

I'm not sure how to address this week's topic without sealing my reputation as the Town Prude.



Alas, if that is to be my fate – if it's the price I must pay in order to 'speak my truth' – I'll bear that yoke. Just know, dear reader, that it weighs heavy on one who's always considered herself a reasonably vivacious party girl.

Here's the set-up: I'm once again on the treadmill at the Y, where all great column topics are born, and I'm thumbing through *Rolling Stone* magazine. Why do I do this to myself, you ask? Why do I subject myself to articles and attitudes that I know will tick me off? Well, one reason is that – and this may surprise you – I like music. Yes, even rock music. I like to listen to it, and I like to read about it. Another reason, I guess, is that I enjoy a challenge. I like reading the opinions of people with whom I disagree on almost everything but the genius of Bruce Springsteen. They help me hone my own opinions, and sometimes even change them. (But, um, mostly just hone them.)

So this column is not about the hipster scribes of *Rolling Stone* and how angry they often make me, with their smart-alecky scorn for most everything I hold dear. No, I'm not even here to complain about my long-time nemesis Bill Maher (actually, 'nemesis' is probably too strong a word, for someone who doesn't know you exist), who charmingly asserted, in this issue of RS, that Obama's just faking the Christianity thing... that a man of our president's obvious intelligence "couldn't possibly believe in the talking snake." (At least I think that's what Maher said; it's hard to cull the substance of these interviews, what with all the gratuitous f-bombs littering every paragraph...)

No, *Rolling Stone* is *Rolling Stone*, and I know what I'm getting myself into when I open a copy. It's a free country, and if I don't like it, I shouldn't pick it up. Fair enough. But here's the problem: Lots of teenagers do pick it up. And the ones who picked up this particular issue (plenty, I'm sure, with teen sensation Taylor Swift on the cover), were treated to some visuals that make Bill Maher look like a Sunday School teacher. I'm talking about the new ad campaign for Calvin Klein jeans.

Is *ménage à quatre* a term? Maybe not, but I don't know how else to describe this full page ad, on page three or four of this mainstream music publication, that features a group of beautiful young people – three guys and one girl. All are clad in CK jeans (the girl's in cut-offs), none are wearing shirts, and they are – how do I put this delicately? – enjoying each other's company. I honestly can't describe here just how salacious an image this is – I'm afraid some teenagers might be reading this column! – but suffice it to say I was deeply shocked to see it right up front in a popular newsstand magazine. And though I am often appalled, I am seldom shocked.

To make sure I wasn't overreacting, I did a small, impromptu survey right there at the Y. I asked a couple of friends – both of whom call themselves "progressive" – to give me their take

on the ad and its placement in *Rolling Stone*. The first friend responded, "I may be a political liberal, but when it comes to this stuff, I'm a total prude. 1950s housewife all the way. This is SO irresponsible, especially when people are out there dying of AIDS. Encouraging multiple partners? No way. I would hate for my son to see this!"

The second friend, who has two little boys, felt exactly the same way. A third woman I didn't know, but who participated in my survey by virtue of being on the next treadmill, said, "I think it's terrible. Completely inappropriate. But what do you expect from *Rolling Stone*?"

I don't know. *More*, I guess. And I expect more of the Calvin Klein company, too, though I'm not sure why.

Calvin Klein has always reveled in pushing the cultural envelope. Thirty years ago, nothing came between Brooke Shields and her Calvins, and since then, we've seen Marky Mark in his tighty-whities, Kate Moss in her bra, and a slew of anonymous, vacant-looking waifs slouching in their skivvies. I never batted an eye. But this is different. With this ad, Calvin Klein and *Rolling Stone*

have crossed the line. By putting an ad like this up front in a pop magazine – not behind some banner at the gas station or in some back room at the video store – they've basically said: *This is the norm. This is what all the cool kids are doing.*

I challenge any parent out there – even the most free-thinking among you – to tell me what good can possibly come of this ad. (Besides selling jeans, I mean.) I've made an interesting discovery: It's very easy to talk about following one's bliss and doing what comes naturally and exploring alternative relationships and such... until one has a child of one's own. Is there anybody out there – anybody? – who would be pleased to learn that his or her child – even a grown child – was engaging in scenarios like the one in this ad? Have we so completely abandoned what was once our cultural ideal – marriage and family – that we're okay with sending *this* kind of message to our youth? Have we decided that monogamy is so difficult, we don't even bother to promote it anymore?

Human beings are sexual animals. We're also social and moral animals. Because of the tension between these impulses, pornography has always been with us. But in the past, it was always recognized as such. Where does a culture go once its pornography has gone mainstream... once every sexual taboo has been stripped of its mystery and rendered ho-hum? What happens to a society when the line between fantasy and reality – between forbidden and permissible – becomes blurred, or even nonexistent, and the concept of "shame" has no meaning?

Well, we've been watching the breakdown of our social structure, built on the foundation of the family, for decades. Now we're witnessing the breakdown of our economic system. Think it's a stretch to connect the two? I don't. John Adams said, "We have no government armed with the power capable of contending with human passions which are unbridled by morality and true religion." He believed a free society unmoored from a common morality – a common love of virtue – would inevitably destroy itself... or cease to be free. I've been hoping for a third possibility: That we might turn back toward self-discipline, delayed gratification, and personal responsibility. But then I hear about yet another financial institution felled by greed... or see an ad like the one in *Rolling Stone*.

When I was in middle school, my girlfriends and I passed around a tattered paperback edition of Judy Blume's book *Forever*. It was dog-eared and underlined and practically falling apart. You'd hide it in your book bag, sneak it home to read at night, add to the dog-ears and underlines, then pass it along to the next girl. It was all very clandestine and exciting. You see,

*Forever*

was about a teenaged girl with her first serious boyfriend. They were deeply in love, and eventually, that love led to...well, you know. The way I remember it, the book was compelling and informative, titillating... and very tender. It was a sensitive introduction to the agonies and ecstasies of a "serious" relationship, and a cautionary tale, too, teaching us that most teenage relationships are not, in fact, forever. The fact that the book was forbidden – that our parents didn't know we were reading it – was part of the thrill. Am I condoning such sneaky behavior? Not exactly. But I guess I do believe certain things are meant to be sought covertly... discovered in private... pursued with all the curiosity and ingenuity and imagination that only youth can bring to bear. There are certain things you can't learn from your parents or your teachers. Certain things you wouldn't want to.

Will my daughter, now just seven, even bother to sneak a book like *Forever* when she's the age I was then? Will she already be too jaded, too knowing, to care? I'm sure she'll be plenty "educated" by then – she'll know all about her body, its functions, and smart strategies for being "safe." But how will she discover the sweet, sacred mysteries of human sexuality – mindfully, with wonder, and in her own time – when the world is so intent on commercializing, trivializing, demystifying and demoralizing it?

I don't know the answer. But I do know I won't find it in *Rolling Stone*.