

Sludge

In the toilet water, there was a trail of dilute red swirls. The evidence was on my frog underwear too. Immediately I was disgusted with the idea of frogs on my underwear. My first thought was cancer. I knew it.

The teacher asked if everything was okay. We're starting history, she said. Your favorite. American independence and redcoats were the last things I cared about.

I whispered even though no one was in the bathroom except us two. I could see my words travel up, through the vents to the classroom, where the words would brush the ears of all my classmates, and they'd know immediately what'd happened.

The teacher told me to "run, run, run!" to the nurse. Was a period worse than cancer? Better be safe. I listened and ran like a gazelle from a lion.

"No running in the halls, young lady!"

Young Lady. That was me. With long strides, he stopped me dead in my tracks. It was my math teacher, actually, and he'd never looked so damn ugly. His enraged face was putrid – it had holes in it, red bumps, hair, and wrinkles. His teeth were even worse, and I became aware that he was missing a significant amount of hair.

"What do you think you're doing! You are endangering yourself and others,"

"My teacher said I could run to the nurse." The redness of my face must've given it away. He let me go without a word. I barged into the nurse's office past the line like my leg was broken.

"Excuse me, girl. You need to wait like everyone else."

I came in close and whispered in her ear the code word my teacher gave me. *Period.*

"Oh. Come with me, dear."

In the storage closet, there were a plethora of options. She chose the generic brand. She told me to go in the bathroom, and stick it on like a sticker.

“Is this normal?”

“Yes, very normal. It happens *every month*. All women get them when they grow up.”

But I wasn’t a woman and I didn’t want to grow up.

I spent most of lunch time trying to find a comfortable orientation for the ‘sticker’. I did something wrong. There were more bloody frogs, and even some red on my khakis. It kept shifting. It felt like it didn’t fit right. The nurse hadn’t even bothered to check the sticker, or maybe she was embarrassed too.

During recess, I wrapped my sweater low around my waist, like I’d seen older girls do. All the equipment suddenly seemed so small, so rigid, so uncomfortable. I was aware of being much bigger than the other kids. I’d known it before, with numbers, but now I *felt* it.

I kept to myself, and I kept off the playground. Everything was just an opportunity to smear blood everywhere.

During science, I sat with my knees bent in my arms instead of criss cross applesauce. My teacher let it slide. Really, I wanted to sit in a chair but she didn’t have that much give. I couldn’t concentrate on the lecture. The stench of the sweat and skin of others and myself made me nauseous. That’s how kids smell. Did I still smell like a kid? I worried the whole class could smell me.

When we moved on to Language Arts, I breathed a sigh of relief because we could finally return to our chairs. We were doing free write Friday. I wrote nothing. I could only think about breathing. It’s okay, we’re going home soon. Discomfort is only temporary.

I raised my hand several times to go to the bathroom. My teacher had to know by now.

“Wow, Janice peed so much today,” a *child* remarked after I returned back. His eyes were cartoonishly large, his skin super smooth, and his stature small and thin with a big bobble head on top. I didn’t know why he, Jose, seemed so different, or why the humor was lost on me, but it made me angry. Eyes were upon me like lasers. I wanted to grab his head and swing it around, but I grabbed the inside of the desk instead.

“At least I don’t pee my pants, like you did last year.”

The kids went around us went,

“Ewww,”

Jose opened his mouth to blurt something back, but the teacher was quicker.

“Hey, we’re supposed to be doing today’s assignment, is anyone finished?”

Silence.

“I thought so, no talking until you’re finished.”

“Yeah, Janice. Do your work,” Jose said.

I put my head in my arms upon the desk, and gave up for the day.

“Jose, I don’t recall asking for your input. Now you have no recess for a week.”

His face was as red as mine then. The teacher wasn’t upset about my unfinished assignment, but she said I had to learn to use the restroom before and after instruction time. I nodded, but I knew I ultimately would be doing the same thing tomorrow. It wasn’t by choice.

I felt immense relief when the day was finally coming to an end. Still, it was the slowest day in the history of all time because for some reason, the bus call wouldn’t come on.

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My mother said nothing when I told her the news.

In such little time, in only a few months, I'd been forced to realize, all at once, the complexities of the world, without the words to say a thing. It boiled inside me until it was a thick, black sludge. I imagined that this sludge was being diluted in my body, dripping as dark red liquid and clotting onto the cotton. I was rotting from the inside out and there was nothing I could do but watch it swirl in the water.