Life Lessons

A teenage River went looking for love in all the wrong places

September 1, 1998 By River Huston

Knowing how to give a blow job can be a very handy tool for a teenage girl, even more important than her curling iron or Clearasil. Before you issue a fatwa against me, please hear me out.

I was never The One. Or even second or third. I was the girl you slept with and didn't brag about. Short, fat, with braces and frizzy hair, I was desperate for love. Any crumb of affection thrown my way was as good as a command of "open sesame." God, how I longed to be Dottie Artivino, the Italian Beauty Queen, or at least Margo Shaver, the Blond Ice Goddess.

But to me, beauty was a foreign planet. I remember once asking, "Mommy, am I pretty?" After a pause, she said, "Not really, dear, but you'll work on other things." Since she never explained what those things were—and I never intuited—I went on to develop a keen sense of low self-esteem and wound up scrounging for love.

I found it, or a facsimile, in the arms of strangers, usually full-grown men or the occasional desperate teenager, if I swore not to tell. I was 12 when I lost my virginity to Scott, a 22-year-old who had bad teeth and didn't believe I was a virgin. It was downhill from there.

What I craved most was affection. I noticed that after most men came they'd fall asleep. And that's when my needs were met. As they drifted off, I'd snuggle into their arms, inhale their musky smells, feel the warmth of their skin and try to regulate my breathing to be in synch with theirs. I rarely slept. Instead, I fantasized about what it would be like if the man I lay next to loved me—that he thought I was beautiful and couldn't imagine being with anyone else, and we'd have babies and live in a house by the sea. Truth was, he probably didn't even remember my name.

I slept with about 30 men before I was 15. I never had an orgasm, didn't know I owned a vulva, and rarely experienced anything but discomfort during sex. I mentioned this to one paramour, and he said women weren't supposed to enjoy it.

In the '70s, before AIDS existed, the most damning physical consequence of my actions was just pregnancy, but the emotional consequences are the same. You can't throw yourself away without losing who you are. Some people romanticize the era of free love, but for me there was nothing free about it—I paid with humiliation and despondency.

I had no sex ed, unless you count the wonderful tidbits from my mother: “Don’t let them touch your breasts.” Or the advice from my best friend, Anna, who told me to douche with Coca-Cola. I believed her because, after all, she showed me my first penis. It belonged to a dead guy—her father owned a mortuary—but it was still a penis.

By the time I was 17, I didn’t talk much anymore. I just didn’t know what to say. Whenever I came face to face with an erect penis, I felt completely responsible, as in, “Gosh, I’ll fix that.” Intercourse was the only option I knew. No wasn’t a word I was familiar with, and even so, I doubt I would’ve had the chutzpah to utter it.

It’s been a long journey becoming the Sex Goddess I am today. It took much healing and a concerted effort to see myself as a juicy, desirable, erotic woman. As a result, I feel appropriate talking to kids of all ages about sex. Since 1996, however, when I was indicted by the state of New Jersey for lewd and lascivious behavior—for putting a condom on a dildo with my mouth during a high school lecture (see POZ, June/July 1996)—most schools don’t let me in the parking lot.

On occasion, though, some church camp or high school in rural Idaho asks me to speak about living with HIV. Since it’s impossible to do so without talking about transmission, the discussion inevitably turns to sex. After the basics, we get down to business: How do we feel about our boobs and penis size? Why do we have sex in the first place? What can we do that feels good at no risk? Students ask about fantasy, masturbation, anal plugs, vibrators, domination and, the most popular topic, oral sex. The children of America want to know!

How I wish someone like me had come to my school and told me all this, especially the part that sex is supposed to be pleasurable, that you are fabulous just being you, and that if you’re ever faced with a hard-on you can either ignore it or suck it. Most of all, I would have appreciated knowing that I was all right, no matter what size my thighs were.

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