

You Say “Tey-may-doe” and I Say “Tom-aaaahh-toe”

I grew up in a musical family. My mother taught syncopation; my father played the harmonica like James Cotton. Our house was filled with music bars—from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony to honkytonk. When they weren’t practicing, jamming, or having sing-songs with their friends, my parents danced to music on the radio. My dad would dip my mom in a seductive tango over the bubbling dinner gravy while dogs barked, my white rat stood on her hind legs, and I twirled in my new ballet shoes. Dinnertime was a fiesta!

The only reason my mom schlepped me to ballet was because she’d discovered in 1.3 minutes that her last child had not a single shred of musical talent. So, on family music nights, while my older sister played the accordion, my mom nimbly tinkled the ivories, and my dad manipulated his harmonica, I was found clunking a spoon on a milk bottle.

I swore when I came to America, only the sky was my limit. Safely 8,000 miles away from my mom’s rebuke, I announced I wanted a saxophone for my 33rd birthday, and I would play “Blue Moon” in six months.

My husband and cheerleaders said, “Wonderful idea,” though he was familiar with my familial history as the musical black sheep.

On the morning of my birthday, at the foot of our bed, lay a shiny, complicated brass instrument. I was thrilled—though I had never seen so much complexity before 7 a.m.

Being the thoughtful man he is, there was also a coupon book holding six months’ worth of saxophone lessons. I was beside myself with anticipation.

But alas, the first time my poor sax teacher guided my lips to the reed, he realized that I was his professional penance.

First, I had to learn to read music since I was never taught what I’d clearly never need to know! (According to my mom.) And second and more difficult, the instructor had to teach me to make a noise on the brass thing. Any noise at all!

When at last the squeak came, it almost ruptured eardrums, and we both nearly fell off our stools. But tenacity was my middle name.

I worked in airline reservations, where we arrived for our shift and filled any unoccupied desk on the res floor. With a 24-hour schedule, we got to know a ton of co-workers. Every Wednesday at four, I’d switch off my headset, and hands in the air I’d declare, “I’m off to my sax lesson.”

Colleagues I didn’t know started coming up to me. “How are your lessons going?” they asked, their interest in my cultural improvement astounding.

“Oh, I’m so excited. I can’t wait to learn to master this sax thing,” I’d reply enthusiastically in those first three weeks.

Their animated questions went on long enough to elicit the truth: “Well, I’m really not very good.” And soon I had to ‘fess up: “My teacher is giving up on me, I’m useless.” I remained surprised by their interest, and dare I say, I was quite chuffed they were so invested in my success.

My husband, a fine shower singer who’d never read music or learned an instrument, picked up my sax in that first week, and was able to squeeze out a note on the unfaithful brass bitch.

I’d come home from work, and he’d look sheepish.

I’d find, not a lithe maiden in our bed, but a wet reed in my saxophone. He was cheating on me by getting the bitch to talk his language!

I faced the hard truth. My mother was right. “Blue Moon” would have to wait for my reincarnation. But my fellow could do what I couldn’t, so for his birthday two months later, I traded in my tenor sax for a big, bad-boy alto.

I have never seen such relief on a face as that of my sax teacher, when I asked him to credit the balance of my lessons to my husband.

By now the whole res center seemed to check in with me on Wednesdays: “Tell me again what you’re learning,” they’d insist sweetly. “Sax, and man, I just can’t master it.” My face undoubtedly showed my grave disappointment. And I often got a surprised, “They don’t teach that in South Africa?”

“Practice makes perfect,” they’d chirp. Or, “Just go with your instinct,” they’d encourage—always with a naughty smile. So kind. So supportive.

My honey, with his own brass beauty, learned music in two weeks, and had his first tune down in three. I was happy for him, and fortunately I was over my dismal lack of success. At work, when asked, I declared: “I was hopeless. My husband took over my sax lessons,” and they giggled.

One day at lunch, when a bunch of them were sitting together they called me over and asked, “Word is you were useless, so you just gave up?”

“Didn’t anyone step in to help you?”

“I heard your husband needs lessons now...”

I was embarrassed. One doesn’t like one’s nose rubbed into one’s failures. But never impolite, I said, “I simply don’t have the skills,” and hung my head in shame.

Laughter erupted. Not titters. No, sireeee. It was long past that. These were gut guffaws, the kind of hilarity that's pent up for ages, and then finally spews like a violent volcano.

"Why?" I asked, hurt to the quick. "Why do you care about my lessons? About my failure?"

It started again—that laughter that removes the spine—rendering a group of eels flopping this way and that as they roared. They beat hands on the table and slapped thighs before mirth knocked them back in their chairs.

When one of them finally came up for air, trying his best not to laugh, he asked, "Okay. Once and for all, what kind of lessons did you go for?"

"Sax," I said, straight faced and annoyed.

"What?" he asked, hand behind his ear.

"SAX" I shouted, furious. The floppy eel-people were back...but I'd had enough. Thoroughly pissed, I turned to leave.

One caught my arm... "Wait! We have to know!"

I tried, but couldn't pull away. He continued: "Please explain why you feel you have to pay for sex lessons. We could have scrounged up a few guys who would educate you for free."

I turned purple and moved four states east. Literally. We left Kansas City for Virginia days after that because my husband's company needed him in DC. I resigned by mail and thanked God I never had to be asked about my sax life again!

You see, my beloved American friends, my South African vowel sounds are very, *very* different from yours! In fact, a bank teller once told me I didn't have an accent, but rather, a speech impediment!

So, next time you hear an English, Australian, New Zealand or South African soul say something funky, do delve a little deeper before you judge. And always remember: you say "teh-may-doe" and I say "tom-aaaahhh-toe."