

Why Piano Students Knew More About Sex Than The Other Kids In My Home Town

The center for sex education in Auburn in the mid-to-late 40's was not the home, the church, the school, or the health clinic. Not that these did not contribute to our growing body of knowledge; they certainly did; but the center for the dissemination of actual facts was Suzanna Brown's piano studio on Jasper Way, right up the side street from Junker & Shull, the Ford agency where my Dad always brought his cars. Suzanna certainly didn't plan it that way, and I doubt if she ever knew about it. But her piano students, of which I was fortunate to be a member throughout most of my elementary school days, led the way in describing to the rest of the Auburn kids the wonders of human anatomy around the world. Not very advanced information, granted, but the kind of information kids around 8 or 9 years old are occasionally curious about when they are not doing anything more interesting. Such things as the fact that in Borneo women not only don't wear blouses, they don't even wear underwear! Exciting things like that.

And how did we know?

Because in the waiting room of Suzanna's piano studio were the well-worn copies of at least 10 years of National Geographic, and it was easy to locate the revealing sections in these magazines, as these were the very well-worn issues, often with page corners conveniently folded back for easy re-location before next week's piano lesson.

Suzanna would often say to her waiting students such things as "Myrna! You're here so early! Well, make yourself at home. There are magazines here for you to read while you are waiting." And Myrna did, and Myrna was the one to turn to when one was in need of some information on bizarre sexual customs around the world, whether women in the Congo wore bras or not, and other such vital statistics.

It took me about two years of piano lessons to figure out why the kids that arrived early for their lessons knew so much about dress (or lack of it) and customs in foreign lands. When I finally caught on, the dog-eared issue I turned to had a section missing; about 5 or 6 pages had been torn out, and on the remaining page of the missing article was a photo of an African lady who apparently was completely naked before someone had used a red crayon to provide her with a lovely American-style dress covering her nakedness, complete with matching handbag. I always wondered if it was Myrna, who was two years older, protecting young eyes from such worldly wisdom, and/or saving all the good stuff for the girls, or both. But it didn't seem quite like her. One of these days, when I work up the courage, I'm going to ask her.

I'd better hurry. Myrna is 63 now.

Our freshman year at Placer High School we had to take a class called "Freshman Problems", which was of course a euphemism for sex education. It was taught dutifully by an old maid named Hazel Germantine, and of course the joke that continually made the rounds of freshmen was "How would she know?" which, in retrospect, I think, was a fair question. But we didn't mean it as a fair question, but as a cruel joke. She was 53 at the time, but to 14 year olds she might as well have been 153, and the class was approximately that exciting. It was all theory, all hypothetical, all basically boring, except for the times when it got so embarrassing we just had to laugh out loud.

But fortunately for us, although certainly not for her, Donna Jo Bofillati got pregnant about mid-way through our freshman year, and had to drop out of school. That drove us back to our texts to see how it all worked. It was no longer theory, but Donna Jo and Herbie Unser, and that took on a fleshly meaning, and we learned like we had never learn before. It wasn't so great for them, however, and the forced marriage didn't last past the first year, but for us it was exciting; a chance to bring our school work to life, to resurrect it from dry pages and lectures to a real life, flesh and blood situation acted out by two of our classmates.

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