

THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES OF A TODDLER

§12

“Daddy, I don’t like being a girl.”

Having struggled in the past weeks with her frustration of being a three-year-old; experiencing a pained desire to grow younger rather than older, all the while worrying that Landon would continue growing older and eventually overtake her in age, Ellie struggled to find peace with her place in the world.

“What don’t you like about being a girl?” Andrew asked.

“Well...I’m having vagina problems.”

If I had been present during this conversation, I might have been tempted to start firing off a list of covertly concerned questions a mile long. “How long has this been bothering you? Does it itch *down there*? Does it hurt when you pee? Did someone touch you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable?” But I was gone teaching class, so Andrew had the distinct honor of fielding this one on his own.

“What kind of vagina problems?”

“Well,” Ellie offered in, I’m sure, her most thoughtful and painstaking tone, “just vagina problems.”

“Oh. Well, I’m...sorry to hear that.”

Ellie was content with the answer, and that was that. It’s a funny thing with young kids—they’ll throw you something out of left field, and then just leave it there as if it’s as ordinary as the daily paper on your doorstep. As we lay

in bed later that night, Andrew relaying the conversation to me, I laughed until tears streamed from my eyes.

Ellie continued her own toddlersque version of *The Vagina Monologues* for several more weeks, revisiting the plight every so often thereafter. Sometimes, it was enough for her to blurt out, “Mommy, I just don’t feel like a girl today!”

On one such occasion, I found the courage to ask in response, “what makes you not feel like a girl, Ellie?” I was anxious to hear her highly dramatized reply.

“My outfit doesn’t look like a princess! And my hair is all *spiky!*” she howled. Dashing herself onto the living room floor, her pink tutu flipped up over her bare bottom and her “Princess” emblazoned t-shirt rode up to her armpits. Choking back a giggle, I gathered her into my arms, and gently crooned,

“You look like a princess to me.”

Andrew and I initially agreed to assume the perpetual vagina issues were nothing more than one of her attention-getting tactics: she would squirm on the floor, howling about how her vagina was causing her problems, tugging on her underwear, which was also “causing...” (She would often leave out the remainder of the sentence...it was apparently enough for her to whine in a nasally voice, “my underwear’s *causing...*” without completing the sentence, which satisfied her need to fuss about something.)

A year later, we would finally come to understand that Ellie’s complaints about her vagina, underwear, the tags on her shirts, the straps on her shoes, her brother’s singing in the back seat of the car, and the pink and purple tassels

on her bicycle handle bars (which were all promptly ripped out) were all a manifestation of her extraordinarily sensitive temperament. For several years, we would discover that logic, distraction, pleading, and admonishing were all equally ineffective in extinguishing the meltdowns that were caused by these normally inoffensive things.

One hot summer afternoon, while getting Ellie and Landon changed into their swimsuits in the cargo area of our family-mobile, smack-dab in the middle of the local swimming pool parking lot, Ellie started doing the panty problem dance. She twisted her face into all sorts of miserable looking expressions, and ultimately pulled up on her lavender Sleeping Beauty underpants to the point of giving herself a frontal wedgie, all the while complaining, “my underwear’s causing...” It was all Andrew and I could do to turn our heads and grit our teeth before bursting out laughing right in front of her. To suggest to her that she was the one doing all of the “causing” wouldn’t have gotten us anywhere.

Andrew expertly diffused the situation by using the “Low and Slow” approach—a tactic offered by one of the several counselors we sought guidance from in dealing with Ellie’s colorful personality. With a calm, quiet, slow voice, he walked Ellie through the steps of undressing and redressing until she was gleefully ready for an afternoon dip in the water.

And don’t think we didn’t take her seriously at first. Ellie went through several rounds of doctor’s exams and tests for bladder infections, supplemented with frequent applications of various creams that might ease any actual

labial irritation. But when we started noticing that her dramatically desperate requests for “cream” and the permission to not wear underwear (or anything at all) directly correlated with Landon’s frequent bouts of diarrhea that required applications of Desitin to his bottom, along with other life-changing events, such as a household move, and the approaching due-date of her second sibling, we were on to her.

But we were, in fact, intent on dealing with Ellie’s vagina issues mundanely and without incident. As parents, we pride ourselves in modeling an extreme level of comfort with our own bodies in the hopes that this attitude will rub off on our children. Admittedly, this tactic would occasionally result in conversations about bodily functions at the dinner table, in the grocery store, or anywhere the topic spontaneously occurred to one of the kids. It was not beyond our Ellie and Landon to aggressively pursue the question of why people vomit, while standing in line at the local shipping store.

All the same, I did occasionally worry about how far the vagina issue with Ellie would go outside the confines of our immediate family. I couldn’t help but wonder what the ramification would be if and when Ellie decided to inform her preschool teachers about her vaginal troubles—or even worse, the volunteer “grandmas” from the senior center, who helped out in the preschool.

Nearly a year after Ellie’s vaginal obsession began, Andrew and I were still treated to an occasional resurgence of the topic. While out in Seattle for a surprise visit with my parents, Ellie fluctuated between sweet, charming, and

boisterous, and surly, pouty, and as angry as a Montana wildfire in mid-August. The final twelve hours of our visit were particularly challenging for Ellie and, therefore, for everyone involved.

Following dinner, Ellie, Landon, and my parents congregated downstairs in the family room for some play time while Andrew and I began organizing our trunkload of belongings for our trip back home. Unbeknownst to us, Ellie—exhausted from a flurry of activity over the preceding three days—had begun to revisit her underwear complaints once again, with an occasional bit of vaginal angst thrown in. While Andrew and I finished packing, we could hear Ellie’s desperation rising up the stairwell from the basement. When we joined the group downstairs, I immediately recognized the look on my father’s face that said he was disapprovingly uncomfortable about something that had just happened.

“Ellie says she’s having *vagina* problems,” my dad said, his eyes needling through me like I was sixteen again and home an hour past curfew.

“She told us, ‘My vagina’s *bubbling!*’” He paused. “Kimmelin, sometimes, there’s such a thing as too much information.”

Oh, God, I thought to myself. *The secret’s out.* Surveying the look on his face, I couldn’t tell whether the ‘too much information’ he referred to was that which Ellie had just shared with him, or the information I had obviously shared with her, sometime in the past. Taking a stab at it, I retorted, “oh well, Dad. At least she knows the right name for it.”