

The reluctance to deal with sex extended not just to sex *per se*, but to body parts, physical closeness, and signs of affection. At an earlier age, seven or eight, I read the word “penis” in a book I found in our apartment. What did this word mean? In the living room, on a credenza shelf along with knickknacks and a pile of old *Life* magazines, a fat Oxford English Dictionary beckoned. Surely, I would find the answer there. I did find “penis” in the dictionary—after all, I knew my alphabet!—but was still confused. The entry read something like, “male generative organ.” Huh? This was gibberish to me. So I asked Mom and Dad what this strange word meant. There was a long pause. They looked at each other.

“It’s a word doctors use,” Mom offered. And said nothing more.

Leaving the living room as bewildered as before, I registered the embarrassed look on their faces. I knew I had wandered into forbidden territory. Some things were *verboten*, not to be discussed or even mentioned. I soon discovered what this puzzling word meant and learned to feel awkward and embarrassed around anything remotely sexual.

Sure, lots of parents in the ’50s were reluctant to talk about sex with their kids. But my parents were an extreme example. Born at the tail end of the Victorian era, each raised by strict German parents, they readily absorbed the era’s code of morality, one that emphasized prudery and repression.

As I approached my teens, there was plenty for me to feel embarrassed about. One incident stands out. In warm weather, when there were enough of us kids outside on our dead-end street, we might play “ring-a-levio.” This was a New York City street game in which one team’s players hide while the other team’s players try to tag and capture them. On this particular day, with both boys and girls around, one of the older boys declared we would play *kissing* ring-a-levio, with girls on one

team, boys on the other. To capture players on the other team, instead of tagging them, you would kiss them! Yikes! Timid me was both excited and terrified at the thought of this new adventure. I’d never kissed a girl before.

My discomfort quickly escalated when my father, to my horror, leaned out our open living room window and used our unique “family whistle”—a European custom, apparently—to call me home for dinner. (Our family whistle, customarily used to alert family members in a crowd, ascended from low to high, much like a slide whistle.) I froze. Clearly, he could see the chasing and kissing spread out before him. Anger was carved onto his face. I vividly recall throwing up my hands in apology and explaining, “It’s just a game.” I hurried upstairs, bracing myself for the certain reprimand ahead.

As I got older, there were more embarrassing moments. When I turned 18 and finally able to legally drive in New York City, I was living at home while attending City College. My parents rarely ventured out, and on weekend evenings I would often borrow Dad’s car, a 1955 two-tone Buick Special. On one



Dad’s ’55 Buick Special. The drive-in’s sticker on its rear bumper gave me away and got me grounded.