

to bleed and pee

I was about ten years old when I got my first period. It was the morning after a sleepover at the house of the twins in my grade. The girls in my small Episcopalian school called these events TGIF parties, so I'm assuming I first bled on a Saturday.

I saw the stain on the outside leg of my denim shorts and checked myself for wounds but couldn't figure out where it had come from. The word "PERIOD" blinked once in my mind like a neon hazard sign, a flash of anxiety more than clarity. I quickly dismissed it – the blood was on the outside of my shorts, not *down there* where the period I hoped would stay hypothetical should someday start. Then I checked the tissue paper.

The rest I mostly blacked out, though I remember clearly the sense of panic and the pit of dread. I remember the squeak of my shame as I revealed my condition to my mom on the short car ride home. I remember the drama afterwards, trying to determine whether I preferred a pad or a tampon when neither felt right.

I remember the sense of defeat and self-violation when I conceded I'd rather put something inside me than feel the bulk of a diaper between my legs. At least inside me I could detach, learn to forget. By ten I was already practiced in using my insides to bury parts of me too dangerous to let flow free.

These days I don't think about my period too much. It comes and it goes, more a nuisance than a trauma. It's never been a function I've planned on using.

I mostly think of my period in public restrooms, especially places like travel stops in Indiana and Kansas and Texas and Ohio. I start rehearsing as I approach the women's room doors, preparing for the confrontation I've so far avoided though sometimes only narrowly so.

I imagine the verbal assault by a stranger – some older woman or a father standing guard outside. Sometimes I imagine a security guard or police officer. In all scenarios I imagine my assailant is as white as I am. They shout and interrogate, accusing each time.

"What are you doing in here?!"

"You're in the wrong bathroom!"

"Get out!"

“What *are* you?!”

“Pervert!”

I play my prepared response on a loop in my mind as I enter the stall and sit, careful not to attract too much attention while also careful not to seem to hide. I wear a calm confidence on the outside that says simply, “I belong.” But in my head I repeat the following reply:

“I sit to pee and bleed from my uterus monthly.”

It’s the best way I can think to tell someone unable to understand me that in the simplest terms, here is where I’m “supposed to be.”

Each time I run the scene through my mind I try on a slightly different ending. Often it’s snarky, intended to rebound the weapon of shame sling by my imaginary assailant. Like,

“I sit to pee and bleed from my uterus monthly. Ok, your turn – what’s the deal with our genitals and reproductive organs? Care to share?”

Other times I imagine simply stating my facts and turning to leave, using their confusion as a screen for me to escape safely. Often, I try to picture a way to offer connection, to help them better see myself and others like me, to invite back all of our humanity from where it’s gone so apparently. I struggle to envision this encounter ending happily.

I’m not sure when I started rehearsing these scenarios, though I know it’s become more often as time wears on. The culture is changing much as I have, and those changes seem to make my confrontation more likely.

I don’t have breasts anymore and I’ve grown some stubble. I still have hips and muscles much as I’ve had since I was 18. More fat these days and also greyer. Mostly calmer too despite what this anecdote may lead you to believe.

As a child and a teenager and a 20-something I rehearsed for just about everything, like burglars and rapists and bullies and telephone calls and anything that might feel like shame. I’m a therapist now and I know my rehearsing is a sign of trauma, an indicator of just how much I was made to fear.

These days I move through the world so much more freely, letting myself flow and feeling trapped in my mind so much less. I use words like “trans” and “they” and “queer” to describe myself for the benefit of others’ understanding, but the truth is I’m just me as I’ve always been.

I’ve changed my body some so that people might see me better than they did back then, when my breasts and clothes and build seemed to communicate confusing lies about me. I find people look at me and make truer assumptions now, and that feels better mostly even though it also exposes me.

Women’s rooms are scary places for me, although I choose them because the men’s feel more dangerous still. Also grosser if I’m being honest. At least in the women’s room I can trust I’ll find a clean-ish seat.

So these days thinking about my period helps me feel more at ease. Though I’m not a woman it’s what allows me to pee in public with a small sense of peace. My period helps me hold my head up when people stare or laugh or whisper. It helped me hold my ground when one woman screamed at the very sight of me.

Am I still in danger? Yes. For years I’ve watched and read about people like me – born with vaginas and uteruses who wear their masculinity outside – about how they’ve been confronted, humiliated, forcibly removed or detained, sometimes assaulted, sometimes by cops. All of this because they were simply trying to pee.

Does my period keep me safer? Probably not in the long run. But thinking about it and my smartass reply helps some, and for that I find myself grateful for the fact that I bleed.

More so I wish bathrooms didn’t have to be scary. I wish people like me could just go pee. I wish urinating in public restrooms didn’t cost so much energy. I wish for once people could just let us all be.

The truth is I’m not the one in the most danger. Because of my uterus and my white skin and my charming smile. I think about how much scarier the act of peeing must be for others, for the femmes and the studs and the Two-Spirits and those with more anxiety.

So this is my appeal for unisex bathrooms, where people can just go and do what they need. There can be toilets and there can be urinals, with stalls for all because who really wants to watch anyone else’s urine stream?

This way fathers won't have to wait anxiously for young daughters and mothers won't have to fight with eight year old sons. This way anyone who needs a tampon can find one. This way there's no more drama, we all belong there, just trying to get our personal business done.

What if we made bathrooms and menstruation safe for everyone? Period.

Mallaigh McGinley
they/them