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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Girl Power New lessons still fit an age-old story

Louise Rafkin

What do you think of 35-year-old men?" he asked, reaching from his side of the little red VW to steady my hand on the steering wheel of my father's car. His hand lingered.

He was the driver's ed teacher, also my history teacher, and the coach of the high school football team. I was driving -- sort of -- an empty road in the hills behind my small California beach town. My dad insisted I learn to drive a standard, though I had been taught to drive an automatic, and this guy -- my boyfriend's coach, my teacher, a fan of us cheerleaders -- offered the extra lesson. For free!

My mind was only half on what this man asked; my hands sweaty only partially because of his odd, open-ended question. I had spotted something a few yards ahead. Was it a stick in the road? I tried the brakes, then bumbled a downshift. The car lurched and sputtered. I looked up just before flattening a brown snake, which now ribboned the tarmac.

In retrospect, it's funny, the Freudian symbolism too obvious, and for years I didn't tell anyone -- not even my boyfriend. I passed my driving test -- in the VW -- and shrugged the guy off. I discovered later -- of course -- that I wasn't the only girl he tried to make, nor did all those he approached thwart his advances.

Among girls, this is a story as common as eggs, a story that, over time, lines up alongside countless others: the father of a friend who suggests an intimate good-night kiss; the college date who suddenly gets aggressive and insists on "doing it right" when you have no intention of doing anything at all; the man who stops his car to ask directions and then, when you lean down to look at his map, reveals his penchant for driving pant-less. I write "you" but I mean I, unless you are female, in which case you know this you is ... all of us.

I'm lucky: I fumbled through the multiple minefields of inappropriate advances to emerge more or less unscathed. Still, that I even remember these moments 30 years after the incidents bears mentioning. I'd bet anything that for the men in these situations, those of them who even knew my name then, don't now. For my ex-teacher, I'm sure I'm one in a blur of hazy faces.

I now teach self-defense to girls, women and even boys, and I have for almost 20 years. It's a reactive name, self-defense, sounding both scary and boring. I wish some branding genius would come up with something upbeat and fabulous to call these skills. Self-defense includes fighting skills, sure, but mostly we model how to set boundaries and to leave when someone is inappropriate or too close and -- often hardest of all -- to speak up if something makes you feel uncomfortable. We tread lightly, even though I suspect most kids know

we're doing something important. They watch TV, after all; they hear the news when a kid disappears on the way to school. Sometimes I'll glimpse something like anxiety, or shame. Then I know we've come a little late. Self-confidence and the ability to know what feels right is the heart of self-defense, and teaching those things is often beyond any one person's reach. Still, I'm no longer surprised when I meet parents who say they don't want their kids to be scared by such training, I'm just saddened.

I taught a group of young women -- teens -- the other day in Marin. Initially their attitude told me they didn't think they needed what we had to offer. They informed us that nothing ever happened in Marin. Self-defense, they said, was "embarrassing." But then, as class continued, and I used my silly stories as examples, I was met with twitters of knowing laughter. The stories started to slip out: the "old guy" (30ish) at the In-N-Out Burger who always sits next to them, the boys who freaked them out when, driving them home from a beach, they turned off onto a deserted road. Like me, back when, these girls don't know what to do in these situations. The most secure of them were able to say something, though not much. Most did what I did, flipping and flopping and finally slithering away like loosely snagged fish.

Self-defense for kids and teens is easier now to talk about than it once was, what with the Catholic Church having been wrung out. But I can't figure out why hands-on self-defense isn't part of standard school curriculum, starting with age-appropriate skills in elementary grades and continuing through high school. It should simply be part of education. Last year incidents of sexual harassment at San Francisco schools rose dramatically: no rapes, this paper reported, but "forced oral sex" at "some schools." The school board responded by creating a Safe School Task Force that will educate kids and parents about how sexual harassment and violence is not only unacceptable, but also illegal and must be reported. All that is great, but looking back at my own experiences -- which were also both illegal and unacceptable -- what I needed was not a stricter policy, or even enforced dress codes against suggestive clothing (a suggestion of the task force), I needed to know how to take care of myself.

It took years to realize that what happened in my dad's car on that back road could have gotten that teacher fired. Now he's retired -- I've checked -- but each time I talk to a group of teens, I mention him. The girls listen closely and gasp at the part about the snake.

Louise Rafkin is a fourth-degree black belt in Poekoelan Tjimindie Tulen. She teaches martial arts and self-defense at her school, Studio Naga in Emeryville, and to corporate and community groups.