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## A Bleeding Body

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# A Bleeding Body

By Natalie Serber

**one**

The ponytailed girl runs through a green park in white jeans. The camera focuses on her backside. She can wear white even that time of the month. She winks and turns a cartwheel. I don't yet have that time of the month, but I ask my mother to buy me kotex to keep in my drawer, so I'll be armed when the day comes. The kotex remains in my drawer for two years, unopened.

**two**

The driver swung open the door and we tramped off the bus. Me, Alice, the Queen of Hearts, and the Caterpillar with her hookah. First graders sat on the gym floor in front of the risers. I was the white rabbit, scurrying across the stage, checking a cardboard pocket watch, muttering, "I'm late."

I twitched my whiskers in the trial scene, when cramps, like an umbrella flaring open again and again, were suddenly real. My fretting was real. The gush was real. My white costume bloomed scarlet. Because the stain down my leg had to be disguised, the Cheshire Cat and I devised a plan backstage. A fake fight in the parking lot. We screamed at each other. She pushed me into the mud. At fourteen, I believed cruelty, jealousy and pettiness were less shameful than having a body that bled.

**three**

He snuck me in, drunk, late, sloppily shushing through the dark living room, past his mother's plastic-covered sofa to his bedroom. I think we had sex. And then slept hard. In the morning, the sheets... I said nothing.

I slithered into my clothes and reverse-crept toward the front door. This time past his mother, home from the canning factory, her hair still in a net, cigarette jammed between her beet-stained fingers, black coffee, a cup and saucer. My smile was feeble. Her non-smile a force. As if the smear on his sheets were not enough, my lipstick, hairbrush, French vocabulary cards, diaphragm case, and tampons—the contents of my purse, were strewn across the lawn like a comet tail. Apparently I'd spilled it when we traipsed in the night before. I liked this boy. But I quit him before his mom, who watched me from the window, could call me a tramp.

**four**

I was late again. Five days. Seven days. Ten days. At Planned Parenthood I waited in an orange chair bolted to the floor. All my friends had been at least once. Soon we'd go to Longs Drugs and pee on a stick, but not yet. Now we filled a cup with a clean catch and waited, reading the pamphlet titles, *Herpes*, *Prenatal Care*, *Breast Health*.

Her face seemed too kind when she called my name, as if she needed to soften a blow. "Negative." I exhaled. "I see by your chart this is the third time you've been in for a test. Are you using protection?" It broke, I lied. I forgot the spermicide, I lied.

"Sweetheart," the woman leaning her hip against the exam table said to me, "are you sure you're ready to be sexually active? Are you afraid to say no?" I didn't understand. Weren't all women afraid to say no?

**five**

There was turbulence and the fasten seatbelt light flicked on. I was twenty-three and somehow confident in my pencil skirt, on my first business trip. I had to pee. When

the flight attendant told me to return to my seat, I stared him down. “I’m having a menstrual emergency,” I lied, and he stepped aside.

**six**

After babies ... a long and happy pause.

**seven**

From our bedroom floor I told him, No, I’ll be fine. Let’s wait. The kids are asleep. The menstrual pains ripped me in half again. I was quartered, eighthed, sixteenthed, made into confetti. I clutched a worthless heating pad until light finally cracked the horizon and my husband pulled me up. We left a note on the kitchen table for our kids to call us when they woke.

Before the relief the nurse examined my prescription record. He asked my husband, “Does she regularly use drugs?”

“You mean Advil?” my husband said.

The nurse asked me, “Could I assign a number to my pain?”

Thirty-three times twelve, the number of years I’d had my period multiplied by once a month, minus two pregnancies.

He gave me a gown, a bed, and started an IV just in case. He spurted my abdomen with warm goo and ran the ultrasound transducer over my skin like a vacuum cleaner. He slicked goo on a wand. I flinched when he probed my vagina, another stranger’s hand gripped my knee, holding me still. Finally, after three hours, satisfied that I was not lying, that I had no twisted ovary, he hovered inches from my face while he injected morphine into my IV line. My entire body calmed. My face stilled. “Well,” he said as if he’d invented pain killers, “she’s not in pain anymore.”

**eight**

After my first chemo infusion, the bloody noses were robust, bright as a good cut of raw steak, seeping all the way through my pillow. In the morning, in the mirror, I looked like a crime scene. The hair I still had matted, my skin crusty with dried blood. During my second infusion, I dragged the IV pole into the bathroom and found a meek smear in my underpants. It felt like another joke from my body. I’d done my part, exercised, eaten well, nursed my babies ... and yet I had breast cancer and now my period too?

But the trickle of rusty blood was inconsequential, nearly transparent, a second thought. It appeared like a dusty stray from beneath a hedge, ribs showing, meow faint, dragging a reluctant tail. I felt an overwhelming tenderness. I wanted to hug my poor, exhausted reproductive system. This was a feeble last stand. A wisp.

**nine**

Skin on my knees sags. My upper arms crepe. Fat from here relocates to a less flattering there. Suddenly I’m not *\*hot\** but simply hot. I yank off my sweater. I am no longer dewy with youth, but I’m moist, sweat on my upper lip, beneath my eyes. I wake in the night and can’t go back to sleep.

Also I no longer worry I’ll stain my pants or the bedding (except with coffee). I won’t suffer the discomfort of a tampon, half in and half out, won’t accidentally clog the plumbing with feminine hygiene products. I won’t swallow Advil at six-hour intervals four days a month.

Because my hair is gray, I am invisible in the world. I am free—to say no, to say yes. I’m sorry, what’s a tramp? Wait, I’m not sorry. I refuse to apologize for myself. I refuse to be embarrassed for having a body that no longer bleeds. Every day belongs to me. It is like being seven again. I can wear white pants any day of the month, turn as many cartwheels as I wish.