

Madeline Johnson

Whenever I see chocolate or tape, I think about sex.

In 7th grade, my gym teacher who doubled as a health teacher, waltzed into an unfriendly room of fluorescent overhead lights unraveling a piece of Dove chocolate. I can't remember her indistinct Polish last name, but she always wore a navy blue tracksuit and had chunky caramel highlights. She started at the back corner of the room asking the sporty girl with the thick Nike headband to pass the candy around.

Our health class was separated by gender – girls in one room learning about periods and sex, then boys in another room discussing ... unclear.

Each 12-year-old girl with a puzzled look handed the piece of chocolate down awkwardly while the what's her name teacher grinned walking around as if she was playing a prank no one else was in on. Eventually, the candy reached the student sitting in the front corner near the door. The teacher then asked, "Okay, now who wants to eat this?". We all sat in silence for a few seconds darting eyes around, dumbfounded. I thought to myself, *I would*, but didn't want to speak up because no one else seemed to. Before I could say that I would eat this piece of cheap chocolate, she said "I bet no one wants to eat this." Then continued, "When something has been passed around and everyone gets to touch it then there are germs. That's what happens with sex. The more partners you have, the less desirable you are to someone else." I felt my stomach drop to my feet. It felt wrong. I remember thinking, well that's weird. I am also 12.

But at that age, I did not have the vocabulary to say that's a very fucked up way to talk to vulnerable adolescent youth and I was too exhausted to properly argue. I remembered my previous punishments of running laps in front of the whole class after everyone else because I didn't do them fast enough. I wish I ate that chocolate just to ruin her archaic metaphor. And if I could leap back in time and possess my younger body, I'd call her an agent of the patriarchy.

Perhaps worst of all, she was a *pick me*. On the projector instead of notes, she flaunted to us her tacky ring and engagement photos (the fiancée placed her ring on the antler of a dead buck shot in the woods.)

At the end of class, she passed around something new- a blank piece of paper. I flipped my paper over and read "abstinence pledge" next to cartoon angels along with something about keeping our bodies "pure" until marriage. She urged us to sign it and reminded us to also get our mothers' signatures. I don't have any evidence but I am almost certain that the boys' room never had to do anything like that. I signed it anyway because I didn't want to run any more laps.

In 9th grade, we had real health teachers, if you could call them that, or at least ones that didn't double as gym teachers. This one looked like if Gene Wilder had a twin sister. I don't remember her name either. She emerged into the classroom every day speedwalking with a bounce that made her tightly woven curls look like they were blowing in the wind. She spoke in an unnerving way with an upward inflection that made everything sound like a question or like she was speaking to a dog – chronically positive despite any passive-aggressive comments. She once said that

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women were like spaghetti and men were like waffles. And women are ovens, men are microwaves.

One day, Ms. Gene Wilder walked in with the same pep in her step after a week of noticeable absence. "I'm sorry that I have not been in class, and if you're wondering..." she said almost sprinting down the steps of the lecture hall. "My father died, but he smoked cigarettes so that was his fault," continuing on with the lesson of the day unphased.

I sat in the back of the room trying to blend into the wall. Behind me hung one of the many posters, titled Sexual Exposure. The poster included a chart with one person representing a sexual partner, explaining how many people you have basically been intimate with by proxy if your partner has the same number of sexual partners as you. So, if you had 10 sexual partners, that's essentially over 1,000 people that you have had sex with.

"Pair up for this activity please," she chimed and I joined up with one of the quiet kids who drew dragons during class. She placed a piece of tape in front of each student and instructed us to stick our tapes together with our chosen partner.

"Okay now take your tapes apart." We ripped. "Now stick yours onto the person next to you, or anyone who isn't your partner." The sticky side felt less adhesive.

"Now try sticking your tape onto another person." We ripped and despite our efforts, the adhesive side barely worked at all.

"This is what it's like when you have sex with a new person." Not another sex metaphor. "It feels less special every time with someone new is less special." She didn't specify whether or not she was referring 'special' to the experience or the person engaging in it, but it felt more so was the latter.

She didn't say if that logic applies to the many of us who would have sexual encounters that felt more like robberies or the rich boy that snuck his fingers down my pants when I was passed out drunk off cheap vodka in someone's SUV.

In health class, I learned that sex was dirty and worse that *you* are dirty. We didn't talk about what consent really means, or at all. Gay sex was out of the question. I didn't remember learning about anatomy. I found out that you didn't actually pee out of your vagina after watching an episode of *Orange Is the New Black* on Netflix. I understood that our bodies are seen to be shrunken down into small, insignificant objects like chocolate and tape.

But we did watch a video of a woman's live birth with a baby screaming into existence unaware, covered in blood and amniotic fluid. I thought about all the times at church on Sundays they would say that we are born from sin. I wondered if the baby would feel as unclean as I did.