

Panties and Diapers

by Rachel Huh

After weeks indoors, H and I enjoy the sticky heat of summer with boba teas in hand. We sip icy tapioca as sweat trickles down our necks, trace our too-weak pulses. H—dizzy from their months-long uterine bleeding—and I—dizzy from the dysfunction of my autonomic nervous system—are slow to meander a lap around their sun-drenched neighbourhood. Despite the scarcity with which our good days align, how stringently we otherwise budget our vitality, together we are wanderers, explorers, aimless stranded friends. Sometimes we rant, rage at being sick, at being poor, at how often the two go together. And more often, we laugh at being sick, at being poor, at our lingering vanities un-tempered by sick bodies.

I eulogize my once-perky breasts defeated by gravity after so few occasions for bras. Where others may have offered reassurance, H exclaims down a busy Kensington Ave: *breasts akimbo!*

Some turn our way to the sound of H's full-throated cackle. Most look away when they see us limping, our shuffling steps shaky with exhaustion. I laugh and squish my boobs together then let them fall back in wayward unison.

Together, we are queer irreverence—a quality borne of bodies rarely considered sacred. For some, a body queer and a body sick are hardly different after all. It frees us, this failure to fit, to treat the world with as little reverence as we have come to expect in return. And though it never stops hurting, H shows me how to laugh.

We are giggling when H stops abruptly on the sidewalk. With wide-eyed panic, they ask me for a ride to the grocery store.

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The air conditioning of Walmart's bleach bright aisles is stark against our skin; it cools the sweat trapped in all our creases. Though H is twelve years older than me, they are faster to speed-walk across the linoleum towards a blue-vested employee. By the time I catch up with my sore-hipped, aching-kneed hobble, I only catch the end of their question.

Period panties? The employee directs us to a section in the back corner of the pharmaceutical aisles, behind the condoms and vitamins, to the left of the cartoon band-aids.

Amidst the pharmaceuticals, we are met with Walmart's finest selection of adult diapers. A green plastic package adorned with the overbright grin of a diapered white man stares back at us. His thumb is raised in exaggerated eagerness. I remember the weeks when my inflamed knees struggled to seat me on the toilet; when my thumb was too splinted to raise, my jaw too stiff to smile.

Shit! H's good humour falters. *This isn't what I meant.*

The cotton of my romper clings as we wade through the rows of protein powders and cough medicine. The air conditioning only makes me more aware that I have sweat too many fluids, that I should really sit before passing out. But squatting on the linoleum would only make another employee party to our panty foraging. I'm tempted to ask H why they can't use the diapers, but they are punctuating their search with a breathy: *shit, shit, shit, shit, shit*.

When we wander far enough into the cosmetics aisle, past the shampoos and conditioners and next to nail polish and pumice stones, we finally find a singular brand of period panties. A disembodied waist, panty-donned and slim, mark the box as a beauty product. H grabs them and runs to the bathroom after telling me to meet them back at my car.

I promise not to make a crime scene in your car, they assume me sitting on my passenger seat.

I've always wanted to star in an HBO special, I say back, starting the engine.

True crime: hot and diapered. H rolls down the window.

Your chalk outline would have such a nice ass with the diaper.

They bark with laughter.

When they invite me in to their apartment, they don't apologize for the mess or feign efforts to tidy. I don't troubleshoot ways to staunch their bleeding nor pretend I could help them any more than the panties, that I'm not seconds away from collapsing myself. When I lay on the hardwood to save myself the head injury, they join me without comment. I listen as they tell me about how much it hurts.

H has spent the last year ping ponged between gynecologists and general practitioners in search of some way to stop bleeding. Tomorrow, they would hazard misgendering to call their latest gynecologist, brave the bureaucratic gauntlet of waitlists, appointments, and insurance coverage. Tomorrow, H would find the strength to fight the bloodletting. But today, they make do with the period panties they know won't hold long but long enough. It's funny, how urgent bleeding is until it comes from someone's uterus.

Backs against the hardwood, we stretch our arms above our faces to aid our circulation and admire the matching tattoos that dot our fingers—stars on calloused knuckles. Together, we are a constellation of sore joints and tired hands. I wish I could know the story our stars are trying to tell us.

I tell H that I'm going back to work; that after a year unemployed, my sick body's needs are being superseded by my bank account's. Disability payments aren't enough to live without working and only pay when you can't live to work. I tell them that I don't know what it was all for. Wasn't there some deeper moral I should be extracting from being so sick, some righteous fury that spurs me on despite my tireless fatigue? They ask me if I'm ready though we both know it doesn't matter.

Of course not.

But poor?

But poor.

How much do HBO specials pay? H asks. *I'd wear a diaper for you.*

But we just found the panties, I say with feigned outrage. H stretches the waistband of their green cotton shorts and looks down as if to check that their new period panties have not transformed into diapers.

I know they aren't different, they confess.

But you weren't ready. I get it. I think of when my mother had to help me install a bench in my shower stall before she, thirty years my senior, needed one herself. Diapers, shower benches, splints, disability benefits—all chapters of becoming and being sick. Sometimes we still need to pretend that our lives had not diverged so far from who we were pre-covid, that we could still recognize ourselves through the grief. Sometimes, panties are a lifeline.

Actually, I'd wear a diaper now, H says. But only if I can bedazzle it. I want a cunty diaper.

I erupt with laughter. I've lost months to memory-blurring pain and on a rare day of lucidity, they have made me period panty co-conspirator. H reminds me that the universe doesn't mete out suffering like some cosmic pedagogue. With H it's simple: it sucks to be sick. And sometimes it's funny.

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