny seamlessly made the move from radio to television, he created unforgettable characters such as Sid Snot, Cupid Stunt and Marcel Wave.

Wherever Kenny went, controversy usually wasn't far behind: from being kicked out of the seminary he attended for drinking the communion wine, to bounding on stage shouting, 'Let's bomb Russia!' at a Conservative rally in 1983. Yet beneath the flamboyant and bold exterior lay a deeply insecure man, motivated above all by the desire to make others laugh.

This definitive, authorized biography is packed with brand-new stories about Kenny. It includes exclusive interviews with those who were closest to him, including his sister, Cate, and his former wife, Lee, as well as entertainment figures he worked with such as Barry Cryer, Chris Tarrant and Cliff Richard. *Hello, Darlings!* tells the complete story of one of our most cherished entertainers – in the best possible taste, of course.

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HELLO, DARLINGS!

The Authorized Biography of Kenny Everett

James Hogg and Robert Sellers

For Kenny

PROLOGUE

Let’s Bomb Russia!

A WEST LONDON restaurant, mid-afternoon, Thursday, 2 June 1983. Film director Michael Winner and Kenny Everett have just finished a rather boozy lunch.

MW: I wonder if you could do me a favour, Kenny?
KE: If I can, Michael. Fire away!
MW: Well, I’ve been asked to round up a few celebrity guests for the Young Conservative rally on Sunday and I wondered if you’d help me out?
KE: Ooh, I don’t know, Michael. I don’t do politics. Bores me to tears!
MW: Oh, come on, Kenny. You won’t be the only one there.
KE: Who else is going?
MW: Well, there’s Steve Davis.
KE: What, the snooker player?
MW: That’s the one. And Jimmy Tarbuck.
KE: Steve Davis and Jimmy Tarbuck? Hardly my set, Michael.
MW: Rubbish, Kenny! Look, it’s just a bit of fun. All you have to do is come along to Wembley Conference Centre on Sunday. Don’t worry, we’ll send a car for you. You’ll have some champagne, say something funny on stage and that’ll be it. I’ll even introduce you to the Iron Lady!
KE: Say something funny. At a Young Conservative rally? Like what?
MW: I don’t know, we’ll think of something.
KE: I suppose it’ll have to be something controversial, as it’s me … OK, how about ‘Let’s bomb Russia’?
MW: Ah! Perfect! Yes, Kenny. Start off with that.
KE: What? ‘Let’s bomb Russia’? Won’t that upset a few people? Like the Russians, maybe?
MW: Oh, don’t worry about them, dear. They’ll be safely back in Moscow making homemade vodka. As I said, it’s just a bit of fun. Now, what else are you going to say?
KE: I suppose I could have a pop at Labour. That’ll go down well.
MW: Why not. Great idea!
KE: OK, how about ‘Let’s kick Michael Foot’s stick away!’

MW: Brilliant, Kenny. Brilliant. You'll bring the house down. Why don't you bring some of those big hands you use on TV? You know the ones.
KE: OK, I'll try. I've already thought of a gag about Maggie!
MW: Marvellous, love. Anyway, don't you worry, we'll have a great afternoon. It's just a bit of fun. Nothing can go wrong. Another drink?

Twenty-nine years later …
The Running Horse public house, Davies Street, Mayfair. It's 3.30 p.m. on Friday, 12 October 2012. The authors, James Hogg and Robert Sellers, are interviewing Barry Cryer and Kenny's manager, Jo Gurnett.

BC: What a bloody mistake that was! We were filming on the Friday, and Ev said, 'Michael Winner's invited me to have some champagne and a laugh at some political thing on Sunday.' I said to him, 'Look, Ev, please, mate, don't do it.' He said, 'Oh, Baah, what are you talking about? It'll be fine.' I said, 'I know you, something will happen. I can feel it. Seriously, Ev, DON'T GO!'
JG: But there was nothing he could do. He'd promised. I had to go and collect these huge bloody hands from the BBC and take them all the way up to his flat, which was on the fourth floor! When I got there I said again, 'Ev, you're mad. Don't do it!'
BC: He did though. Bonkers!
JG: The fallout was unbelievable. I had the press on to me all the following day asking how long Kenny had been a Tory, and I kept saying to them, 'Look, he is NOT a political animal. He doesn't know the first thing about politics. Michael Winner got him drunk and persuaded him to do it for a laugh!'
BC: The journalists were so cynical though. They knew he couldn't stand Thatcher and they knew he was basically taking the piss out of the audience, but they only reported the 'Let's bomb Russia' and the 'Let's kick Michael Foot's stick away' bits. They conveniently forgot to mention what he said about Thatcher, which was something like, 'I said to her this morning, I did, I said, "Margaret, that's no way to roll a joint!"' But none of them reported that. The next day, on the front page of one of the tabloids, there was a horrible Jekyll and Hyde type drawing of Kenny with the headline: 'The Idiot Face of Conservatism'. They knew full well he was taking the piss, every one of them. I spoke to Ev when he got home and he likened the event to the Nuremburg Rally, for God's sake! He couldn't stick any of them. He was apolitical.
JG: Ev thought it would become tomorrow's fish-and-chip paper, but I told him it wouldn't. I said the best way to counter this was to start turning up everywhere; Labour, SDP, Tory, all of them. 'Ooh yes,' he said. 'That's a great idea. That's what I'll do!' But he didn't. He really should have though.

Young Conservative rallies notwithstanding, Kenny Everett had been dropping incendiary devices all over the shop since 1965. And, almost twenty years after his death, he remains, in the media's eyes at least, one of our most controversial entertainers. Three sackings, several written warnings, two husbands and an incurable disease will testify to this. Yet it's worth remembering that not once did he ever set out to offend anybody. Kenny's biggest crime, if you can call it that, was failing to engage his brain before speaking; in fact he was the master of that particular art. There was no malice-aforethought in play; just a serious case of 'foot in mouth' disease. And although we can't rewrite history, we can endeavour to remind people exactly why Kenny turned up at Wembley that June afternoon. It was the same reason he turned up to every radio or television show he ever produced: to make people laugh – nothing more, nothing less.

Given the hoo-ha following his favour for Michael Winner, you'd have thought he actually had invaded Russia or assaulted Michael Foot. But is a man with a history of being controversial any more offensive when bounding on to a stage wearing big hands and shouting 'Let's kick Michael Foot's stick away' than he would be staring into a large pair of boobs? If Kenny's nemesis, Mary Whitehouse, was out of touch with the mood of the nation, so were those calling for Kenny's head over 'Let's bomb Russia'. The majority of the British public couldn't give a damn what he did on a Sunday afternoon, and those who did see his appearance at the rally knew exactly what he was up to. Billy Connolly summed it up perfectly: 'Kenny was just a man with big hands. He was a dafty man!'

You see, as far as Kenny Everett was concerned, he had a binding agreement with the British public, an agreement that transcended intrusions such as politics and outrage. He trusted us to understand what he was trying to achieve and we never let him down, which is why every attempt

made by the media or the establishment to finish Kenny off – and there were many over the years – never came close to succeeding. His responsibilities were to be funny, inventive, impulsive and naughty; and ours were to digest what he did, see or hear it for what it was, and then laugh our heads off.

The purpose of this book is to remind us all that our agreement with Kenny Everett still stands, and is something that should be honoured, ad infinitum. But in order for our book to have the desired effect we must first reacquaint you with the details of said agreement, and make you aware of literally hundreds of new clauses – anecdotes, interviews, facts and surprises, the majority of which have only recently been unearthed – which will reveal how a hyperactive toddler from Liverpool inadvertently fantasized and revolutionized his way into the very fabric of our society.

Being offended by Kenny Everett meant only one thing: you were missing out on something brilliant.

1

A Liverpool Lad

KENNY EVERETT (CHRISTENED Maurice James Christopher Cole) was born on Christmas Day 1944 at the ungodly hour of three o'clock in the morning. It was a home birth, presided over by a midwife who conveniently lived next door. It was an easy delivery, although Kenny would later describe his young self as coming out shaped like a hot-water bottle.

His sister Cate was eighteen months older and can still vividly picture the infant Kenny. 'He was absolutely gorgeous. I remember his very first haircut, he used to have the most beautiful blond curly hair. I just adored him; he was my toy. He was my doll that we probably couldn't afford. I was mad about him. He was lovely until he was about nine or ten, then he became a little brat.'

Home was 14 Hereford Road in the Liverpool district of Seaforth, north Merseyside. In adult life Kenny was scathing about where he grew up, describing the street as 'a bit like a battery farm for humans in the true Coronation Street tradition'. As for the garden, or lack of one, 'if you blinked, you missed it'. Cate doesn't recognize this blunt, almost unfeeling, characterization of her childhood home, but then her brother was always fibbing to the press and defending it by saying, 'Oh, you tell them what they want to hear and then they go away and it's tomorrow's fish-and-chip paper.' Only it wasn't, claims Cate. 'The sad thing is tomorrow's fish-and-chip paper ends up in the British

Library and it becomes the Bible of Saint Ev and gets added to and added to, and suddenly it becomes the truth. It's not that he deliberately told lies, he just exaggerated and told great stories, and he was always like that. Even as a child he was very imaginative, and he was always teasing people.'

In reality Hereford Road was your typical suburban street and the house a modest-sized Victorian terrace with small back and front gardens; nothing particularly special, but hardly skid row. There was a bath in the kitchen, Kenny recalled, and every week hot water was boiled on the stove and the family took it in turns to wash, in order of seniority, with Dad going in first. 'It's just as well I didn't have a younger brother,' joked Kenny. 'He'd have been swallowed by the mud!' Another exaggeration, as it turns out, for not only did the Cole residence have a bathroom, it had two! Quite a rarity for that part of Liverpool in those days. Because the houses in the street were over a hundred years old they came originally with no indoor plumbing, just the good old-fashioned outside lav. So Kenny's father, Tom, had one of the bedrooms turned into a bathroom and then later on decided to build another one. 'My father was really quite eccentric,' remembers Cate. 'He used to build things and you'd say, oh gosh, no, not another coffee table, not another cupboard. And this time it was, oh no, not another bathroom.' Built mainly out of wood, the downstairs bathroom formed part of a small extension that ran off the kitchen into the garden.

Kenny also recalled that he and his sister had to share a bed, with his head up one end, and hers down the other. True, says Cate, to a degree. Baby Kenny slept in a cot next to Cate's bed and sometimes would jump out and snuggle next to his sister at night before graduating to his own bed.

Their neighbours and the rest of the families in Hereford Road Cate remembers as, 'very friendly, they were all very civilized, and all helped each other'. These were the

nouveau poor; most of them had seen better times and had lost a lot during the war. As one of Britain's busiest ports, Liverpool had been a major target for the Luftwaffe, suffering, like London, its own Blitz in 1941. By the time Maurice came along the German air assault had diminished, although there was still the odd attack, with planes coming in low to strafe the surrounding area and targets like Seaforth barracks, where American troops were stationed. Cate's first toy was a gas mask, 'and Ev's was like a crib gas mask that you could actually put the baby into'. With Hereford Road so close to the docks, not a single house escaped damage. Number 13, opposite the Coles, suffered a hit that blew its roof off. The effects of the war blighted the whole area, with bomb craters in the road and derelict buildings.

Kenny's parents had themselves been bombed out of their previous property during one of the worst attacks in the early years of the war, which demolished every house in the road. Following a bombing raid it was one of the duties of the Home Guard to cordon off the bombed houses and prevent the residents from going anywhere near them. 'Well, my mother wasn't having any of that,' says Cate. 'She went back into this cordoned-off house that had been their home, determined to get her jewellery back. She went up this broken, open staircase to the bedroom, found her dressing table and got her jewellery before she was hunted out by the Home Guard who yelled, "Don't you realize this place is about to fall down on top of you!"'

Elizabeth Cole (born Elizabeth Haugh), known to everyone as Lily, was a real character. 'If you want to sum up my mum in just a few words, think Thora Hird and Margaret Thatcher,' says Cate. 'She was very attractive, with green eyes and red hair, and beautiful skin, and she was very slim and very fashionable. I always wished she would be like a normal mother, roly-poly and up to her eyes in pastry and baked apples, a bit more mumsy and homey,

but she wasn’t. And she was quite difficult to talk to. You could talk to my father about anything, but you couldn’t talk to my mother because she was quite egotistical. You’d start off a conversation and you’d always end up talking about her.’

Behind this façade Lily was a bag of insecurities. Cate calls her ‘a little mixed up, really’, on account of a difficult and tragic childhood. When Lily was two years old her sister Jane, just a year older, died as the result of a freak accident. She was innocently playing in the park on the swings when she saw her father approaching. Waving, she lost balance and fell off, hitting her head on the concrete ground. As the result of a possible skull fracture, the toddler contracted meningitis and died. The grief was unbearable; her father carried her tiny shoes in his breast pocket for the next six months until he too died; of a broken heart, people said.

Not long after this tragedy Lily and her mother moved into her aunt’s house, where Lily was to grow up and enjoy a happy childhood alongside her cousins, who were to become more like brothers and sisters. Sadly, more trauma was visited upon poor Lily not long after her sixteenth birthday when her mother, who had always been quite frail and suffered from a heart condition, died of heart failure. With the sole exception of her husband’s, Lily was never to attend another funeral. For much of her life she kept her emotions reined in; if she cried, she cried alone.

Tom Cole, a friend of the family, was a regular visitor to her aunt’s house. Tom and Lily often went dancing together and on long walks, and steadily a romance developed. ‘My father was very handsome,’ claims Cate. ‘Everyone said he looked like Jimmy Cagney, and in some pictures I’ve seen of him in his youth he certainly did. Actually, he was much better-looking than Cagney.’

The couple married by the time they were twenty-one and enjoyed a stable, loving relationship. They were so

completely devoted to each other that Cate struggles to remember them ever having an argument or even hearing a cross word between them. This made it difficult for her and Maurice growing up, because they couldn't divide and rule; their parents put up a united front. 'My mother could be something of a tyrant, but Dad was just so patient. I think any other husband might have strangled my mother, but he remained supportive and caring. She was a little bit difficult, a bit sensitive, a bit touchy, a bit fiery. She was a big character and not that easy, but Dad was a saint; he was so loyal to her the whole time, and they were so happy together.'

For a while Lily ran a department at the Prudential Building Society, but gave up work when she had children and became a full-time mother. Much later, when Maurice and Cate were a little older, leaving her bored stiff at home, she had the chance to buy a distant relative's newsagent's business. 'She loved that,' says Cate. 'And she did well with that shop. She liked being there, chatting to the customers. She was a very chatty person, Mum; she never stopped talking.'

Eric Gear, Kenny's bank manager and friend, later got to know Tom and Lily well and recognized that Lily was the dominant one in the partnership. 'She was kind and helpful, but you could see that she was probably the driving force of the family. She was a good organizer, and quite methodical. Now Kenny could be a bit of a scatterbrain when it came to things like finances, but when it came to producing radio shows he had to be extremely disciplined and very methodical. And that was a characteristic that was certainly a product of his mother.'

Lily was also a brilliant gymnast in her youth, and one wonders how much of that dexterity and mobility Kenny inherited. On his television shows he traded in visual comedy to a vast degree, mimicking the movements of rock stars like Mick Jagger and Rod Stewart, or emulating

Marcel Marceau in those almost surreal mime artist sketches. Lily's talents in the kitchen, however, were less impressive. Kenny joked, 'She cooked bacon that the government almost commissioned to make warships out of. She knew more ways to murder an egg than any woman alive!'

Tom Cole worked as a tugboat captain on the River Mersey and was of that generation who were thoroughly decent, hard-working, industrious and highly principled. 'He was an absolutely lovely guy,' says Cate. 'And everyone who met him never had a bad word to say about him.'

It was not difficult to see where the future Kenny Everett got his sense of humour from. Eric Gear visited Tom and Lily in Perth, after they emigrated there in the eighties, and his impression was of a very, very funny man. 'In the house, Tom wore a deaf-aid. Well, my brother and I took him out for a drive round Perth, and when we got in the car Tom immediately took his deaf-aid out and began chatting normally. When I asked him about the deaf-aid, he said the wife was less likely to nag him if she thought he couldn't hear her, so he usually kept it in. He was a lovely man, though, and quite mischievous, just like his boy. He was very laid-back and extremely jovial.'

But he was also stoical, as many people were back in the 1940s, and keenly aware and respectful of authority, believing one always had to do the right thing. 'So we were brought up very strictly and with high expectations of our manners and behaviour,' remembers Cate. 'Maurice and I always had to be super polite, well dressed and I suppose you'd say now slightly repressed. We never really stood out of line because you would earn my mother's displeasure, one look from my mother would wither anybody. We were never smacked, one would be brought into line by harsh words and made to feel guilty, so you wouldn't do it again. Nobody would cross my mother. My parents were very strict but very fair.'

Lily particularly doted on Maurice, dressing him up in little dickie bows and smart clothes, including one beautiful white outfit, short white trousers and white shirt, which Maurice ruined one Christmas seeking Father Christmas up the chimney. 'I think Maurice was very happy within the family unit,' believes Cate. 'We were a very close, very loving family. It actually used to annoy us that our parents never argued. Perhaps it was too overprotective. Perhaps we were too cloistered, too sheltered. When we finally left home we were very innocent.'

For a long time Lily's controlling influence extended to not letting her children play out in the street with the other kids. It was the local doctor, who had his surgery in Hereford Road, who finally confronted her about it and said, 'For goodness' sake, you have to let your children out to play!' Far from being horrible, the local kids were great fun and Cate and Kenny got up to all sorts of pranks with them. Cate recalls: 'Almost everyone owned a pair of roller skates and would hang out at this derelict scrap of land. Sometimes there would be fifteen kids hanging off the end of a bicycle as it tore around the tarmac, with the unlucky sod at the back of the line gathering enough momentum to send him airborne. We'd also play simple games like hopscotch, or play with hoops and skipping ropes. You just had to make your own amusement back then, which probably helped Kenny's creative bent.'

Conveniently there was a park at the bottom of Hereford Road and Cate and Maurice spent hours there playing. Sometimes they'd cross the main road and walk down to the beach, where the Mersey lapped against a sandy shoreline. Again Kenny painted a less than romantic image of the place, describing how condoms would wash ashore and that nearby were two sewage outlets pumping waste out to sea, which had a nasty habit of coming back in again with the tide. Yes, Cate agrees, it wasn't quite the Côte d'Azur, 'but it was sandy hills and water – albeit it was

River Mersey water, which wasn't that clean – but still one swam and paddled and built sandcastles. We took picnics down there and pitched a tent. Looking back, we had a lot of freedom as children. Actually, we used to go out and play a lot on our own and then come back at mealtimes.'

Often on Sundays they'd join their father for a brisk walk to a park in the Waterloo district of Liverpool where there was a duck pond for little Maurice to sail his toy boat. Other times they'd visit the docks and watch the big liners coming in and out, or enjoy a trip on the ferry across the Mersey. Coming back, they might buy fish and chips at the shop that Cherie Blair's mother worked at. 'Dad was very patient with us,' remembers Cate. 'He spent a lot of time with us, and read us stories. He also had a little Ford car and used to take us out on fun day-trips. And for a special treat he would invite us on to his tugboat, where we would be fussed over by the crew and treated like royalty.'

After the ravages of the war the civic aesthetic of Liverpool had slowly begun to improve, but for Kenny the city would always be a dump, or 'cruddy' as he once referred to it, a place to escape from. Whenever he spoke about Liverpool in interviews it was in derogatory terms, conjuring up a grey and bleak place. These are feelings that find resonance with Cate: 'It wasn't a fun place to grow up in after the war. I never felt comfortable there, and I left when I was nineteen. Kenny left when he was seventeen.'

Kenny always felt strangely out of place in the city, as if he didn't belong, which in a way he didn't. The Coles were not true Scousers with deep roots in the city; the Doomsday Book records that the family originally heralded from Cornwall and Devon, and this particular branch only moved to Liverpool when Kenny's grandfather was in his twenties. 'I remember my grandfather,' says Cate. 'He was very impressive and scary and told tales of grandeur and owning vast tracts of land. We grew up on that, it became family

folklore.' He sold up in Devon and was on his way to Australia to start a cattle business when his mother became ill, so they ended up settling in Liverpool. 'I think he was a gambler and a drinker,' says Cate. 'And he married an Irish woman and had five children, most of whom he ignored. He was very strict.'

Towards the end of his life he came to stay at Hereford Road. 'And it was always interesting to go into his room and talk to him,' says Cate, 'and listen to his tales of travel. He'd already visited Australia and brought back a collection of shells and other objects which he used to show us.' Years later some of the Cole family followed in their grandfather's footsteps and set off for Australia. Cate was first to emigrate with her husband and young family in 1983, and she persuaded Lily and Tom to join them in Perth two years later. Cate recalls ringing Lily one night from the balcony of her house overlooking the Indian Ocean and suggesting that her mother and father might wish to leave the cold of Formby for a new life in Australia. Lily replied in a slightly annoyed manner, 'I thought you would never ask!' Ev wanted to live in Australia as well, she claims. 'But he got too sick. He loved Sydney.'

When his childhood came up in interviews, Kenny portrayed himself as a small, weedy boy trying to circumnavigate local gangs who'd shout threateningly, 'What the bluddy 'ell er yooo looking at?' if he so much as glanced in their direction for more than a split second. 'And before you knew it,' recalled Kenny, 'your face was all over the floor.'

This image of a gentle petal of a boy who never really spoke to anyone, was constantly having to avoid bullies and asking his sister to get him out of trouble, is one that Cate simply does not recognize. 'I don't know where all that came from. There were no scrapes, not that I saw or heard about. Yes, he was smallish and slim, and so, so sensitive he

picked up on every single vibe, so of course he was going to suffer in a place like Liverpool. But it wasn't a bad childhood. He was always singing and chatting. I always thought he was a very happy child, he never seemed unhappy.'

It's another case of Kenny not stopping to think before speaking to journalists – a dangerous habit that never left him. One doubts it was engineered or carried out in a conscious manner, but he was an entertainer, and when he was talking to the media he wanted to get a reaction. If the truth was boring and wouldn't get a response, he might embellish it a little. However, one porky pie, or shall we say exaggeration, eclipses all others: that of branding his parents as religious zealots, implying they were partly to blame for many of his psychological hang-ups, most notably the guilt trip about his homosexuality which he struggled with for half his adult life. According to Kenny, his family was 'very religious … extremely Catholic'. They attended Mass every Sunday without fail, and confession once a week. It got to the stage, he claimed, where he had to come up with something sufficiently grand to confess just to keep the priest from falling asleep. Owning up to playing with himself was about as apocalyptic as it got. 'Although if God hadn't meant us to wank, he'd have put our bits and pieces somewhere where we couldn't reach them!'

All the Old Testament doom-mongering of the Church left an indelible mark on young Maurice. It was drummed into him at an impressionable age that God was watching you all the time, like some celestial Big Brother, so woe betide anyone who misbehaved or had less than saintly thoughts. 'I was brought up a true Catholic, that if you do something slightly naughty you go to purgatory for an awfully long time and it's really bad,' he complained during his interview on the BBC's *Desert Island Discs*. 'So if you commit one of these lists of sins and you don't get to confession in time, you'll go to hell FOR EVER. And hell is

unimaginable agony – FOR EVER. Fancy telling that to a kid. It's outrageous.' Consequently Maurice was terrified out of his britches and in a near-constant state of neurosis as a child. He worried about everything. 'And if there was a God, why did he make me so thin and spindly?'

Again, the truth is more enlightening than the fantasy. There's no doubt that religion played a significant part in Everett's life, but the culprits weren't his parents. 'Mum and Dad were not religious freaks,' stresses Cate. 'Yes, they had a belief, but they didn't go to church all the time. I know a lot of friends who had evening prayers and used to recite Rosary; it was that sort of time. We never got involved in any of that, and we never had holy pictures hanging up either. In fact, sometimes they didn't go to Mass on Sundays, which actually was a bit problematic for us kids, because at school we had a Mass register and it wasn't just for children, it was for parents. The teacher would ask, "Did your parents go to Mass?" So that was always embarrassing.' If anything, it was years of being harassed by their children that made Tom and Lily go back to church again. Cate can't recall why they stopped going in the first place. 'Perhaps they just fancied some peace and quiet on a Sunday morning. In retrospect, I was happier when they were not in church because my mother was quite out spoken and every time the ninety-year-old priest would stumble on to the altar she'd put out this enormous, "Oh no!" or "Oh my goodness!" She was always in a hurry to get home and do things. She was very outspoken and cringe-making at times.'

No, if there was any religious axe to grind from Kenny it was a result of his experiences at school and of the teachers. 'They were pretty full-on,' admits Cate. 'It was all-pervasive. Honest to God, we could have got a PhD in Catholicism and religious doctrine, when we should really have been concentrating on maths and English and those

kinds of subjects. So much of the school curriculum went into religious education.'

From the age of five Maurice had been enrolled at St Edmund's Primary School, a short walk from home. That first day was traumatic; as he watched his mother leave him in a room full of strangers he burst into tears. Reassurance was at hand from one of the teachers, or so he thought. 'There, there, don't cry, little boy,' she said. 'Or we'll nail your knees to the blackboard.'

School was almost as forbidding as church. Here authority manifested itself not as an omnipresent deity but in the nightmare-inducing form of the headmistress, who every morning rose from her desk like a human praying mantis to quiz her unfortunate pupils on the sacraments. 'She was a spinster woman,' remembers Cate, who was also a pupil there, 'with a big long feather-duster, and the feathers at the end of it didn't seem to slow down the swish of the cane. She was such a bully, she was a nightmare. I went back to the school years and years later and she was still pulling kids around by the scruff of their neck and their ears, these poor, timid little five- and six-year-olds.'

St Edmund's was a small school made up of only four classrooms, with old-fashioned wooden benches and desks, and an open fire. Mass was held every week in the school's own chapel, which ran the full length of the top floor and was reached via wooden stairs. So God was literally hovering over the children as they studied, omnipresent.

Cate remembers that Maurice was not academically gifted as a child and did not do well at school. He certainly didn't lack ability, but school failed to hold his interest. 'If he wasn't interested in anything, well, he wasn't interested. I think he lived in his imagination.' In the repressive environment of St Edmund's it must have been tough for any child to embrace the joy of learning. For the most part they were too scared to step out of line or even contribute in class. 'The way the teachers belittled the children,' says

Cate, 'you would be too scared to make the wrong answer and wouldn't make the effort in the end. It's a wonder we could string two words together by the time we left.'

Having survived the school week, the big treat at the weekend was Saturday-morning pictures at the local Odeon. Kenny's favourite was always *Flash Gordon*, but he also loved other Republic serials such as *King of the Rocket Men* and *The Crimson Ghost* with its thrills, spills and ridiculously overwrought cliff-hanger endings. It was here one Saturday that Kenny got his first taste of public success. 'Before the film began the cinema manager used to get up on the stage and try and control all these unruly children by having quizzes and competitions,' remembers Cate. 'And Kenny won a skipping competition and I won a singing competition.'

The simple pleasure of Saturday-morning pictures was denied Maurice when his dad decided, for no apparent reason, that he should learn to play the violin. The lessons, given by a grumpy teacher, were not only held at the same time but next door to the cinema. So poor Maurice would see all his mates rush excitedly into the foyer, while he faced an hour of worthless fiddling.

While not exactly a wallflower, Maurice was developing into a shy and reserved boy, not much into physical activities such as sports, preferring to stay indoors with his own company. In that way he took after his father, who was by nature a quiet man. But Kenny carried it to extremes. 'He was very very quiet, very quiet indeed,' recalled Tony Ormesher, who was four years older than Maurice and lived opposite. 'He didn't mix much at all with the kids in the street. When he was eleven, twelve and thirteen he started to go a little bit into himself. I was really surprised in such an introvert person there was such an extrovert trying to get out.'

One friend was a lad who lived around the corner, Peter Terry. A bit of a tearaway, was Terry, and together they'd

sometimes sneak into the back of a local grocery store to steal tins of peaches or play postman's knock on the doors of unsuspecting neighbours. Once they climbed on to the roof of the local supermarket. Maurice and Terry also pulled the odd practical joke. The local parish priest, Father McKiernan, was a regular visitor to all local households and would always give Peter Terry's sister Margaret's plaits a little yank as he got up to leave. One afternoon Margaret got her hair cut and, sensing the opportunity for a good wheeze, Maurice asked her to retain the detached plaits. When the priest next visited, Margaret fixed the plaits on to the back of her head so that when he playfully gave them a tug they came off in his hand, accompanied by a scream of anguish from Margaret. After the poor man left in an awful state the children burst out laughing.

If the prankster was born early, so too was the mischief-maker. One day after school Kenny and Cate were walking along the pathway that ran past the side of the school building when Ev saw a brick in a puddle and started playing with it. 'Then he got bored and chucked it over the wall,' remembers Cate. 'And unfortunately on the other side was poor Mike Ahern, who copped it on top of the head. Ev was mortified.' Mike Ahern attended St Edmund's at the same time as Everett, although he was two years older. By a curious coincidence Ahern also became a pirate DJ, had a brief spell on Radio 1 and worked with Kenny on Capital Gold in the nineties. To have two future radio presenters live within 200 yards of each other was a remarkable coincidence.

The natural performer also rose to the surface fairly early on. Cate remembers she and Maurice used to put on little plays and shows and charge all the neighbouring kids a penny to come and watch. When he joined the local scout troop, Maurice appeared in their annual production – playing the part of a woman. This entailed borrowing a red corduroy pinafore dress from his sister, white ankle socks,

leather shoes and a long blond wig. 'It was the first intimation I ever got that he was actually brilliant,' says Cate, who saw the play with her mum and dad. 'We went along expecting nothing much, but he was fantastic. He had such stage presence the whole show seemed to revolve around him. I also noticed that it was Ev who prompted all the other kids when they forgot lines.'

One of the happiest periods of Maurice's childhood was Christmas, a time of magic, warmth and celebration. Christmas Day always saw the arrival of Auntie Sadie and Uncle Jack, who used to give the children each a crisp ten-shilling note. Maurice would run upstairs into his bedroom and pin it to the wall, just to stare in wonder at this manna from heaven.

There were holidays to look forward to as well: trips to Ayrshire in Scotland and Llandudno in Wales, where one of their aunts owned a caravan, and Bray on the coast of Ireland near Dublin, as well as an annual jaunt to the Isle of Man. 'I also remember we set off to Devon and Cornwall once,' recalls Cate. 'But because my mother was reading the map we ended up in London!' Wherever they went, poor old Ev would always be travel-sick. 'Car-sick, coach-sick, boat-sick, every kind of sick,' recalls Cate. 'Poor kid. Once we went to Scotland and I actually thought he was going to die. We had to stop all the time – he was in a shocking state. He was a very sensitive boy.'

In the days before television, the radio was for many the only source of home entertainment. Like most families, the Coles would sit around the fire every night and tune into shows such as *Dick Barton Special Agent*, *The Goon Show* and *Take It From Here*, with Jimmy Edwards and June Whitfield. For Kenny, radio wasn't merely a source of amusement, it attained an almost ethereal quality. 'I used to wake up at six o'clock in the morning and listen to the start of radio because I was so entranced by it.' Totally mesmerized by the sounds coming out of the speaker, he'd

let himself be taken on a journey somewhere else, somewhere exotic and exciting. 'And then, of course, the transmissions would end and I'd be back in drizzly old Liverpool.' Sometimes he found himself staring fixatedly at the radio even when it wasn't on, this little magic box, trying to fathom where all that sound came from. At night he'd listen to *The Adventures of Dan Dare*, fifteen minutes of wonder which aired five times a week on Radio Luxembourg. Based on the *Eagle* comic strip, each episode started with the command, 'Spaceships Away!' Maurice's imagination would soar as he was taken away to Venus and interstellar battles with the evil Treens.

The dial was almost permanently tuned to the BBC's Home Service, and he'd carry on listening sometimes right up until the end of transmission, when the announcer strayed from the programme's rigid format and set script and began to talk more freely: 'And now I can see the gas lamps flickering in Portland Place, it's time to wrap up for the night.' Kenny loved staying up for that bit, it sounded so cosy and warm, as if the presenter was speaking only to him. It was an early lesson about the power and intimacy of radio.

At school Maurice continued to underperform. About the only lesson that engaged his interest was geography, where he enjoyed learning about other countries, perhaps daydreaming about escaping to a tropical island far away from the grey, cold environs of Liverpool. And so it came as no surprise to anyone when he failed his eleven-plus. The sole object of the exam, it seemed to him, had been to ask all the questions that he couldn't answer, like divide 42 by 6, to which Maurice wrote on the exam paper – *why?* His parents were disappointed but not entirely surprised; 'They knew I had this will-o'-the-wisp mind which flitted from one subject to another.'

So instead of the local grammar school Maurice went to St Bede’s Secondary Modern, where physical punishment was rife. Almost certainly Maurice fell prey to the cane since ‘they used to cane everybody’, according to Cate. ‘We also had this despotic headmaster who was very, very tall and frightening-looking, and rather grand about himself, and he used to beat the hell out of the children with a leather strap. It was terrible. Children never went home and told their parents; they’d only have said, “Well, you must have deserved it.” That was the culture back then, you put up or shut up. That guy would be hauled before the courts now for his behaviour.’

At St Bede’s, Kenny’s weedy frame made him an easy target for bullies: ‘I spent most of the time at school avoiding the other chaps because they were great hulking brutes; they were practising to be ditch diggers.’ Cate says she can’t really remember him being bullied, but agrees that ‘maybe he felt intimidated. He wasn’t a big chap, and he wasn’t all that sporty. He was always a bit of a moocher.’

As at his previous school, Kenny didn’t form many friendships. One of his few mates was Paul Walker, who lived nearby on Wilson Road. Both quite techy, they gravitated to each other due to a shared hatred of anything to do with physical exertion. Aside from being physically exhausting, Kenny particularly loathed school sports because it meant having to wear shorts, thus revealing to the world his spindly frame.

Looking back now, Walker comments, ‘Maurice was quite cultured, even then, and that’s probably why he never felt he fitted in. I never recall him being bullied though. He was a delightful lad and quite funny. Very affable. He definitely came over as being middle-class though, but in a very working-class area.’ Indeed, while Maurice himself was already exhibiting self-confidence issues, amongst his fellow pupils he was considered clever, combining a quick wit with immaculate handwriting.

Through his love of radio, Maurice had developed a keen interest in music. Near St Bede’s was Rosie’s, an old junk shop where he spent hours flicking through boxes of old 78 records, buying hoards of them at three pence apiece. In his bedroom was one of those plastic toy record players which he’d been given as a child; wrenching the arm off to allow space for his much larger 78s, Maurice would wet his finger and manually spin the vinyl until it reached the required rpm. George Butterworth’s tune ‘The Banks of Green Willow’ was the first record he recalled ever buying, but the bulk of his 78s were classical recordings. One particular favourite was Laurence Olivier reciting speeches from *Hamlet*. Over and over again he’d play the Yorick speech. ‘I just loved the magic of a voice crooning out of a little plastic object.’

Despite his burgeoning interest in music and radio, it’s doubtful whether Kenny envisaged a career in broadcasting or indeed knew such a thing was a possibility. At this early stage he had no idea where his future lay.

2

Heaven Calling

ONE AFTERNOON KENNY'S school organized a trip to what can only be described as a religious expo. It wasn't compulsory, no one was forced to go, but Cate remembers most of her class and Maurice's boarding the coaches and off they went. 'And there were all these stalls with nuns and priests encouraging us to join their particular order. Me and my friends came away laughing, saying, no way José. Ev came away with an application form.' It was for a Catholic seminary based at Stillington Hall near York, run by the Verona Fathers, who originated as a brotherhood based in Italy training young men for the priesthood and for missionary work in places such as Uganda and the Sudan.

Cate doesn't believe her brother had any particular vocation to go into the priesthood. As Kenny himself later said, 'It was a choice of either staying at St Bede's and finishing off my training as a mass murderer, along with the rest of them, or going to learn to be a priest and converting people. Can you imagine me converting anybody!'

As a young lad he had been an altar boy and, according to Cate, really enjoyed it. 'He looked so angelic. And he loved swinging the incense. That was theatre, wasn't it.' She can't recall Maurice ever discussing religion or even raising the subject when they were children, though at that age one wasn't encouraged to ask questions. Any expression of doubt would inevitably receive the stock

answer: ‘It’s a question of faith, my child.’ Going to Stillington Hall, then, was simply one more fanciful notion that was pushed into his head, helped perhaps by the fact that his friend Peter Terry was already there and reporting back to Maurice how much he was enjoying it. Cate remembers her parents’ response to the news along the lines of, Oh golly, are you sure? Well, if it’s really what you want … ‘I think they had to struggle, because it was quite expensive to send him there.’

Maurice arrived at Stillington Hall in September 1956, and it was all rather overwhelming at first. Stillington Hall was an old country house that dated back to the early 1700s. Kenny later recalled that it was like living in a movie set, one of those gothic mansions that turn up in old-fashioned murder mysteries with a grand staircase, balustrades, mahogany panelling and minstrel galleries.

The children all slept in a huge dormitory on the top floor that stretched along the whole front of the house. Maurice hated having to get up early and take a compulsory shower, since there was no privacy whatsoever, no doors on the cubicles, and one was subjected to blasts of cold water. The boys would then hurry along to chapel for morning prayers and communion; though the thin wafer was supposed to remain in the mouth, slowly dissolving as the mind engaged in contemplation of godly thoughts, most pupils were so hungry that they guzzled it down straightaway. After a bible reading it was finally time for breakfast, followed by maths, geography, English, etc.

After lunch there were more lessons or games. Again, Maurice did his best to avoid the latter if at all possible. Football was the favoured sport at Stillington Hall, hardly surprising since many of the priests were Italian; one of them had a relative who was on the books of Internazionale Milano, and he managed to acquire a full strip in the famous black and blue for the school’s team. Of course, Maurice tried to stay as close to the edge of the pitch and