In Bloom

Well, it’s official. I’m the last girl in all of Wrigley Middle School who still hasn’t gotten their period. The only other girl I could commiserate with was Jessica Chan, the quiet girl in my English class who everybody knows and has heard of but nobody has spoken to. I knew she hadn’t started hers because she always wears white pants and didn’t go to the Hygiene Festival for free blood blockers. My sister calls them blood blockers and somehow I feel closer to her by using the same terminology. But after 5th period lunch today, the worst thing ever happened: I saw Jessica Chan pull out the pink-wrapped delicacy from her sunshine yellow backpack: a pad.

And what’s worse, the whole school knows I’m the only one left, thanks to my stupid friend Becca Jones and stupid Ramona Davis.

On Monday, Ramona Davis came over to my lunch table. It’s just like her to float from table to table, making her presence known when it’s obvious we are the insects she wishes she could squish with the bottoms of her school-inappropriate Jimmy Choos.

“Hey, could anyone spare a tampon? Regular or super?” Ramona Davis said.

“It’s not my time, otherwise I’d be stocked up” Alexis Casper responded. Alexis Casper has been my longest and most faithful friend, since North Franklin Elementary in Mrs. Sharp’s third grade class. Keith Maxwell used to play with my pigtails and tell me I looked like I had pipe cleaner hair and that no one would ever like me because it pointed in all the wrong directions. Alexis Casper’s misfortune involved comments on her less than stylish allure. But the weirdos always got picked on separately, all secretly hoping that if we didn’t interact with each other maybe someday we’d be brought into the light of the cool kids. But Alexis Casper grew six inches between second and third grade, along with the confidence to step in between me and
Keith Maxwell and tell him to back off. We broke the weirdo seal, never to be solo again but rest in solidarity.

Alexis Casper got her period the next year, the first of my friends to get it and the first time I’d ever known anyone to receive this special honor, besides my sister. I never thought four years later I still wouldn’t have mine.

“I have some tampons in my locker,” Becca Jones said. Ramona Davis looked from Alexis Casper to Becca Jones and rolled her eyes before stretching her eyes around the circle to me. Becca Jones didn’t take well to eye rolls and sassy comments and always felt the need to justify herself.

“I mean, I have some pads with me right now?” Becca Jones said, pulling Ramona Davis’ attention back to her.

“Uh, no,” Ramona Davis spit back. “I’m not a child. I don’t wear diapers.”

Becca Jones rubbed the sleeve of her hoodie under her nose to stop it from dropping sniffle-induced snot. She was terrible at hiding her true feelings and visibly fought back a couple tears. Given the chance, she’d drop us at any moment to be friends with those attention hungry trolls. But it still didn’t justify her response.

Ramona Davis looked at me, awaiting my response.

“I, uh, don’t have any.”

“Josie doesn’t have her period yet,” Becca Jones said. I shot her the ugliest look, hoping that by stare alone I could burn a hole in her face and make her pay for the pain she just inflicted on me.

“Are you for real?” Ramona Davis said.

I thought about saying Becca Jones was wrong and I just wasn’t on mine right now, but girls like Ramona Davis always know when you’re lying. Then, I thought about putting on a face of confidence to get myself out of this with courage. ‘No I don’t have mine. What’s it to you?’
Except I’d no doubt say it too awkwardly. Instead, I went with a tilted shoulder shrug and scrunched my face.

“Freak,” Ramona Davis said and walked away with a flip of her long blond pony tail. The table fell silent, the only sound from Alexis Casper as she snacked on her barbecue chips.

Finally: “Thanks, Bec” I said.

“God, I know I’m so sorry. I wanted to put it back in my mouth as soon as it came out,” Becca Jones said.

“It’s too late. The damage is done. Ramona is going to tell all of her little followers all about this and I’m going to be the laughing stock of Wrigley.”

Becca Jones was an army brat and transferred schools yearly. I’d only known her for a few months, but it was long enough to peg her down. On her first days, she would make friends with everyone until she decided which groups would benefit her the most. Had she not accidentally tripped in the lunchroom on her first day, spilling baked beans all over herself, she might not be sitting at our table right now. Becca Jones was not sorry. Becca Jones was always looking for a way out.

“You’re making too big a deal out of this,” Becca Jones said. “She made her nasty comment, but she doesn’t care enough to actually say anything about it to anyone else.”

I laid my arms down on the table with my fingers touching and slid my head face first into my hands, rolling my head back and forth with a long drawn out moan.

“I hope you’re right.”

Ramona Davis worked fast. She sat down at her usual table on the east end of the room, grabbing the arm of one of her identical devil sisters. It might have been just my imagination, but I thought she looked right at me.

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I was in the sixth grade when I realized it wasn’t just Alexis Casper. Periods were popping up like weeds around Wrigley. It all started when Marisabel Avila walked down B Hall
with a red stain the size of a cherry on the butt of her khakis. Uproar attacked the Wrigley boys, all laughing and pointing.

The girls’ response was much different. LeeAnn McGraw, the school feminist, made speeches about how there was nothing wrong with periods and Marisabel Avila deserved respect for her transformation into a woman. The next day, LeeAnn McGraw put on a play called “Periods Happen” followed by a game of raise-your-hand-if-you-have-your-period-so-Marisabel-Avila-knows-she’s-not-alone-and-so-the-boys-know-it’s-not-something-to-make-fun-of.

That day, I realized I was the weird one, not Marisabel Avila, when a quarter of the female hands shot into the air with absolute pride and blatant disregard for the cynics.

And for the past two years, I’ve begged my period to arrive, tricking my body into becoming a woman.

* "Can you believe Jessica Chan started her period?" I asked Alexis Casper as we walked home together, a daily tradition usually encapsulated with cherry twizzlers and boy talk.

Alexis kicked the same rock repeatedly until she accidentally lost it across the street.

“She was my last chance at normalcy and she freaking started. It’s not fair,” I said. Another pause.

“Can you believe it?” I spoke again.

“I mean….” Alexis Casper paused and found a new rock. “Yeah, I can. She’s in ninth.”

Now, all I could think about was being the only ninth grader without hers and shivered. “She could have had it for a while and you just now noticed.”

Another shiver attacked my spine as I remembered Rachel Peters walking up to me right after final bell.

‘I just wanted to say I overheard in English that you haven’t started yet and I think it’s really cool. Cramps make you wish you were dead and you’ll bloat and think you’re the fattest
thing in the whole world. Cherish this’, she said cheerfully before going in for an awkward side hug.

Fuck you, Rachel Peters.

“Maybe you could talk to Ashley about it,” Alexis Casper said.

“About periods?” We talked about ex-boyfriends, her bitchy roommates and Ramona Davis, but periods had never come up before.

“This stuff is genetic. Like, when you start and stuff. If hers was later, it would give you some peace of mind.” But what if hers wasn’t later, what am I supposed to feel then? I split off from her as I made my way to my cul de sac.

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As fate would have it, Ashley Reynolds came home from college to see her boyfriend for the evening. She ripped through the door as I was doing a yoga video by this scientologist who believes inner growth comes from spiritual intimacy with the self. I’m pretty sure the video was designed to ward off cancer and other serious medical issues, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

“What are you doing?” Ashley Reynolds said, but not in a demeaning way. More in a playful, you’re-my-weirdo kind of way. She stepped into the foyer and put a hand to her hip, studying my movements with a smirk on her face.

“The better question is, what are you doing home? Mama said you weren’t gonna be back until Thanksgiving.” I said it with a pinch of salt, but she’s smart enough to see right through that fakery. Ashley Reynolds bridged the gap between us and squeezed me and topped it off with a cheek kiss.

“Love you, too, Posie.” She said it with a wink because she knows how much I despise the nickname she gave me. “Chris has his senior banquet-thing tonight. I’m surprised Mom didn’t tell you. She practically jumped through the phone with excitement when I told her,” she said.

“Nope. Didn’t hear anything about it.”
I watched her set her duffel bag down by the door. Mom will have a cow if it’s still there when she gets home and $20 says it still will be. And then they’ll chase each other up and down the stairs for twenty minutes shaking weird household objects at each other and screaming volatility. Oh, the excitement. I watched my sister walk to the refrigerator, pull out milk and make a bowl of cereal.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” I asked, nervous but desperately seeking answers.

“Anything, baby.”

“When did you get your period for the first time?”

Ashley Reynolds choked a bit on her Honey Nut Cheerios before a coughing fit took over for a few seconds.

“Is that a bad thing to ask?” I asked, immediately regretting my question.

“No, not at all, I just wasn’t expecting you to ask me that,” Ashley Reynolds laughed and immediately changed her demeanor. “Uhm, I don’t really remember anymore, but I think it was the summer between fifth and sixth grade. Why do you ask?”

Ashley Reynolds is not a dumb girl and a monkey’s uncle could imagine why I’d be asking, so I looked at her with my head tilted to the right, my eyes small slits as if to say ‘You know why I’m asking’.

“Alexis says it’s genetic,” I said.

Ashley Reynolds smiled at me, a big, toothy smile. She set her spoon down in her bowl and walked around our island counter to me and wrapped her arms around me from behind and whispered in my ear.

“It’s going to happen, Josie.”

I didn’t anticipate it, but I started crying. And crying turned into whaling. And whaling turned into shrieking. When I tried to speak, my words came out like inaudible noise.

“BUHEENJESSICHANHAPERPEEEEED.”
Ashley Reynolds squeezed tighter and her voice got really soft and sweet. “Josie, I can’t tell what you’re saying.”

“SHEGOITANNOITHONLYONELEFFFFF.”

Ashley Reynolds began to stroke my hair, rocking me side to side while I attempted to calm down so she could hear me. My breaths were clipped and jagged as I reached for a tissue on the counter.

Once I could take a full breath, Ashley Reynolds spoke again: “Alright, try again.”

“Even Jessica Chan has her period now and I’m the only one in the whole school left who doesn’t have her period yet.”

Ashley Reynolds continued to rock me, running her fingers down my arms and back. “That can’t possibly be true. There’s probably plenty of other girls who haven’t started their periods yet and you just don’t know them. Wrigley Middle is pretty big.”

“No, it’s me, it’s just me. I’m it. Everyone has theirs and I don’t.” I went back to screaming. “WHAT IF I NEVER GET IT?”

Ashley Reynolds let go of my back, flipped around and looked me dead in the eyes. “Look at me,” she said and lightly shook me. “Hey! Look at me in the eyes.” My eyes were no doubt pink and puffy and I didn’t feel like it, but she lifted my chin with her fingers so I was forced to. “This is not the end of the world. I know it feels like it is, but it is not. You will get it and before long you’ll want to return it.” I took a few hard breaths out of nowhere as my body came down from my fit. “It’s going to happen. Maybe not this month, but it will.” I dropped my head again to break our visual connection.

“I’m just tired of being the outcast.”

Ashley Reynolds let go of me and sat in the chair next to me.

“Do you want to know something?” Ashley Reynolds said. My response was an awkward stare. “In high school, I had a similar conversation with Mom. I was crying because everyone had
boobs and I was stuck with little mosquito bites. And now I’m 21-years-old and I still don’t have boobs.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“Look, you’re going to get your period. It’s a biological fact of nature.” She stopped to wrap her hands around my face. “But every body looks and works differently. And it’s ok. Be patient.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re a full blown woman with a boyfriend and boobs and I’m the baby with no hips or blood leaving my uterus.”

“Ah,” Ashley Reynolds said. “I get it.” I stare at her, not quite understanding what she thinks she gets, wondering what it is she thinks she was listening to for the last ten minutes. She steps behind me again and plays with my hair, going back and forth between a pony tail and the beginnings of a dutch braid.

“You know what I love about being a woman?” Ashley Reynolds said. I let out a disgusted chuckle in response.

“You rubbing it in or….?”

“No I’m serious. My favorite thing about being a woman is the way I can love people. And I’m not saying that men can’t love or don’t have the ability to empathize or whatever. I just feel that my purpose is to love people to the best of my abilities and I want to do it with integrity and respectfulness.” She paused for one second before adding, “AND to hold myself up with strength and dignity. That’s important, too.”

I roll my eyes and flip around. “Ok, sister monologue. What’s your point?” Ashley Reynolds avoids my eye contact for the first time.

“My point is, by my definition of what makes me a woman, my period has nothing to do with it. I’m not a woman because I menstruate once a month. I’m a woman because of my character.”
I think about that for a moment before replying. “But what if that’s not the foundation I want to build myself off of? What if I want to be a wuss?” That’s not exactly what I meant to say, so I add, “I don’t, but you know what I’m saying.”

“Well, then, make your own definition. Who do you want to be?” That eye contact comes back and I realize all I want to be is a woman with a period.

Ashley Reynolds brushed my bangs back from my eyes and wiped a couple of tears from below. We both faintly heard the garage door going up, signaling Mom’s return. “Go upstairs, Jos. I have to get ready so we can talk more then. She’ll be too preoccupied with me being home to bother you.”

Ashley Reynolds kissed my cheek and squeezed my shoulders, patting me on the back to run upstairs.