

Sacred Teachings of Cosmopolitan Magazine

What I knew about womanhood I learned from *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, ca 1985. I was twelve and on a summer vacation in New York City with my father. It was an “educational” trip and his objective was to teach me the profane history of some of America’s most important landmarks. While I dragged myself up to the verdigris crown of our nation’s greatest lady, I plotted how I would take care of matters more sacred.

Earlier in the hotel lobby, I had spied a selection of sleek magazines featuring bare-shouldered women with glossy lips. I had never seen anything like it back home in Salt Lake City. One headline asked: “*Are You Sexy? (A Quiz).*” Once the rush of blood subsided after seeing the word *sexy* in print, I ran down a quick list of the moms from church to determine if any of them qualified. They all looked flawless every Sunday—perfectly permed hair; matching shoes and purses; little sparkles of facial powder glinting off their cheeks—and knew they all must have had mothers growing up to turn out looking so nice. Was that what sexy was?

Four summers before this trip to New York City, my mother tore off in her big brown car and didn’t come home. She left me and my four-year-old sister with our father, who started yelling at us instead of her. After three years of feeling like it was my sister and me against the world, my mother claimed her one day and then I was alone. She brought my sister into the light and warmth of California while I was stuck in Utah with my father, whose method of discipline often mirrored the harsh, cold days of winter.

After a long morning exploring the Statue of Liberty, where I incorrectly guessed most of my father’s trivia questions, his bunioned feet declared they needed a rest. We subways it back to the hotel room and he was soon asleep. Once his nose began whistling, I tiptoed to his bed and

inched his wallet off the nightstand. I was forced to steal his money since he never let me buy anything good. This business model had previously funded a stick of powder-blue eyeliner, dangly earrings, and countless bars of Hershey's milk chocolate. The soft gray billfold was always fat, crammed with ones and fives. I eased a five away from its brethren, inhaling the sweaty, bathroom-paper scent that puffed up like the wallet was a mini bellows.

Estimating my father had at least an hour's snooze ahead of him, I slinked backwards to the door. Once clear of our room, I speed-walked to the elevators, adopting the same technique I had observed the mall-walker moms back home do in their flower dresses and white Reeboks. Downstairs, I eyed the feathered-haired lady behind the counter of the glass gift shop. I pinched my toes inside my jelly shoes and told myself this was no different than buying Bop Magazine. I slinked up the counter and grabbed the issue featuring a brunette whose breasts were wrapped up in a big blue bow like a gift. Slapping the five-dollar bill on the marble desk, I scurried away.

Safely back in the room, with my father now wheezing in several pitches, I huddled on the far side of my bed. I caressed the slick cover and thousands of tiny bubbles burst in my stomach. *I had a Cosmopolitan magazine!* The binding made a delicious crinkling sound when I opened the issue. It felt like I was parting the gilded doors of a sacred temple. The pages fell open to a shiny perfume insert that wafted like a censer to anoint me with scents of peachy vanilla and orange spice.

I fanned the pages to search for the quiz but my eyes were drawn to an ad. Tampons. I had to stare at the page for a moment before I understood what I was seeing. *Wait. We don't have to wear big, thick boats between our legs every time we get our period?*

I had been to hell and back for nothing. One recent day after trudging home from school, I had descended the plastic-covered stairs to the basement where I heard a series of fast whooshing noises. When I got to the bottom and turned a corner to the laundry room, I saw my father vigorously scrubbing something at the sink. His back was hunched and he applied so much pressure that his muscles bulged and strained under his wrinkly 62-year-old skin. I only caught a glimpse of the dull pink rag in his hand, but something felt off. A smell like dirty pennies crept toward me. I inched closer and fought a crashing sensation in my stomach when I saw what sat next to him on the ironing board.

The Bag. He had found it.

It was a brown-paper grocery bag that I had tucked in a far corner of my closet. The one I had filled with used menstrual pads during my period because I couldn't just throw them away in the house for him to find. But what was infinitely more horrible than that, I had also hidden my bloodied underwear in there. And still, even more awful, now feeling like I had hopped on a Slip 'N Slide and shot down on boiling water to the deepest recesses of hell, I had doubled up all my undies into pairs so the pads were sandwiched between the two garments like giant diapers. I hated the way maxi pads sagged between my legs, so I wore two pairs of panties each day to make sure the sanitary napkins stayed in place. It was my second period and I had planned to throw the bag away in a neighbor's bin once my menstrual cycle ended.

"You got some blood on these," he said matter-of-factly, his arm pumping. I suddenly felt too top-heavy and struggled to keep my balance. He said something else I didn't hear while I hobbled to the bathroom. In church, I had been warned of all the ways I could end up in hell: stealing (*I always asked for forgiveness after!*), swearing, drinking caffeine. This one was definitely not covered in Sunday School. I threw my body against the bathroom door and stayed there until I no longer heard the sounds of my mortification.

The magazine slipped from my hands as I relived the horror. Easing it back up into my lap, I threw a quick glance toward my father whose chest still rose and fell in sleep. I didn't know what he'd do if he caught me with the Cosmopolitan, so my mind whirred on a good hiding spot while I homed in on the quiz.

“Are you sexy?” the headline screamed, in hot-pink font. I fought to breathe while my heart flailed like a bird in a too-small cage. My gaze fell upon a question that caused shame and nausea to bubble up in my stomach like my father's Alka-Seltzer. “At what age did you begin to masturbate?”

I hadn't meant to!

I still wasn't sure that's what I had done. Several months earlier, I was at my next-door neighbor's house, a home filled with teenage daughters. Their mother had arranged for me to collect the girls' used bras to take home since I didn't have any yet. Once I learned why I was being sent over to her house, my skin tingled with excitement and I rushed over to get my hands on my first bra.

While waiting alone in a wallpapered, pot-pourried room for the undergarments, my vagina started itching. I placed my hand over the crotch of my shorts and used a rubbing motion to stop the itch. Immediately, a tingling sensation zinged through the lower half of my body. I had never experienced such a feeling—it was pleasant but also felt like the pins and needles I sometimes got when a leg or arm would fall asleep. I rubbed faster and harder to keep the sensation going and figure out what was happening. I was really working it when I walked one of the daughters, bra straps spilling over her hands and arms like spaghetti. When she caught sight of me, her body bounced back like she had been hit by an invisible bat. Once she collected herself, she rushed over to drop the donation in my lap and then ran out of the room. I scuttled out of their house through the side door and did my best to avoid her and my vagina after that.

I shifted the heft of the magazine from one leg to the other when my father started making choking noises, signaling the end of his nap. I only had a few more minutes. I tried to gobble up as much of the quiz as I could before he woke. Many were questions about things I didn't understand, ones about lovers and lingerie and libidos.

“What is *that*?” my father asked, his face etched with sleep lines. He loomed over me as I feebly tried to hide the magazine under my bed. It was too late.

“Goddammit!” he yelled. He had no problem taking the Lord's name in vain. “Where did you get that?” I lied and stammered that someone had left it in the hotel room. He snatched the magazine from my hands and glowered at the cover model.

Since he was in a hurry to do more sightseeing, he opted for a few minutes of yelling and cursing. Then he marched me to the gift shop and forced me to tell the lady she shouldn't have let me buy the magazine and that I needed to return it. Once the magazine was locked back up in its glass cage, my father took me to Grand Central Terminal and Times Square. He had always told me that half of a person's education was travel and it was his duty to expose me to the world.

My mind usually welcomed the knowledge he shared, but now my soul ached for the kind of lessons he couldn't teach me. The magazine had opened up a new world that contrasted too brightly against the temporal facts and features of my father's realm. I half-listened to him rattle off important dates and events while I gathered my questions close to my heart and searched for a new teacher.