

THE TALK

*Billy and Susie sitting in a tree,
K-I-S-S-I-N-G.
First come love, then comes marriage,
Then comes Billy in the baby carriage.*

Traditional jump rope rhyme

One evening, during the winter of my fifth grade year, Mother, Daddy, and I sat in front of the black and white Motorola watching Doris Day. I was perched on the arm of our sofa with perfect balance while Mother and Daddy sat holding hands on the plaid cushions.

And then—I fell off...into still, deep waters.

“What does ‘Modess’ (only I pronounced it ‘modest’) mean?”

“Oh,” my mother offered, without taking her eyes off Doris, “that’s when someone doesn’t want you to know of his achievements.” (Notice that she carefully avoided other meanings, like when you don’t want anyone to see you *naked*.)

“No, I don’t mean *that* kind of modest. I mean the kind you see on the dispenser in the restroom at Dolores,” (our Sunday night, “I don’t want to cook” restaurant).

Both sets of eyes, wide with surprise and panic, abruptly left Doris’ and locked on mine.

Long seconds tiptoed past.

Mother was first to recover, “Oh, *that* kind of modest. Only it’s pronounced ‘mo-*dess*’, with the stress on the second syllable.”

“Yeah, well, what is it?”

If Daddy hadn’t been caught totally off-guard, he wouldn’t have volunteered for this conversation. He would have excused himself to change a light bulb or mow the lawn or one of a million other tasks usually left to Booker, the yardman, or Oliver, the handyman, whom he dragged home from work from time to time when a chore required technical skills—or any skill.

But he was caught. I heard him suck air all the way to the bottom of his lungs and hold it there, pathetic eyes pleading with my mother to go first. After all, this was *her* part of the deal. He was in charge of "The Talk" with the boys (most of whom claim it never happened), and Mother was supposed to handle me.

Knowing what I do now as a mother of four, I realize that my parents could have stopped at milepost one with their explanation. For some reason, they decided to press on all the way to the cairn atop Mt. Whitney. Maybe there was no decision involved. Maybe they just put one foot in front of the other, and with "never say die" Street family perseverance, they marched ahead, determined to plant their conquering flag at the top of the highest peak, not one step short. Or, maybe, having already answered the "Modess" questions of my older brothers, they just threw all caution to the wind. Why the heck not? Or, maybe, they understood that this was the moment to clear the trail so they could address the *real* issues on the horizon: "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Johnny in the baby carriage."

In any case, forward we went; I with an empty backpack, they with a loaded one that they unloaded mile by mile into my own.

First, I heard the simple biology of menstruation, and thus the need for "Modess" or "Kotex" or when you had more experience, "Tampax," (but that was only for advanced, usually married, women. I suspect that my mother was concerned that Tampax might make it impossible to determine virginity on the wedding night.)

At this point, Daddy jumped in and told me why all of us Street grandchildren had inherited Tampax stock. (I knew it sounded vaguely familiar, beyond the blue box tucked in my mother's dressing table drawer.)

"Granddaddy Street thought he was 'buying the future' with *Kodex* stock, a washing machine manufacturer when washing machines were a rather new commodity in American homes. He got the names confused, but it turned out to be a bonanza!"

(After all, in 1967, Tampax was the only company making tampons. The stock split several times, yet kept on rising. Several of my brothers cashed in at the height of Tampax's rocket rise. But in typical Street, "hands-off, surely this will go on forever" fashion, I waited to sell my portion until 1981 when the one-product company's stock

had plummeted to a tenth of its peak value. The proceeds were only enough for my husband and me to go to England and buy dress shirts at Marks & Spencer for his first real job.)

Interesting perhaps, but I was not easily distracted by Daddy's stock report...and my backpack still rested featherlike on my shoulders.

"So why do women have to menstruate?" I asked.

Mother picked up the storyline, which inevitably involved babies, nourishing babies, growing babies, and making babies. Looking up, we were already three quarters the way up the mountain! But now for the steep part; there was no turning back.

Mother continued, "So the sperm from the father joins the mother's egg and that's called conception, the beginning of a new life!"

You could see the excitement in her eyes and perhaps a touch of pride for having climbed all the way to this viewpoint calmly, maturely, and using the "real" terms—pretty impressive for a mother and dad in the late sixties. (The following year, my dad was the *only* father out of all three sixth-grade classes to come to the sex-talk night sponsored by the PTA.) By the smug looks on their faces, I'm pretty sure they thought it was time to plant the flag.

But then came the moment none of us had been waiting for and for which I, least of all, was prepared.

"So how does the father's sperm get to the mother's egg?" I asked.

(I can imagine my father saying "D*mn!" under his breath at this point, except he never said "D*mn!"... Okay, maybe once.)

My mother forged ahead with steely determination.

"Well, the father places his penis inside the mother's vagina and the sperm comes out and fertilizes the..."

"What?" I interrupted. "What the heck! You've got to be kidding me. Really? That's just soooooo gross!"

Silence. They both looked a little taken back, a little sheepish, a little guilty; that perhaps they had let the cat out of the bag a bit too soon. After all, I was only eleven.

Doris Day might as well have died. Nobody knew she was still flirting in the background. They waited, fidgeting—Dad with his Naval Academy ring, Mother with the lipstick she kept in her pocket for frequent touch-ups.

“So,” I began, avoiding their eyes, “How does it,” (very long pause) “feel?”

This was too much for my mother. She floundered. But Daddy stepped up in “mountain man” fashion, albeit a tad timidly. He wrinkled his nose, tilted his head to the side and down so that he had to strain to look at me from under his bushy eyebrows, and then, with an abbreviated chuckle, he sucked in his breath, “Well,” (long pause) “kinda nice.”

Two sets of eyes fell to the shag-rug tundra. Mother studied the ground carefully while I squirmed under the load of my pack.

Was this really the top?

I leaned over to pick up the forgotten flag. I examined it dubiously.

And then with a shrug and a “Why the heck not?” tossed to the wind, I planted it firmly beneath the firmament.

Kinda nice.