

My buddy motions to me, a finger to his lips, even though no one is home.

"What," I hiss back, in all my ten-year-old impatience.

"Look," he whispers excitedly, pointing to his dad's sock drawer.

"What is it?"



I look into the drawer, where all kinds of small rectangular packages with names like Trojan and Ramses are scattered at random amongst the black socks and a sweat band.

"What are they?"

He slaps his forehead.

"You're such a dope!" he whispers.

It takes a second, but I catch on quick.

"Holy cow! You mean your folks are...."

He nods.

"That would explain why they yell at us to go away on Sunday afternoon whenever we knock on the door. They say they're taking a nap. The door's always locked."

I'm astonished. No matter what your age, whether you're ten or fifty, it's just damned difficult to imagine your parents, or your friends' parents, hell, any adult, you know, doing it. At age 10, you're not even that sure exactly what constitutes "doing it," anyway. You have a few theories, based on those ball field conversations and the occasional summer night spin the bottle game with the little girls down the street. You probably know by now that neither the stork nor Santa Claus exist. But Mom? And Dad? Doing it?

Too much for a child to wrap his head around, no matter how old he is.

"Here; take one of these -- we made need them if we play spin the bottle tonight with Mary Jane and Leah."

"Reckon it'll fit?"

He considers a minute. "Good point. Better try one on."

A little more confusion as two youngsters try to figure out first how to open the package, then what to do once they have opened it.

"Okay, I got mine on," he says from the bathroom. "How about you?"

I may not know much about doing it, and the first time I ever got one of those random stirrings in my britches I freaked out and ran home, but even I can tell this thing ain't gonna work.

"Uh, I think it'll be fine. In fact, it looks like it might be too small.

Maybe I should take it home and stretch it."

He gives me another look, but this one is more respectful; he obviously has a higher opinion of my intelligence now.

"Good idea. Let's get out of here before Mom comes home."

A high-pitched whine stops us. Curses! Foiled by his little sister!

"I'm gonna tell," she says, a mantra every older brother is forever doomed to hear.

"No, you're not," my buddy replies menacingly.

"You're not supposed to be in here. You're gonna get in trouble. T-R-U-B-L, Trouble!"

"So will you. You're not supposed to be in here, either. So how would you know we were in here, unless you came in, too? Go ahead and tell' we'll both get a spanking."

You can tell by the way she bites down on her thumb she hadn't quite thought about it that way. And the threat is far worse to her because she never gets spanked; he's used to it. But she

presses forward anyway.

"I won't tell if you let me play, too."

Invite her to a spin the bottle game? Is she crazy? Who'd want to kiss her, anyway? That's a question that years later I will kick myself over, repeatedly, every time I see her prancing on the sidelines in her short skirts and pom poms, but right now, I don't have such a clear insight into the future.

"Uh, play what?" We have to act dumb.

"Play with one of those balloons, of course. You can't hog 'em all."

Yes! Yes! Give the little pest one and get rid of her! But my friend is not done yet. He realizes something about the psychology of a little girl, especially a little sister. That is, don't give in so quickly. Make her really want it. And make her really believe it's her idea. He casts a line, starts reeling in the bait.

"I dunno. There's only a couple. Besides, you wouldn't like it."

"Yes I would! Yes I do! I'll Tell! I'm Tellin'!!!!"

He flashes me a quick wink, even as he sets the hook.

"Alright, alright! Criminy! Here!" He tosses her the one he just tried on.

She trots happily out of the room, a little victory dance skip in her step.

When we head outside a little while later, she has managed to blow it up into this huge, greasy, cloudy globe but she's having a hard time tying it.

She whines a little at us, so we stop and he ties it off for her. She wanders off, happy as a little mud lark. After all, it's the biggest balloon she's ever owned.

It never occurs to us that she'll show off her great big balloon to everyone in the neighborhood -- especially mommy and daddy when they get home -- and as a result, there will be no spin the bottle game -- or anything else in our social calendar -- that night and many nights after.

As I said, I just don't see the future that well.