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You Probably Think This is Gross (and I Do Too)

I was nine when my mom decided I was old enough to learn about being an adult, by which I mean we had THE TALK. It had been a lazy summer day, and I was relaxed enough to not be suspicious when Mom said, “Let’s go for a walk.” It seemed innocent enough; a half hour of alone time with my mother was hard to come by with three siblings, so I jumped at the opportunity. By the time we’d gotten away from the house, I realized something was unusual. Mom was being curiously quiet, and when she finally broke the silence it was with the words, “Let’s talk about periods and sex.”

My brain was stuck between fight and flight. Should I run back to the house to escape the awkwardness, or should I accept my fate? Mom seemed to realize that she was losing the moment, because she plowed industriously onward, ignoring my disgust. “Motherhood is a wonderful thing, and that’s why you have a period.” At the word “motherhood,” my innocent mind went into hyper drive and filled the rest of the conversation with static. I was horrified at the idea that I, a nine-year-old tomboy with very little interest in boys, might have a screaming baby because of a biological function that I did not want. Up until this point, I’d come to the very logical conclusion that French kissing made babies, and it did not please me to learn that the actual process was much messier.

While I was in freak-out mode, Mom described how to use a tampon, a concept that terrified me for years, what to expect every month, and most importantly, the dangers of men. She made it sound as if every man on the street would be looking to prey on my young body. This led to months of terror, believing that men could somehow smell that I was able to get pregnant or see the pad in my pants and get an instant erection.

Somehow in my daze, Mom and I made it back to the house in an awkward half-hug position. Mom was trying to be reassuring, but I hadn’t recovered from my shock. As soon as I stepped into the house, Dad swooped down upon me and said, “Let’s go for a drive.” Apparently my parents had planned a coordinated attack to destroy my innocence in one awful day. I

climbed into the cab of the truck, my face devoid of expression.

Dad's talk went hand in hand with Mom's. He spoke largely of the sneaky nature of men. "I was a teenage boy once. I know how it is. You be careful with men, they only want to get in your pants." The thought of my father as a sexual deviant threw me deeper into shock. The rest of the drive passed in silence, and when we arrived at home I went to my room to sleep off the awkwardness.

As a Catholic private school kid, I was able to put the incident behind me quickly. Sex ed was limited in my education. I once had a teacher who offered to answer all our sex questions anonymously. She was fired at the end of the year, naturally, since she hadn't maintained the "abstinence only" curriculum. From that point on, my sex education consisted of learning the basic anatomy of males and females from a teacher who was more embarrassed than us sixth graders. When we got to talking about pregnancy, the diagram in our book showed something that looked suspiciously like a piece of poop holding the baby in the uterus. My teacher got flustered when we asked questions and hurried us on to the next page. To this day, I still suspect that that particular diagram may have been inaccurate.

When I entered public high school, sex ed became slightly more thorough and ten times more comical. We learned how to use condoms by struggling with bananas, we gagged over pictures of STD's, and the lunchroom was a far more educational place for learning about sex itself than the classroom. Having come from a sheltered home, these noon-hour question sessions were both uncomfortable and enlightening. I learned all sorts of vocabulary words that I'd never wanted to know, like teabag, 69, and Dirty Sanchez. What's more, there were seemingly a hundred different ways to say "penis" and "vagina." As I grew older, from freshman to senior, I became less of an uncomfortable student and more of a reluctant teacher. "What's a boner?" my Mormon friend, even more sheltered than me, once asked. Once the shouts of disbelief had quieted and her face had lost its redness, my friends and I stumbled through an explanation.

"It's when a man has an erection," I muttered.

"What?" my naïve friend asked.

"An erection, Jess!"

Laughter rose from the tables around us. It was not the first of the

lunchroom lessons I had to give. Despite the fact that I was becoming accustomed to sex talk and dirty jokes, I still actively avoided the subject at home. The closest my mother and I came to discussing sex again was when she raised the subject about why I wasn't dating anyone. And so I spent the last of my time in secondary education with no more parental sex talks.

With this slow transition into maturity and growing tolerance to all things sex-related came other changes. I graduated from high school and moved on to college, 150 miles away from my parents and friends. Still, I struggled through my homesickness by calling my mother multiple times a day. "Audrey, you just have to go out and meet people. Everything will be okay."

A few months into my first semester, circumstances changed as I entered my first real relationship. Mom was nearly as excited as I was, since I'd never dated anyone before. I suspect she was relieved that I wasn't too weird to have a normal relationship. Despite the happiness I felt upon leaving the universe of single people, it came with some unwanted consequences, as I would soon discover.

I went home for the holidays like most students do, and in a moment of generosity offered to help Mom wash the dishes. We chatted about college, how her job was, and the conversation began to feel like two adults speaking. I relaxed, surprised to find that talking about life with my mom felt like talking to a friend my age. Then I heard Mom say, "...and Rebecca was an accident. Well, more of a surprise really. After that your dad got snipped."

"MOM!" All the awkwardness and shock from my nine-year-old self came rushing back into my head.

"What? It's true! I know the Church doesn't believe in contraception, but we weren't about to be raising a family of ten kids."

The implications that my parents continually had sex were too much. I regressed back to childhood. "LA LA LA I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

Mom somehow sensed that she should change the subject, and we were able to resume dishwashing, but if I thought the storm had passed, I was dead wrong.

A few days later we were folding laundry, when Mom tried to start a casual conversation. I say tried because when the words "sex", "urges", and "virginity" popped up in the first sentence, I ended up responding in a robot

voice.

“All the teachers at school couldn’t believe that Dad and I waited until we were married to have sex. Don’t get me wrong, it was hard to wait sometimes. We had urges.” A pregnant pause. “Do you and Joel have sex?”

I gave the automatic “no” and resumed my folding in silence.

“Because you know you should wait. There’s difficulty that comes with waiting, I know.”

“Mom, I know. We aren’t having sex.”

“Okay, that’s good.”

I waited, expecting more uncomfortable words. The minutes passed in silence, and mentally I breathed a sigh of relief. No more sex talks with Mom.

“You know, after we got married there were concerns that your dad might not fit right.”

WHAM! It was as though she waited for me to relax and then hit me with all her firepower. Alarm bells went off in my head and my body lapsed into panic mode, folding laundry with renewed energy, doing anything to escape as fast as possible. My mother just giggled at my discomfort.

“It’s so great that your parents are so in love,” say all my friends, but they have no idea just what that statement means. I prefer to imagine that my parents kiss chastely every night and sleep fully clothed. Maybe it comes from being raised with a healthy (unhealthy?) caution regarding sex, but somehow the nine-year-old in me cannot be reconciled with the idea of my Catholic forty-something parents having recreational sex.