

Irish Catholic Sex

I'd say I had an ordinary childhood. I dated girls, got drunk on occasion and eventually grew up. In truth, I didn't get much closer to real sex than Playboy magazine, that staple of young manhood that taught us what women really looked like with their clothes off. Really.

Sex wasn't a permissible topic in our Irish Catholic home when I was growing up in the 1950's. No one in my memory ever brought it up. Anything that even smacked of it was quickly squashed. I remember my father turning off the car radio one Sunday afternoon when Peggy Lee began to sing "Fever! Fever all through the night!"

In fact, I first came across the three letter word as a youngster while completing an application for a free Polio shot at the old Health Clinic a few blocks from the business district of my home town. There was a fill-in line on the application that read simply, "Sex". I looked at the woman clerk across the counter from me and pointing to the line on my card said, "I don't get this." Not realizing what I meant, she laughed and said, "Neither do I!" Then, seeing my confusion, she leaned forward and said in a whisper, "It means whether you're a girl or a boy. Put down an M." I didn't know how an "M" could mean boy, but I did as I was told.

Now, you may think me a bit slow, but I was a newspaper-reading 9 year old holding the second highest grade average in my class at school. So you can imagine how little the word "sex" was actually seen or used at that time in America. Desi and Lucy slept in separate beds on their TV show. In any Hollywood-style passionate kiss, the camera faded to black if the couple tilted over more than 35 degrees from the vertical, 25 degrees if they were in a bedroom, even if they were standing up and the beds were made. Just reading the movie titles in the Legion of Decency's C category (for Condemned!) was good for a little quiet titillation.

Since many of us wouldn't be here without sex being easy and instinctual, it is unsurprising that even when young we were excited about it, sought it in one form or another and yet didn't know anything about it. Not exactly.

Not long after the M for Boy episode, my best friend George told me how a man and a woman did it. He had a few of the particulars wrong...out of order as I remember....so I wonder if George ever had children.

A few years later on a Friday night toward the end of seventh grade, George and I got dressed up in shirts and ties (pink and charcoal) and walked from our neighborhood to our first dance. Each year a group of girls called the Children of Mary put on a dance at our Catholic school. Seventh and Eight grade students were invited.

Standing on the sidelines, I was unable to bring myself to ask any girl to dance. I was telling myself yet another imaginary reason why I had come here ... to write a story on the dance for the school newspaper, to count the missing light bulbs in the ceiling while on special assignment from the janitor ... when a girl I'll always remember came up and asked me to dance. I was so elated to have the "male burden" of having to ask pass from my shoulders that I nearly sighed audibly. Her name was Maureen. She wasn't the prettiest girl in my class at school and she was an inch taller than me, but we marched out onto the dance floor and I was glad I had practiced a step my mother called the Foxtrot, first with myself and then the previous afternoon with George's older sister, who smelled strongly of chewing gum and Clorox as we leadenly stepped through our drill while standing 3 feet apart.

So that night I put my 13 year old arms around Maureen and we danced ... sort of. The first thing I noticed was that she was warm. Like a really nice kind of warm. I could smell a little perspiration from her neck along with a flowery perfume that smelled delicious. She didn't seem to be the same Maureen I saw daily in class chewing on her pencil and lost in her roomy school uniform. This Maureen had boobs! They were pointing right at me and I was trying to keep my distance from them. I must have looked like I was either leaning back from the edge of a cliff or afraid she was going to rub something off on my new tie.



Irish

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the long way to heaven

Years later I realized that Maureen was the first person in the world I had ever put my arms around. Oh sure, my mother put her arms around me, but I was a man before I embraced her in a hug. And I certainly never put my arms around George! He would have knee'd me. Putting my arms around Maureen was an intimate thing, really, even though it is often treated as commonplace. We come into each other's space, get a whiff of each other's aroma and feel the warmth if we linger a moment. It's bound to leave an impression the first time.

Of course, more sex was on the way ... sort of ... when I entered the whirlwind of catechism and hormones that defined our local Catholic High School. Here the boys and girls were regarded as little sinners on their way to becoming bigger sinners, unless they had a 95+ grade average and could bring honor (and donations) to the school.

The Catholic Academy was run by a group of seemingly stern nuns who were quite strict with the girls, but warmer toward the boys. As an example of the female plight at the Academy, the accepted hemline for the heavy wool jumper uniforms at that time was somewhere around the knee and anything shorter was evidently a major offense. Snap inspections in the classroom would begin when the Principal Nun burst into class and directed all the young women to kneel down next to their desks to show that their hems touched the floor. Backs straight, young ladies, no crouching! If she was wearing a sweater, a girl might surreptitiously undo her side zipper to get an extra half inch of hem. But mostly the girls relied on rumors of coming inspections and set their hems using only pins so they could be adjusted downward when an impending Hem Raid was suspected.. During my entire time in high school, I never saw a girl with a permanently sewn hem.

The nuns looked aside as boys and girls dated, but “going steady” was practically forbidden. Despite the proscription, boys and girls together did what you know they did and to signify their steady status a girl wore her boyfriend’s class ring suspended on a fine chain about the neck outside of her uniform, but only after school hours. During classes it was worn under the blouse against the skin so as not to attract the attention of the nuns. My high school girlfriend huffily returned my class ring when I bought her an extra long chain so my ring would nestle down where my interest lie while she sat in her classes. Eventually I gave the chain to my wife, but I never told her its history.

Use of one’s time was strictly regulated too. In addition to absolutely no study periods, after-school activities often revolved around one religious activity or another. For the girls, there was the Sodality of the Holy Virgins of the Order of Mary, honoring a group of French nuns who were said to have been martyred for their faith in the 1400’s. But some sources say they became dissolute and fell into disrepute, an excuse for the boys to call Sodality members the Part Time Virgins.

Unknown to me, miles away in a similar Catholic high school, my future wife was getting kicked out of her Sodality because she was dating a boy from a Public School, of all things! Lucky for me, my kind of woman gets kicked out of Sodality for not meeting others’ expectations.

For the twenty or so senior boys, there was the Society of Thomas DeTragia, a 15th century French altar boy killed by a crazed Protestant Englishman. Attendance at Tuesday after-school meetings was mandatory. The STD’s, as we called ourselves, got together in a room for the stated purpose of conducting a Chapter of Faults, an old monastic custom that resembles an open confession of one’s misdeeds to your peer group. We were allowed to meet by ourselves because no nun was crazy enough to chaperone us. Meetings would begin with all of us standing around in a circle in semi serious prayer for no more than 30 seconds. Then someone would pull out a pack of cards and some would play while others hung out the huge old Victorian windows and smoked.

I have no idea how many couples “did it” in my Catholic high school. I didn’t, but thank goodness thinking about it couldn’t get you in trouble. There were two unwanted pregnancies that I was aware of and I do remember girls in my class secretly visiting a young woman who quit school to have a baby. But I’ll bet STD’s ... the real ones ... were contracted far less frequently than they are among today’s high school kids.

There’s an aspect of my adolescent stirrings and my Catholic high school education that I often forget. Riding herd on our hormones and immature behavior were the stalwart nuns as they tried to help us make the best decisions for ourselves. These women were true radicals in medieval dress. Independent-minded and very well educated, some from wealthy backgrounds, they devoted their lives to working in hospitals and jungles. But they also lived in communities in eastern factory cities and pulled working class children up from the old neighborhoods to a worthy life through a decent education.

They worked tirelessly and put up with a lot. Strict with the girls, they taught us boys to respect our fellow women students and their academic achievements and accomplishments. School organizations had just as many female officers as male, providing an early taste of an equality of the sexes.

And they had another goal. As Sister Mary Joseph said to me once in an unguarded moment of exasperation when George and I faked a fall from the fire escape, “You are the worst kid I ever taught. How am I supposed to get you into Heaven?”

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