

In 5th grade it became my blessed lot to participate in the so-called maturation program, sex education for youngsters. I believe the purveyors of this initiation into such a transformational phase, intended for it to be a celebration of life, with balloons. Instead of lunch in the cafeteria that day, we sat semi-formally at tables in a dimly lit gym. Brown paper table coverings and battery-powered candles did not succeed in lifting the anvil-heavy weight of awkwardness, nor did the non-alcoholic champagne that tasted a lot like the entire experience—weird.

I sat next to Victor from my class, the rims of his glasses looped so largely that they could have passed as a prototype for the Large Hadron Collider that would be built many years later. Opposite from us two girls from the other class stared into space blankly; in the distant horizon they spied their adulthood trying to pretend that they didn't exist.

Constellations of zits covered various faces in the room. If one were to correlate all of the zit coordinates together and map them out as perforations on a roll of paper and insert this roll into a Pianola, the sound played would have been a particularly avant-garde piece of music. Or in other words, it would have resembled in melody and pitch the cracking voice of a pubescent boy sounding out the dots and dashes of a Morse coded SOS.

"I think my stomach is cramping up." Tiffany, the triangle-haired girl across from me blurted. My eyes glanced at her lunch tray where some sort of mashed food with a yet undesignated representation in the periodic table of elements, lay half eaten next to an untouched piece of steel wool trying its best to pass as toast.

"My gloop tasted normal," I offered. To which she let out a weak groan. Salem, who was lucky enough to be Victor's date for the fine dining experience let out an exasperated gasp.

"Maybe you have phantom pain." Her eyes rolled a period to punctuate her suggestion.

"Phantom pain?! What in the world is that?" Tiffany begged.

"Some people who are missing limbs," began Salem.

"Limbs! What are those?" Tiffany shrieked looking down at her body as though it was a foreign object.

"Like an arm or a leg. Some people who lose them..."

"Am I losing my legs?" Tiffany appeared to be hyperventilating already.

Victor squeakily piped in. "At least you won't have to shave them."

Nervously she squeezed her see-through bag of milk so tensely that I thought it looked like a blowfish with no pokey bits. Tiffany possibly thinking the same, sought to remedy this by injecting it with a pokey straw. The milk bag reacted by giving all within a five-foot radius around Tiffany ample reason to answer with a resounding "Well duh!" to the famous question of our youth. "Got Milk?"

"I hope there wasn't any Tetrodotoxin in that puffer fish." My adult self guffawed. Nobody got the joke, and everybody at the table pretended my adult self wasn't actually there.

Salem continued calmly while using her napkin to clean up some of the milk. "Anyway, what I was getting to is, maybe you are tricking your body into thinking you have period pains because you just heard about it."

In response to this Tiffany promptly fainted while Salem entirely unperturbed, decided to offer a toast. "To the death of childhood and the birth of lame puberty!"

Victor squinted behind his windshield size glasses to see what was proffered. With the lightning speed I was known for at that age, I took my glass and slammed it into Salem's, which reacted by emptying itself onto Tiffany.

"Ahh dang!" She squealed, waking up and looking around like a lemur for the source of her confusion. Victor squinted extra hard to figure out what was going on but gave up and started imitating Darth Vader for no particular reason.

"The force is strong with this one," was followed by heavy breaths.

Salem sighed "Star Wars is so 4th grade!"

Salem was a lot more mature than anybody else; she had even beaten every boy in the class in the race to get peach fuzz. All of us pre-pubescent males eyed her enviously. She was cool. She started munching on a rubber meatball, I was kind of sad to see them go to waste for the purpose of food. These meatballs were superior to any sort of commercial bouncy ball and I had already stored my own portion safely in my left sock. My eyes wandered up to the projected image of the female reproductive system at the front of the gym. It looked a lot like the Time Flux Capacitor. My mind feebly fumbled for a joke about ovarian time travel but gave up because I wasn't that smart back then.

Coming of age was an odd development for us all. Any enlightenment that our parents or teachers attempted to provide was quickly muddled in the backwaters of childhood. Waiting in line for lunch, loudmouthed girls would taunt us for not knowing what the difference was between a tampon and dental floss. Other mean girls from the 6th grade would ask calculating questions such as the following example:

"Hey kid!"

"Hey Jackie." I sighed, knowing something malicious was about to happen.

"Hey little guy, I have a question for you."

"Shoot." I said, immediately regretting my choice of words.

"Do you have an epidermis?" This wasn't a question so much as a demand.

"Well, what is an epidermis?" I asked suspecting it to be some mystical component in the female apparatus.

"Just answer kid!"

"But... what is it?"

"Yes or no freak boy!"

"No!"

This I quickly learned must have been the wrong answer and I determined I must actually have an epidermis. Although later encounters with this question revealed that there was no right answer. In a situation as this I would end up being the object of teasing until replaced by another unlucky victim. Slowly all of us 5th graders learned to avoid the dark side of the jungle gym where the 6th graders roosted.

But it wasn't just at school that miseducation reigned. There was a house a few blocks from ours where I used to hang out, I don't think I knew the people there very well but they owned Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles IV: Turtles in Time for the Super Nintendo. So I frequented their home as regularly as my minutely scheduled childhood permitted. One day the conversation took an uncomfortable turn. The afternoon had started out with an innocent Mario warm-up before the green martial artists were plugged in. Game paddles were in hand but eyes were not, they were safely glued to the TV screen instead. The only sounds were clicks and button mashing coupled with the occasional grunt or slurp of pop. Suddenly the boy who I only knew as "that kid with the ninja turtle game," turned on me. "Did you know that your parents have had sex?" He brazenly asked.

My controller almost dropped out of my hand and Donatello nearly got killed by one of Krang's stone warriors. Soda pop sprayed out of my nostrils in a carbonating expression of discomfort.

"What?" I shouted, trying not to spoil my screen to eye adhesive.

"It's true," he answered swinging Raphael's sai. "How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"We are four." I answered in horror as to what he might say next.

"That means your parents have had sex four times." He answered very matter-of-factly.

This time the controller was dropped from my hand and in anger, I turned off the console that was powering our reptilian adventure. "That's not true! My parents don't do that!"

And so ended my deep friendship with "that kid with the ninja turtle game."

But the crowning glory of sex education was without question the day my mom decided to have "the talk," with me. Somehow something that would have been awkward enough with a male parent became doubly weird with my mom. I am sure it was far from easy for my mom as well because she had resorted to illustrate the lesson on a pad of paper.

"This is a man."

"That is a stick figure, mom."

"This is a woman."

"That is just a lop-sided stick figure mom."

"When a man and a woman are married and in love they do this."

"Mom the one stick figure just beat up the other one."

"You will understand it when you are older."

"I sure hope not."