

World Book Encyclopedia “S”: How I Learned About Penetrative Heterosexual Intercourse, AKA “Sex”

For Ann N.

1.

I grew up in the 70s but my household was far from the stereotypical 70s American family. We weren't like the Brady Bunch or the Partridge Family; my parents were emigrants from the Philippines. Catholic, repressed, clueless, you name it. Although there were 7 of us kids, which tells you something about my parents. Anyway, there was no *Joy of Sex* to ogle and giggle over. Just lots of shame and guilt spread thick by the nuns at school and reinforced by my parents' silence and subtle *delicadeza* culture, at least for girls. My brothers knew all about this stuff way before I did. Apparently the same applied to Penn Dutch girls, too.

One afternoon in fifth grade my good friend Ann and I decided we wanted to use my mother's Singer sewing machine but didn't want to *ask* her for permission. Confidently I told Ann that we could just look up how to thread a sewing machine in the *World Book Encyclopedia* at my house and I could take it from there. We grabbed the *S* encyclopedia from the living room bookcase then ran downstairs and locked ourselves in the den. Sitting on the scratchy green sofa together we quickly paged to *S-E* but overshot it and found ourselves on *S-E-X*. I looked at Ann and she at me, and we started reading it silently together. We got to this triumphant line and started seeing red: “And the man puts his penis in the woman's vagina. And some women find this pleasurable.”

Ann whispered it aloud. “*And the man puts his penis in the woman's vagina. And some women find this pleasurable.*” Oh my God! We slammed the book shut, too stunned to laugh, our furtive sewing expedition forgotten. We stared at each other in shock, hands over our mouths.

How did we not know about this?

Our parents *did this!*

Everyone's parents *did this!*

Neighbors, our lay teachers.

The people we babysat for...

We couldn't look at any adults without wondering if they *did this too*.

It was too disgusting to fathom.

Throughout that school year Ann sent me unsigned notes that just said, “And some women find this pleasurable.” Why did she have to keep reminding me? It was enough to make me burst out laughing, then blush and cringe. Thankfully menarche came as a needed distraction from this terrible information. But it was clear our bodies were changing, hurtling us towards new and uncharted lands . . .

Ann and I gradually drifted apart. In 9th grade I finally got my wish of transferring to the local public school. The following year I was shocked to hear that she, now a popular cheerleader at the local Catholic high school, had been forced to drop out, pregnant with twins, humiliated and abandoned by her cad of a boyfriend, the star football player who refused to give up his college scholarship.

For years afterwards I felt weirdly responsible and connected to her story, wondering if she recalled our innocent meander that afternoon from *s-e-w* to *s-e-x*. That one page, that one letter had changed the world for us, divided it into stark absolutes, before and after, virgin and whore, innocent and experienced, with no avenues to explore our own girlish sexual curiosity and pleasure. Like the Virgin Mary herself, we were to *let it be done to us*, passive recipients, receptacles; never agents, instigators.

2.

Some learning comes through reading, some through observation;
others demand a definite hands-on approach.

Sex is just like that--

an encyclopedia can only offer the most basic information

while the Church and your parents pretend it doesn't exist outside of marriage.

What to do with these animal urges?

It's more than simply mind over matter--

hormones racing, blood pounding,

bodies growing before your very eyes

weird thoughts and feelings spilling forth, unbidden.

And always, an older boy waiting, willing

to show you the ropes

to take your virginity (another notch on his bedpost)

to fuck and tell--at least in my hypocritical hometown.

Curiosity may not kill the cat

but it can kill a teenage girl's reputation

disrupt her life, scar her and her family

Meanwhile, those boys carry on, smirking...

Oh, what we risked

for knowledge

for pleasure

for love

These days, I thank the goddess for the internets,

for Youtube, Scarleteen, Amazon Prime.

My advice?

Get yourself a good vibrator, girls, and have at it.

Learn how to please yourself first

then demand the same from everyone who enters your bed.

Life's too short to rely on accidents

like a slip from *-w* to *-x*.

You need a license to drive, right?

Learn to drive and maintain your little red corvette.

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Melinda Luisa de Jesús

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