

Sperm Attack: One Boy's Sex Education

By Tom Perrotta

I SPENT MOST of the past two years writing *The Abstinence Teacher*, a novel about the sex education wars currently being fought in communities across the nation. In retrospect, it occurs to me that I'm an unlikely person to tackle such a sensitive subject, given my own lack of first-hand experience. I grew up in working-class New Jersey in the 1970s, a member of what was possibly the last generation of American kids to receive no sex education whatsoever, even as the sexual revolution raged all around us.

My father – a postal worker who was not an early adherent of the touchy-feely school of parenting – never volunteered to give me 'The Talk', and I didn't bug him about it, respecting the terms of our unspoken lifelong pact to avoid heart-to-heart conversations whenever possible. I guess my dad just figured I would learn about sex the way everyone else did, simply by living long enough and not being a complete idiot. After all, it's not rocket science, right? You don't need an instruction manual to eat or go to the bathroom, so why should sex be any different? Nobody had to show you how to *breathe*, did they?

When I say that I received 'no sex education whatsoever', I'm guilty of a slight exaggeration. If I remember correctly, a couple of sessions of my tenth-grade Health class were devoted to a matter-of-fact presentation about the mechanics of human

reproduction. Interestingly, my instructor was a butch female gym teacher, the first more or less openly gay person I'd ever encountered (she lived with a substitute English teacher famous for her gypsy-like attire and mystical writing assignments). But this was tenth grade! By that point I'd already been shaving for a couple of years (I'm Italian; we start early), and I'm pretty sure that a number of my classmates were no longer virgins. It was a little late to be introducing us to the basics. Whatever sensible information Miss F. had to offer had to make its way through the dense fog of rumour, fantasy, half-truths, malicious misinformation, outrageous boasts, and pornographic imagery that had gathered in my brain between the ages of ten and fifteen – my *real* sex education – and that, to this day, still hasn't been entirely dispelled.

Now, I'm no advocate of ignorance. I don't want my children to grow up the way I did, hobbled by misconceptions and bad information, trapped between shame and silence on the one hand and *Hustler* magazine on the other. At the same time, I don't want to make it sound worse than it was. There's something to be said for figuring things out on your own, cracking the erotic code of the world without help from the adults around you. You had to stay alert, because you never knew when or where you might stumble upon some crucial new piece of the puzzle. ►

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◀ Somehow I made it all the way through the fourth grade before I found out how babies got made, embarrassingly old not to be clued in to such a basic nugget of information. Either the subject hadn't come up before that or, if it had, I must not have been paying attention. Anyway, I was hanging out at the town recreation centre on that fateful summer day, playing Nok Hockey with my friends. A kid named B. did something to annoy me and I retaliated by saying, 'Screw you!' (I was a practising Catholic in those days and avoided profanity whenever possible.) B. wanted to know why I thought the word 'screw' was more acceptable than the F-word, given that *they* meant the exact same thing.

'No, they don't,' I told him, my voice dripping with scorn.

'Do so,' he insisted.

'Do not.'

B. looked at me with interest. 'Do you even know what they mean?'

I assured him that I did, but there must have been doubt in my voice. B. studied me for a moment, gauging the depth of my cluelessness. Suddenly delighted, he leaned in close and sang a dirty little song in my ear, telling me exactly what went where, after which 'you screw it all around'. He repeated this ditty several times, just to make sure I was clear on the details. Three and a half decades later, B.'s song is still seared into my brain. If you buy me a couple of drinks, I might even sing it for you.

I got luckier with menstruation. I was maybe twelve years old at the time, home

from school with a cold. My mother had just gone back to work, so I was alone in the house, nothing to do but watch TV. We didn't have cable in those days – it really wasn't that long ago, I swear – and the afternoons were a wasteland of soap operas on the major networks. Out of desperation, I turned to PBS, which, for some inexplicable reason, was televising *an actual sex education class*.

The teacher was a pretty woman with a no-nonsense demeanour, and the students were kids my age, each one more articulate and well informed than the next. I remember being particularly impressed by an eager beaver named Jimmy, who held forth in surprising detail about what happened when a girl had her period, a phenomenon which, I have to admit, was news to me. I sat in my bed watching in queasy, sore-throated amazement. Could this possibly be true? How had such a crucial and troubling piece of biological reality eluded me for so long? I had heard the phrases 'on the rag' and 'that time of the month', and seen 'feminine hygiene' products in the store. I had even been present when the girls in my class were called out of the room to go see a filmstrip about their changing bodies. But it had all gone right over my head until Jimmy connected the dots.

You might be tempted to conclude that I was unusually naïve or slow on the uptake, but I don't think I was that different from most of my peers. Nor were we, as a group, particularly sheltered or inexperienced, especially compared to kids growing up ►

Sperm Attack *(continued)*

◀ today, many of whom barely venture out into the world without adult supervision until they get their drivers' licences. We had what now seems like an astonishing amount of freedom to roam around and live our lives. A lot of my friends were smoking cigarettes in junior high, and there was a fair amount of experimenting with pot, alcohol and petty crime.

It was just that, when it came to sex, we literally *did not know what we were talking about*. I remember my buddy N. sitting in McDonald's one afternoon in seventh grade, sheepishly confessing that something strange had happened to him the night before. He was standing at the toilet just before bed, taking an innocent piss, and his penis got, you know, *hard*, and he rubbed it a couple of times, and the next thing he knew this white goop starting shooting out. This sounded alarming to me, possibly the sign of a dangerous medical condition, but N. assured me that not only hadn't it hurt, it had actually felt pretty good. Our friend J. nodded sagely at this. 'It's okay,' he told N. 'You just had a Sperm Attack.'

That was all it was, you see, a simple Sperm Attack, nothing that could be controlled, but most likely nothing to worry about, either. It's a good thing, too, because otherwise N. might have been accused of playing with himself, and playing with yourself was not a good idea in those days. Outside the pages of *Portnoy's Complaint*, which none of us had read, it simply wasn't done. Well, maybe it was, occasionally – I wouldn't know – but no one in his right

mind would have admitted it. You certainly weren't allowed to joke about it the way you are now, or treat it as a harmless, more or less universal pastime.

You don't believe me? Then you probably didn't know a kid named D. who went to my high school. D. was one of the guys, well liked if not wildly popular, but certainly no outcast. One Friday night he'd made plans to meet his friends at eight o'clock at their usual gathering place, but his friends got there early and decided to head over to D.'s house. When they got there, they noticed that the light was on in D.'s ground floor bedroom window and went to see if they could get his attention. Somebody gave somebody a boost, and you know what somebody saw?

By Monday, the whole school knew the story. D. had been caught *whacking off*. Right there in his own bedroom, sitting on the floor with his eyes squeezed shut and his pants bunched up around his knees. Several witnesses – the guy's friends – had seen it with their own eyes, so there was no use denying it. For three or four days, the guilty party moved through the halls with his head down, trying to ignore the jeers and laughter and rude gestures that followed him wherever he went. We couldn't help laughing because it was hilarious to think of him beating his meat while his friends peered through his window, one after the other after the other. Unbelievable.

Maybe the scandal would have died down after a while, except that our football team was about to play a big game, and there ►

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◀ was a mandatory pep rally one Friday afternoon. The whole student body had assembled, spirits were high, and D. made the mistake of entering late. A huge howl of derision greeted his appearance. Throughout the bleachers, guys rose from their seats, shouting his name and yanking their fists up and down in front of their crotches, mimicking the unforgivable sin that he'd committed. I still remember the way D.'s face turned red and his mouth dropped open, the way he stood there and accepted his punishment for five or ten seconds before turning and fleeing from the nightmare his life had become. Then we had the pep rally. Go, team.

D. never came back. He had to transfer to another school, find new friends, try to figure out a way to forget his public humiliation. After a while, some of us felt a little bad about what had happened to him, but the joke never really went away. If you wanted an easy laugh, you could just say his name and pretend you were jerking off. The teachers and administrators at our school must have known what happened, but I don't remember anyone talking about it, or suggesting he'd gotten a raw deal, or pointing out that there'd been a certain amount of scapegoating going on, poor D. taking on the guilt of an entire school full of closet masturbators. I guess even the adults in the school accepted the basic narrative – D. had been caught doing something shameful, and could no longer remain among us.

It was only a few years later when

attitudes began to change. I remember hearing Dr Ruth for the first time in the early eighties, this sweet old lady with the funny accent joyously giving everyone permission to masturbate – *Go ahead! Enchoy yourself!* – insisting that it was your body and you could do what you wanted with it, and that there was absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. It seemed so obvious when she said it, so utterly reasonable, and I felt a weight lift from my shoulders, the relief that comes when you realize that the world could take a turn for the better, that things could be easier and more forgiving than they'd been before. It was too late for D., I thought, but maybe not for the rest of us. ■