

The Thing About Your Daughter's Virginity...

I was 14 when I met my high school sweetheart. He was 17. We lived in East Oakland. My friend told his friend she had a friend and our rendezvous was arranged, like a heist.

We all met up after dark when our mothers thought we were spending the night at each other's houses, the go-to cover-up of the late 90's. He was tall and dark and smelled like Ralph Lauren and Winterfresh. Both of us were a bit awkward, clumsy in our youngness—the way you are when you're trying so hard to be grown up.

He wasn't like the other boys. He openly tried to impress me without the guise of ambiguity—he confessed upfront to being a nerd and confessed upfront to being humbled by my beauty. At some point that night he held my hand and I told him he could call me. We might have kissed, who knows. Kissing wasn't the point. The butterflies and feelings were the point, and leaving childhood behind was everything.

A year later we had sex up against the side of my grandmother's house.

I didn't even know yet that my body could do those things. The furthest thought from my mind was what my parents would think. Or what God would think. Or that my boyfriend had just turned 18 and legally what we did could be considered rape. I was thinking about being banged against the dust-blue siding, disguised by the shadows that dipped between the streetlights.

When you're a teenager your body is basically all you have.

You don't own anything, you still need permission walk out of your own front door, but in the quiet of your bedroom or some dark corner...your body is yours to touch, share, or desecrate.

And like death—you are alone in your virginity.

You are alone in keeping it, you are alone in giving it away. I have never regretted the end of my virginity taking place when I was not quite sixteen. I have never regretted who I gave it to. I didn't feel regret, but I did feel other things.

Growing up I kept hearing how virginity was this sacred thing that should be kept and guarded. It was constantly implied that my virginity belonged to the world—not to me. I owed it to God, my family, my community. I was to be judged by others based on how I touched my own body, how I felt about being touched by others and by when I chose to explore the blurred lines of adolescence. I was to look closely at the girls around me who had babies and had—at one time or another—contracted diseases and remember that those were the consequences when girls had sex. I was to take in after-school specials and Lifetime movies and Sex Ed videos and commit to memory the scenes in which some confused girl had sex with some brash, overstated boy only to be shunned and embarrassed afterwards.

No one ever told me that my body belonged to me and that I could do with it what I pleased.

And so within the act of feeling liberated and stirred after my first few sexual encounters, I also felt dirty, disrespectful, deceitful and disappointing. No one tells young girls to do what they want with their bodies because they know that at some point young girls are going to want to have sex. And God forbid a girl should open her legs and explore her sexuality.

Instead, women are taught their bodies exist because men exist. That their sexuality should be controlled by what men think and feel. Their fathers or male protectors will guard it, their political officials will regulate it and the boys they choose to lay with will determine its importance.

No one tells their daughters that sex is sex and love is love and each can be enjoyed without requiring the other. No one tells their daughter that when a boy wants to have sex with her, she should consider one thing and one thing only—if she wants to have sex with him.

Instead we teach our daughters that despite having wet panties and perked nipples and all the necessary emotions and "equipment" needed to engage sexually, that they should hold off—not because perhaps she doesn't have the time to deal with the physical realities of sexual activity (i.e. remembering to take a pill, having your naughty-bits rubbed raw on occasion, having to maintain a new standard of personal hygiene, keeping up with your menstrual cycles and knowing what questions to ask a potential sex partner) but because the boy won't respect her, or Jesus won't like it or she may end up pregnant or itchy or dead or sad.

When we decide to besmirch adolescent sexuality we are actually closing the possibility to have a real conversation about sex at a time when that support is most needed.

We are neglecting to empower a girl at the brink of womanhood. We are creating shadowy sensationalism around something that really doesn't need the added pressure. Girls who think their bodies don't belong to them are more likely to believe that women are a lesser species. They are more likely to make choices based on what they are being told and *not* how they feel.

After all:

What's the difference between you telling her she shouldn't have sex and some boy telling her that she should? Either way she is ignoring her own mind, her own desires and her own convictions.

"Your skirt is too short, you'll attract the wrong attention."

"Don't dance like that, boys will get the wrong idea."

"Respectable girls keep their legs closed."

These are the narratives we use to keep women in line only to turn around and proclaim that they can change the world, that they are powerful, that they should be proud of everything that makes them up. But teaching a woman to be empowered begins with teaching her the power of her own body. Teaching her that sex should be about her choices, her desires, her curiosity, her mind and her requirements.

We should be teaching our girls that sex does not define us—be it the abstinence from it, or the indulgence in it.

If I could go back to the days that followed after I lost my virginity and change one thing. I would want to have the courage (and the open invitation) to tell my mother that I had experienced sex for the first time—instead of her finding out from a diary page I had left carelessly exposed. I would want to talk about all the new feelings I had. Maybe she could have helped me not get so caught up in this new role of "sexual being". I would have wanted her to congratulate me, prepare me, and hug me.

To settle my nerves a bit and sooth away all the secrecy and perhaps nudge my shoulder and say, "If you were safe and you felt ready, then I'm proud of your choice."

We can keep pretending that women are these put-upon, exempt, mutations who should be kept in glass houses, fondled by a lucky few and acquired by the highest bidder, or we can all take a moment and admit that women (of varying ages) invented sex, that it belongs to us and we can do with it what we damn well please.