

American Rococo

Essays On the Edge

By

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An American Talisman

A talisman has appeared in twenty-first century America, one with astounding magical powers. Fitting in the palm like a mini crystal ball, it can bring people to life on its screen. To young kids submerged in the dreamy developmental phase of childhood, this glass amulet must seem utterly bewitching and miraculous, a veritable Wonderland of miniature toy stores and colorful games. With parent's permission, it even sends real toys and snacks to one's home.

When they reach their early teens, kids begin adapting to the adult world of reality. The talisman soon becomes jaded and the magic fades. Still, it remains an engaging, multifaceted toy, capable of shooting videos and photos with incredible ease and realism, playing movies and music from an infinite list and packing more information at the fingertips than the city library.

If someone from the future had attempted to describe this mysterious thing to me back when I was a teenager in the 1970s, I would have found it pure science fiction and more or less incomprehensible, as we all would have. I refer of course to the smartphone, now the most mundane of objects. In the US, however, this talisman has a very peculiar status and function. For American teenagers, and only American teenagers, the smartphone retains its magical and untamable powers—of the black magic variety. It is a very scary, indeed terrifying object.

You're a fifteen-year old female and thus below the legal age of consent, which is sixteen or eighteen depending on which state you live in. Annoying males at school have been sexting you revealing pics of their body. Because you have no interest in them, it's easy to tag them in the dung heap for potential reporting. But one day the very guy you've got a serious crush on sexts you his erect member. He invites you to reciprocate. This is a whole new ball game. What he did was of course outrageous and a major turn-off. At the same time, it makes you drunk with desire and afraid—of yourself. He promises never to show your pic to anyone, but you know very well he might. If anyone does get their hands on it, it's all over. Your boobs will be imprinted on the reti-

nas of thousands of students and you'll be the school slut. And on the retinas of teachers and parents and then your own parents as well. On the other hand, you have his pic too. Doesn't this mutually assured destruction guarantee he won't share your pic? Nah, still too risky.

Whew! Survived that one, the first of an ongoing barrage of sexting temptations. They just keep on coming. Only another three years to go before you reach eighteen.

It's a good thing you've hardened yourself early on to this resistance, as there are even bigger dangers you may not be aware of. Being the school slut will be the least of your problems. For starters, don't forget to quickly delete all those nudie pics the guys are sending you. By possessing them even momentarily, indeed simply by receiving them at all, you are breaking the law. You are committing a felony: possession of child pornography. And certainly don't reciprocate with a nude selfie of your own, as that would make you a co-conspirator in the manufacture and distribution of child pornography. But wait, you say. It's only older guys and creeps who do child porn, right? How can someone underage violate kiddie porn laws? Doesn't being underage protect me?

Well, no. Not since the Adam Walsh Act was signed into law in 2006. It's understandable you might not know about this. Your parents probably don't know about it either, or they would warn you. Most people are too busy getting on with their lives to be pondering the latest changes to juvenile sex laws. While the law is supposedly there to protect you from adult pedophiles, it can be turned against you. Consider what the legal age means. It is the age at which the state considers you old enough to participate in adult activities. It's not just what others may do to you; it's what you may do to yourself. For instance, the primary purpose of the drinking age is not simply to prevent others from corrupting you with alcohol, but to prevent you from corrupting yourself with alcohol. Similarly, the age of sexual consent is not just there to keep others' hands off you but your own hands off yourself. You are not allowed to have sex with anyone in any form, physically or vicariously (web cams, porn) until you're eighteen. It's a total, blanket ban on sex, short of masturbation, and even this is frowned upon or punished in some of the more religious communities.

What about the so-called "Romeo" laws exempting teenage couples close in age? Such laws do exist, but only in twenty-one out of the fifty states. Do you know where your state stands on juvenile sex? You should. If you're not in one of the lucky states and goof up, welcome to the sex offenders club! It's quite a group. That's right, for being caught with your fifteen-year old classmate's cock shot, or for having consensual sex with your boyfriend of the same age, your new circle of acquaintances will include everyone from baby rapists to streakers, public urinators, and prepubescent kids

caught playing doctor (children as young as nine or ten can get on the sex offender registry in some states—see Stillman, “The List,” below).

The law doesn't care how young you are or the circumstances of your offense. It's enough that you violated it. Courtesy of the Adam Walsh Act, you will be classified into one of three categories, Tier 3 (violent sex offenders), Tier 2 (less severe but includes the manufacture and distribution of child pornography), and Tier 1 (a vague catch-all category for remaining offenders). If you're lucky you'll only be a Tier 1 offender, which keeps you on the registry for only fifteen years. Note that these categories apply nationally. No state may alter them to make them less severe, but states are at liberty to make them more severe, as severe as they like. In some states you'll be on the registry for life, with no possibility of appeal. In most states, the registry is public and accessible to anyone with an internet connection. It lists everything about you, your mugshot, home address, phone number, email, license plate, etc. On the other hand—and this is crucial—the registry is vague about your actual offense. It defines you as a “sex offender” without detailing the specifics of your case or even what Tier you're in. So anyone keeping tabs on new offenders in the neighborhood and discovering you on the registry has no reason not to assume you are worst of the worst and an extreme danger to society. There are also vigilantes who make it their life purpose to hunt down sex offenders around the country. They will soon come to harass or attack you, and you will be hounded out of the neighborhood along with your family.

Even if your name is eventually expunged from the public record, you'll still be on it for life anyway, because private companies collect your information and sell it on the web. So while you may be removed from the registry, you can't really be removed from it. Take a moment to consider the consequences. Almost every state requires your school and employer to be notified of your sex offender status, regardless of when you were convicted. Your school will still allow you to stay, but everyone and their parents will know, and they will be very unhappy to have a sex offender on premises. It won't help to move to a new school, as they will soon find out all about you as well. You will be pressured to leave school altogether.

When you are old enough to have a job, good luck trying to find one. It's pretty difficult for a sex offender to find a job, any job, ever. That means it's going to be very hard for you to pay all the fees you've incurred as a result of your conviction. There may be initial court-ordered fines and administrative expenses running in the thousands of dollars. By law you will be required to undergo a variety of regular tests, such as monthly polygraphs, administered by private probation companies. They are doing great business these days, as they can pretty much set their own fees, which can cost you

hundreds of dollars a month. If you're a Tier 2 offender, you may be required to wear a GPS ankle bracelet for years or the rest of your life, and you'll be billed several hundred dollars a month for its operating and replacement costs (planned obsolescence is built into them too). You'll also need your own electricity supply to keep it charged around the clock; they are alerted as soon as your signal stops and this will promptly send you to jail. How ironic that the same GPS technology used to track sex offenders' whereabouts is also celebrated for its various applications in cellphones—enabling you to track your friends, for instance. This makes the smartphone and smartwatch a glorified ankle bracelet.

You take for granted a ready supply of electricity at home, but you may not be allowed to live at home. That's due to residency restrictions for sex offenders, which have also gotten stricter in recent years. They solve the problem of what to do with pedophiles in the neighborhood: kick them out. Most states now have laws preventing offenders from residing within 1,000 feet of any place where children congregate—schools, daycare centers, playgrounds, bus stops, parks, churches, swimming pools, and so on. As there are few places not covered by these zones, the restrictions can effectively lock you out of your entire town or city. If any legal residential pockets still remain, lawmakers simply extend the distance to 2,000 or 2,500 feet (half a mile) or add new venues to the list, such as stores and shopping malls. Or they create parklets (“pocket parks”) to fill in all possible gaps.

Once exiled, where can you live? Under a highway overpass perhaps, like the notorious Julia Tuttle Causeway “sex offender colony” in Florida, the only spot Miami-Dade County permitted them to reside until it was shut down in 2010 after much media embarrassment (and the subject of a novel by Russell Banks). The offenders were relocated to trailer parks in rural areas. By the way, if later you want to get married and have children, they will either have to live with you in your trailer or away from you, though in more lenient cases you'll be allowed daytime visiting rights to your family's home.

If you remain unconvinced this could ever happen to you, it's understandable. As a teen you are naturally rebellious and you should be, as it's a healthy sign of independence. You also tend to disregard dangers that are not immediately apparent and require a certain maturity and foresight to anticipate. That's the lovely thing about childhood, being wrapped up in your innocent bubble and allowed to put off adult worries and responsibilities until later. When I was a teenager, for instance, it would never have occurred to us we couldn't have sex with our peers.

Children become sexualized as part of their natural biological development. The idea itself is put in their heads earlier or later in various cultures. In North America, beauty industry values start bur-

rowing their way into the consciousness of prepubescent girls quite early. The process is well underway by twelve or thirteen, sanctioned by peer pressure and parental approval: lip gloss, mascara, makeup. Years before boys take an interest in girls, the latter undergo extensive indoctrination and training to look attractive, and by senior high are expertly decked out and ready to act, already pros at the seduction game, when boys start turning their attention to them. Both boys and girls by this point have acquired quite a bit of knowledge of sex and gab about it with friends and classmates. Today you see fellow teenagers all around you having sex, girls boasting about their boyfriends, and everyone and his brother sexting each other their homemade porn.

Apart from advances in technology, things were no different in the past. I can't speak for earlier eras, such as the proverbial prudish 1950s, but I can attest that sexually open discourse has been a feature of Western society since at least the 1970s when I was growing up. I suspect it always has been if not for the bias of the present. This bias holds that we are ever evolving toward a freer zeitgeist and leaving the repressive past of our parents' generation behind. How misleading and untrue this is. I recall one day in my last year of junior high while living in Canada, age fifteen. While waiting for the teacher to arrive for chemistry class, we listened rapt as a classmate, Linda, related in graphic detail all the sexual positions she had tried with her senior high boyfriend. Two years later in Germany, my senior high classmates invited me to go skinny-dipping with them on a Sunday picnic. Yes, both sexes. And also in Germany then was the teen bar where a thirteen-year old girl came on to me (there was no strict drinking age). We danced a bit, and that was all. I found it odd to be with someone so young and preferred girls older than me. Yet the sexual frankness of German teens has always been a constant (the legal age of sexual consent in Germany today is fourteen).

Draconian sex laws in the internet age are a relatively recent phenomenon. That's why you may not have heard about them. They are unprecedented and don't exist outside the United States. Some countries do have sex offender registries but they are confidential and known only to local law enforcement. No other country has residency restrictions and drives offenders into exile, and no other country convicts juvenile sex offenders as adults or bars them from gainful employment. If I have difficulty wrapping my head around these new developments, I can understand you do too, in your youthful credulity and ignorance. They bear no relationship to any reasonable form of justice but are immoral and evil in their very conception. It has something to do with the contemporary capitalist trend of extending profitable markets into childhood, all accelerated and enabled by computer technology and Internet commerce: first fast food, then the sexualization of children through teen mags, cosmetics and fashionable teen wear, and now the private incarceration industry, which is increas-

ingly accommodating juveniles. The result? A society that is itself perverted and schizophrenic, dangling sexual temptations to ever-younger people and then punishing them brutally.

Of course, the courts can't prosecute all teenagers. They don't have the resources to, not to mention the country can't afford to gut the future of most of its youth. There would be a widespread public backlash if too many teens were convicted of sex crimes. Yet the justice system only needs to pick out a few delinquents to make an example of. Your chances of being one of the examples is on the whole fairly low, but not by any means negligible. The consequences are disastrous, and mom and dad won't be able to help you. They might inadvertently be responsible for getting you in trouble in the first place, if for instance, in order to ferret out all parties involved, they were to inform the school about the sexual content put into your cellphone by another student.

So kids, take my advice and ditch this toxic talisman which can turn your life upside down with one false step. Reject the smartphone. Get one of those old Nokia phones from a decade ago that had no camera or photo apps. Disable the camera on your laptop and iPad as well. And most importantly, don't date or have sex. It's simply too dangerous these days in America. Do as Asian teenagers and study your ass off to get into a good college. Before you know it you'll be safely delivered to your eighteenth birthday and ensconced in a nice university where you can fuck your brains out to your heart's content (though vigilantly check the ID of any fellow freshmen you've got the hots for who may still be seventeen!). I can tell you, computer technology is overrated. You don't need it. When I was growing up, we had our own form of social networking technology that worked just fine, an address book we pulled out of our back pocket. We also had our own talisman that was far more fascinating, sophisticated and superior to any smartphone today or of the future, in the form of a tiny tab of paper known as LSD.

Further reading:

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