



# Calling the Moon

16 PERIOD STORIES  
FROM BIPOC  
AUTHORS



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Ibi  
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edited by  
Aida Salazar & Yamile Saied Méndez

Calling  
the  
Moon



# Calling the Moon

*16 PERIOD STORIES  
FROM BIPOC AUTHORS*

EDITED BY  
Aida Salazar *and*  
Yamile Saied Méndez



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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*To my hijita hermosa, Avelina Claridad,  
for allowing me to bloom alongside you.*

*To those who bleed and have yet  
to bleed: your blood is beautiful.*

AS

*Para Magalí y Areli*

*And for every child, even that inside  
the heart of every grown-up.*

YSM



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# The Rules of the Lake

*CHRISTINA SOONTORNVAT*

“This isn’t a Burger King!” shouted Ms. McKinney over the rumble of the school bus. “You can’t always get things your way.”

This was Ms. McKinney’s favorite saying, and she must have been shouting it at sixth graders since the ’70s to shut down their complaining. Well, who wouldn’t complain if they had to deal with the disappointment facing us out the window?

We were on our end-of-the-year class trip to Possum Hollow Lake. For a month, we’d stared at the promotional posters taped in the hallways that showed a glittering blue lake rimmed with waterslides, a tower crowned with super-soaking water guns, and the best part—the trapeze. For

weeks, I'd daydreamed about gripping on to that metal bar, swinging out as far as I could go, doing the perfect back-flip, and dropping into the cool, crystal paradise below.

But as our bus pulled into the gravel drive circling the property, all those dreams vanished. Possum Hollow Lake looked like—

“—where possums go to die!” shouted Eric Gunner. The kids around him burst into laughter.

Eleanor and Julie pressed up against me, and we stared out at the chalky brown water. “He’s not wrong,” Eleanor sighed, wrinkling her freckled nose.

“It’s not so bad . . . It’s natural,” said Julie. “This will be like getting back to nature.”

Sometimes I wondered if Julie’s retinas ever got burned from looking on the bright side so much.

“Well, brown water or not, I’m going off that trapeze at least fifty times before we leave this place,” I said.

“That’s the spirit, Penny!” said Julie. “We’re going to have fun no matter what.”

The bus pulled up into a parking spot, and an older man with a shiny tanned face and a polo shirt embroidered with the logo of a swimming possum boarded with a clipboard in hand.

“Welcome to the lake, boys and girls!” he said in a Texas accent that put even Ms. McKinney’s thick drawl to

shame. “Let me assure you that despite the color you see out your window, the pH levels at PH Lake are just fine.”

The joke fell flat, but he soldiered on. “We’ve had a lotta rain lately, which has stirred up the silt, but I promise that our lake water is continually refreshed from a spring-fed creek, and it’s perfectly fine to swim in. Couple of rules here at the lake. Number one: Respect each other. No roughhousing, fighting, or chicken fighting. Number two: Respect our plumbing. We got two trailer facilities on the property, and that’s it. You clog ’em up, you’re gonna be doing your business in the woods.”

Eleanor leaned over and whispered, “Do you think he planned his number-two rule to be about number two?”

Julie and I both snickered.

Our teacher’s assistant, Ms. Gallegos, checked our names off her list as we filed off the bus. It was only ten in the morning, but already sticky and hot. I didn’t care if the water was purple—I couldn’t wait to swing off that trapeze and dive in.

And then, just as we were spreading our towels in the grass near the lake’s edge, I felt it.

In books, they often describe dread as a sinking feeling “in the pit of your stomach.” Totally wrong. Dread is a warm gushing feeling between your legs. It’s the feeling of

knowing you started your first period fifty-four miles away from your house.

I pulled Julie and Eleanor close and whispered to them what just happened.

Julie's mouth fell open. "Are you sure?"

I tugged down my jean shorts, trying to figure out if they were wet without making a scene. "I don't know . . . but I'm pretty sure."

"Okay, it's fine. Don't panic," said Eleanor. "Penny, you and Julie go to the bathroom, and I'll go ask Ms. McKinney where to get . . . you know. Products."

I grimaced at the thought of hard-hearted Ms. McKinney knowing I had started my period, but at least I wouldn't have to be the one to ask her. This was what made Eleanor a champion best friend.

Julie and I headed for the girls' toilet trailer. It was an air-conditioned version of a Porta Potty with beige plastic wallpaper, two stalls, and a tiny sink. I went into the smaller stall, pulled down my shorts and swimsuit, and assessed the damage. I pressed toilet paper into the bottom of my suit, and it came away dark red.

I could see the top of Julie's blond head over the stall door. "So did you really start? Is it bad?" she asked.

"Yeah, I did. And it's not too bad, but not great." I was grateful that I had worn the one-piece with a

purple-and-black tie-dye pattern. The blood hadn't soaked through to my shorts yet, either.

"Does it hurt?" Julie whispered. She was taller than Eleanor and me by a foot, but her voice still sounded like it did in elementary school.

"I . . . don't really feel anything. My stomach kind of hurts a little—like crampy, but that's it."

The trailer door swung open, and I heard Eleanor call out, "Got it! Ms. McKinney had a pack of pads in her first-aid kit. Here, Penny. Sorry—it's kind of . . . on the big side."

She handed the blue plastic packet under the door. I unwrapped the pad, peeled off the plastic strip, and stuck it into the bottom of my suit. I flushed the toilet and stared at the stall door for a long time before opening it. Of all the days this could happen, did it really have to be today?

When I finally came out, Eleanor and Julie both gave me worried half smiles. "Are you okay?" asked Eleanor.

"Yeah, I'm okay." I walked to the sink—or should I say, I *waddled* to the sink. "But this pad is the size of a hot dog bun."

"Could you call your mom?" asked Julie. "Maybe she could bring you a smaller one."

I imagined Mom pulling up to the lake and getting out of the car to hug me tight, then handing me a pad that

wasn't big enough to see from outer space and maybe a tub of coconut ice cream. But it was already ten thirty. Mom was the cashier at Sawasdee, our Thai restaurant on the square, and she wouldn't have time to get all the way out here and back before the Friday lunch rush. My dad couldn't do kitchen duty and work the counter at the same time, so he might have to turn customers away. There's no way I'd ask them to lose out on our best sales day of the week just to bring me a smaller pad.

"It's fine," I said as I washed my hands. "I'll just tell her after school."

As uncomfortable as the pad was, I was relieved to know I wouldn't leak through my swimsuit. But as soon as we swung open the bathroom door, and I saw all my classmates yelling and splashing and swinging out into the water, my relief turned to heartbreak.

"Looks like no PH Lake for me," I grumbled.

"What if you kept your shorts on?" offered Julie. "Maybe no one would notice."

"I just want to sit down for a minute if that's okay."

We went back to our towels, and I lay down on my side. I felt weird and my stomach gurgled and cramped.

A few yards away, Amber Daley and her friends lay sprawled in their bikinis on giant towels as thick as plush bathrobes. Right then I made a solemn vow that when I

got older and became a millionaire, the first thing I'd buy would be a towel the size of a picnic blanket.

I looked up and saw Julie leaning toward me with a smile that I'm sure she meant to be sweet but was actually a little creepy. "What?" I said.

"You started your period!" she whispered. "The first one of us to do it—can you believe it?"

No, actually I was still in shock about the whole thing. I didn't think I'd have to worry about carrying pads with me until next year at least. I watched as Amber and her friends stood up and ran giggling toward the water's edge. Eleanor scowled at them with her death stare. I knew exactly what she was thinking.

It was Amber who had put the thought into my head that I wouldn't start my period so soon. She'd been one of the first girls in our grade who got hers. We went to the same gymnastics gym, and once when we were waiting for class to start, she'd said to me, "You're so lucky you're Asian, Penny."

She was always saying things like this. "Nice" things about me being Thai American that always made me feel weird, like "Boys like Asian girls because they're so exotic," or "Your mom's accent is *so* adorable." Was I really supposed to think those comments were complimentary?

That day at gymnastics, she'd said, "Asian girls don't get



their periods until they're way older. That's why they're so flat." She nodded to her own curvy chest and then to my barely-there breast buds, and quickly added, "That's totally a good thing in gymnastics, you know? They won't get in your way."

I knew immediately that it was pretty messed up and racist to say that to me. But as I watched Amber line up for the trapeze, I couldn't help being mad at myself. I had believed her. And when I told Julie and Eleanor what she said, they believed her, too. As much as I loved my best friends, sometimes I wished there were other Asian American girls in my grade to talk about this stuff with. Mom was always so busy working, and I never wanted to bother her. So I had just gone with it and let Amber fool me into getting caught off guard.

"Don't you want to get in?" Eleanor asked me.

Yes, more than anything. But I shook my head. "This pad is so huge that I'll probably bob on top of the water like a life preserver." I pulled my knees up to my (still-pretty-much-flat) chest. "But you two should go in. You don't have to sit here with me."

"No way," said Julie. "You've been waiting for this for weeks! We are not getting into that water without you."

Eleanor sat up with a determined look on her face.

“Julie’s right. We’re graduating sixth grade, and you are going off that trapeze. There’s only one thing to do.” She turned to look straight at me. “We’re finding you a tampon.”

Julie put her hand over her mouth and gasped.

“A tampon?” I said. “I just started my period and you want me to level up already?” I only had the vaguest notion of what a tampon even looked like. My mom didn’t use them, and even though we had talked about periods, she only ever mentioned pads. It was sort of an unspoken understanding between us that tampons weren’t something I needed to worry about.

From listening to the older girls at gymnastics, I had figured out that you wore a tampon inside your vagina, and that it was almost like magic. You could do nearly anything you normally did without worrying about bleeding on your clothes.

Eleanor stood up and held out her hand to me. “Come on. Before this day is over, we are getting in that disturbingly brown lake. *All* of us.”

My eyes tracked Amber as she swung out on the trapeze and did a backflip—*my* backflip—over the chocolate milk water.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s do it.”



Eleanor assured me that there had to be at least one other girl on the field trip who used tampons and had brought one with her. At first we tried to be discreet and just approached girls we thought might have started their periods already. But then I realized that was no better than what Amber had done, and we were stereotyping girls based on what they looked like. Now I understood firsthand that you couldn't tell just by looking at someone, and actually it was kind of rude to make that assumption.

So we straight-up asked around. Of course, we knew Amber had started, but there was no way I was going to ask her. Then Eleanor learned from one of her soccer friends that we should ask Margo Rainey.

"Oh, Margo is *so* super nice," said Julie. That was high praise coming from my nice bestie.

And it was true. In second grade, Margo had shared her glitter markers with me. If I could ask anyone for a tampon, it was her.

By then about half the kids had come out of the lake for lunch, and we found Margo sitting with her friends at one of the picnic tables.

"Oh, hi, Penny!" she said when I walked up. "How come you aren't swimming?" So nice, so concerned about my well-being.

“Well, actually . . .” I leaned closer and whispered my question to her.

She blushed a little and pointed to her backpack. “I do use tampons. But I’m sorry—I can’t give you one because I only have one left.”

Selfish, selfish Margo! Who only brings one tampon to a field trip?

“That’s okay, no problem,” I said, turning to walk away.

“Oh, but you should ask Alicia,” Margo called out. “She usually has them with her.”

Generous, sweet, giving Margo.

“Thank you!” I called back as I jogged away, the spaceship pad chafing my thighs.

The three of us found Alicia Flores waiting in line to fill up her water bottle. She carried a backpack covered with embroidered patches, and I said a silent prayer for it to be stuffed to the brim with tampons.

When we explained the situation, Alicia nodded knowingly as she reached into her backpack. “I got you covered, Penny.” I expected her to pull out a discreet zipper pouch. Instead, she held out a Chapstick-sized paper packet and handed it to me as casually as if it were an actual Chapstick.

I took it from her and tucked it under my towel, then untucked it again. I wanted to be cool and unembarrassed, too. Then I tucked it back under my towel. Not quite there yet.

Alicia nodded down at the tampon. “I don’t use the kind with an applicator because they end up in landfills. The wrapper on that one is biodegradable. You can flush it, no problem.”

“Perfect, Alicia, thanks,” I said, not having one clue about what she was talking about.

I ran for the bathroom trailer, Julie and Eleanor at my side. The three of us went into the big accessible stall on the end and latched the door behind us. I unwrapped the tampon and held it out. It was a tightly packed cotton nub about the size of my pinkie finger with a white string coming off the end of it.

“It’s so small,” said Julie.

“I think it expands as it absorbs . . . you know, the fluids,” said Eleanor. “It looks pretty simple, right?”

“Well.” I gulped. “Guess I’ll find out.”

Julie and Eleanor turned their backs, and I got down to business. Suddenly the simple cotton nub didn’t seem so simple at all. How was this supposed to work? Should I tackle this from the front or reach around the back? What should my angle of attack be? How far up was it supposed to go?

We heard the bathroom door swing open, and light flooded the trailer. I froze.

Then Amber's voice: "Did you see Eric go off the trapeze? He's such a show-off!"

Eleanor and Julie had also frozen, and Julie clutched Eleanor's arm. Amber's friend giggled and chattered away as she went into the stall next to mine. I could hear Amber tapping her flip-flopped foot.

"Is anyone in there?" Amber called impatiently. "I have to go. Penny, is that you?"

I startled at my name. And then I dropped the tampon into the toilet.

"Shoot!" I hissed. I stood and yanked up my swimsuit and shorts.

Julie turned, saw my horrified face, and gasped.

"What are y'all *doing* in there?" said Amber.

I panicked. Julie panicked. Eleanor, who never panics, must have panicked, because she flushed the toilet. And then we all looked at each other and remembered the number-two rule of Possum Hollow Lake too late: Respect the plumbing.

"Come *on*, already!" said Amber. "I have to go and you're hogging the stall."

The toilet gurgled, made a loud *sluck!* sound, and then stopped filling up with water. We bolted out of the stall and nearly bowled Amber over.

“Finally,” she said, going into the stall and latching the door.

We ran outside into the blazing heat and turned to watch the bathroom trailer.

“Oh gosh, oh gosh, oh gosh,” said Julie. “Do you think we clogged the toilet?”

“Alicia told me the wrapper was biodegradable,” I said. “Maybe the whole tampon will dissolve and it’ll be okay?”

Eleanor stared at the trailer. “I think we’re about to find out.”

Five seconds later, we heard a scream. A flood of water gushed out the door as Amber bolted out, shrieking, “MS. MCKINNEY!”

For the next hour, we lay in the grass, listening warily as the news spread.

“Did you hear?” called Eric. “Amber backed up the plumbing with her gigantic turd!”

“Shut *up*, Eric,” shouted Amber. “I did not!”

Miraculously, Amber hadn’t put it together that *I* had actually clogged up the toilet before she got in there. Poor Amber was a victim of circumstance, and I felt kind of bad about it.

Eleanor did not. “Serves her right,” she said with a sly smile. “She shouldn’t be such a jerk the next time.”

I smiled back, but then frowned again when I looked out at the lake. The trapeze swung empty. No line. Everyone had gone off it so many times that they were sick of it already. Everyone but us. We probably only had an hour, maybe two, left before we'd have to get back on the bus.

Suddenly I felt Julie tug on my arm. "It's Ms. Gallegos," she whispered, pointing to our teacher's assistant, who was walking straight toward us.

"Hi, girls," Ms. Gallegos called out. "Can I talk to y'all in private for a minute?"

We looked at one another. Ms. Gallegos always picked up on things Ms. McKinney missed, and from the look on her face, she'd figured out what no one else had. I gulped and hoped they weren't going to call our parents—or worse, make them pay for the damages.

Ms. Gallegos tilted her head at me. "I noticed that you three haven't gotten in the water all day. I know you were so excited to come on this trip, so it made me think something was up."

"Well, we . . . um . . ."

"So I'm going to give you something," she said, reaching into her purse. "If you don't need it, that's okay."

She held out a zippered makeup bag. I took it from her and opened it. Inside was a variety of panty liners and pads that were a fraction of the size of the gigantic one I was



currently wearing. And nestled in between: slim tampons of various sizes and brands.

I looked up at Ms. Gallegos. If there was only one pint of coconut ice cream left on the planet, I would have given it to this woman. “Thank you,” I said.

She smiled. “You still have a little time before we have to get back on the bus. Not sure how many trapeze swings you’ll get in, but it’s worth a try.” Before she walked away, she nodded at the line of boys and girls waiting for the remaining toilet trailer. “Oh, and now that this place is down to one bathroom, you might look for somewhere with a little more privacy.” She pointed to the far side of the lake. “There’s a hiking trail that winds along a little creek. I just walked the whole thing and no one’s on it.”

The three of us looked at one another. Then we gathered up our backpacks. It was time for a hike.

Ms. Gallegos was right. No one was on the trail. Still, we walked until the trees completely obscured our view of the lake. And just to be careful, Julie stood guard. “Nobody gets by me!” she said, holding up her palm and planting her long legs on either side of the path.

Eleanor and I walked a little farther into the trees. Inside Ms. Gallegos’s zippered pouch there was a folded-up instruction sheet for how to use a tampon. Eleanor and I

unfolded it and spread it out on the trail in front of us, like explorers reading a map.

Eleanor took one tampon out to use as a model. She muttered as she pointed to the diagrams. “Okay, this makes sense . . . This part’s the applicator, and you just push this up here . . .”

After we’d studied everything in the pamphlet, I stood up. “Okay, well, here goes nothing.” I took one of the smaller tampons with a plastic applicator, saying a silent apology to Alicia and the landfill.

I walked behind an enormous cypress tree near the creek’s edge. I slipped off my shoes and made sure one more time that no one could see me. Then I pulled down my shorts and crouched down among the tree’s knotted roots.

I didn’t want to take my whole swimsuit off. Even though the tree trunk hid me from sight, it still felt weird to get naked out in the open. In fact, the whole thing felt weird. Was I really about to use a tampon for the first time? Here?

I looked behind me at the creek. The water was crystal clear—nothing like the muddy swill in the lake—and a cool breeze ruffled the leaves overhead. I inhaled, breathing in the scent of fresh moss and cypress needles. If I had to do something new and scary, at least it was in a place like this, with my friends close by.

“Just think of that backflip,” I whispered to myself.

The whole thing was actually not nearly as complicated as I thought it would be. Instead of taking my swimsuit off, I pulled the bottom of it to the side. I peeled off the blood-soaked spaceship pad, rolled it up tightly, and wrapped it in a sheet of paper I had in my backpack. It was a little tricky to envision the tampon diagram upside down and backward. It took a couple of tries, but once I figured out the angle, everything slid into place. I tucked the applicator into the bottom of my backpack with the pad to throw away later. When I stood up, I could just barely feel something was different, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

“I'm done!” I shouted triumphantly. As I started back, I put my hand on the tree trunk and felt something. A rope.

My eyes followed the rope up and up to where it was tied to a thick branch overhead. A rope swing.

“Eleanor! Julie!” I called out. “Come here!”

They both ran up, wide-eyed.

“Well?” asked Eleanor.

“Are you traumatized?” asked Julie.

“What? No!” I laughed. “I did it, and it's in, and it's totally fine. *Look!*”

Their eyes followed mine up the rope swing and then back down into the cool, deep water below.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding!” said Julie.

“Like finding buried treasure,” said Eleanor.

I held the rope out to her. “Should we do it?”

Eleanor nodded and grinned. “It’s your day to go first.”

Julie clapped her hands. “This is so awesome!”

Holding the rope in one hand, I climbed up the knobby tree trunk until I reached the lowest branch. I gripped the rope in both hands. It wasn’t a trapeze—but, hey, life isn’t a Burger King. You can’t always get things your way.

I smiled as I swung out, out over the water and let go.

# Muñeca

**AIDA SALAZAR**

I am not Amá's first-choice daughter, not even by a long shot. Yet I am the one who agreed to work in a factory with her for the summer. I am not the oldest, who *should* have the most duty but has to prepare "for college." I'm not one of the youngest, who are too busy playing outside. I'm not the two older boys, who don't do anything because they are basically macho royalty in our house for no good reason. And I'm for sure not the second oldest, who cleans the house like an abuela on steroids.

I'm the middle child of seven who happened to finish her last day of the year with no need for summer school, the one who technically qualifies for a work permit but who doesn't have a job, the one who doesn't care about

cleaning the house until it sparkles. My entire thirteen-year-old life is filled with one obsession—to get my period before summer’s over and I start eighth grade. Other than that, my life is pretty much nada. Zip. Zilch. Zero. I have no excuse to say no to go work with Amá.

The morning is just peeking through the horizon as I climb into our old orange-brown van with Amá at the wheel.

“¿Lista?” Amá says, and smiles.

“Ready.” I answer, not entirely awake despite the machaca burrito I wolfed down with milk.

Suddenly I realize how strange it is to be alone with Amá this early in the morning, earlier than when I get up for school even. But more than anything, it’s weird because I am *actually* alone with her! This never happens with seven kids swarming around her every day, fighting for her attention, but also because our house is always filled with people asking things of her, too. See, Amá is a sobadora, a bonesetter who was taught by my grandmother and her grandmother before her in the art of adjusting sprained joints, crooked backs, wobbly hips, stiff necks, and a whole bunch of things that I don’t even know about. People in Maywood call her “the bone mechanic” in Spanish because she is so good at fixing achy bodies, though she doesn’t charge folks like a real mechanic should. People pay her what they can, which isn’t much and the real reason we’ve got to take these jobs at

the factory. Anyway, my point is that there's always someone around, and Amá knows a whole bunch of stuff about how bodies work and *now*, we are alone.

So, I figure, here's my chance. I'm going to get her to tell me all the things she knows about periods. I want to hear everything she knows about blood, wombs, moods—without leaving out any of the gory details. I mean, everything that I haven't already learned by reading all of those “menstruation” books I checked out from the library or by spying on my two older sisters. What I really want, though, is for her to tell me when my period is coming because literally everyone else in seventh grade claims they've started. It feels like I'm the last one to be picked for kickball or something. It totally isn't fair.

Just as I begin to ask, “Amá, when do you think . . . ?” she revs up the engine, and the sound of the loud muffler plus the radio blaring ranchera music drown me out.

“Vamos, Lali,” she says to the van.

Amá named the van Lali because after she'd had it for a gazillion years, it started to make a noise with its spinning tires that, to Amá, sounded like *lali, lali, lali*. She loves the old heap, even though it's painted in a glimmering orange brown and still has the wood platform that once held a waterbed but now holds a thin spring mattress with a mess of blankets. Lali is everything to her, even though

to us kids, it is beyond embarrassing. We beg her to drop us off a block away from school so that other kids don't see us coming in the dingy orange-brown booger of a van. Once a year, she and Papi pile us into it and take us on an eighteen-hour drive to Mexico for las fiestas in our pueblo in December. Amá usually whistles or sings the whole way there. She packs all sorts of secondhand clothes, shoes, and personal supplies underneath the bed frame.

In Mexico, she is like Santa Claus because she makes sure she has a gift, pulled out from under Lali's bedframe, to give every single person in our family. Amá is all generous like that. Even with things she doesn't have. Maybe because she grew up poorer than we are now, sleeping on dirt floors and everything, and knows what it's like to go without. I don't know. But as long as Lali works, it is going to be in our family.

As the van whistles *lali, lali, lali* and bounces along the potholed streets over the Fourth Street bridge into downtown LA, I shout, "Amá!"

She turns down the music and says, "Tell me, muñeca."

It surprises me that she calls me a doll right then because she never—I mean never—calls anyone that. Well, maybe except when we are sick or when she wants to be extra sweet to someone else. Maybe she senses I am about to get super personal with her. Or maybe she is happy that



at least one of her kids came to work with her. Whatever the reason, I'll take Amá's little bit of sugar because it makes me feel . . . I don't know, special, I guess.

"When do you think I'm going to get my period?" I accidentally continue to shout even though the radio has gone quiet.

Amá's face looks surprised, but then relaxes when she answers, "Your luna? Pues, I don't know, mi'ja. Everyone's timing is different. Some get it early like your sister Nena, who got hers at nine and a half. Otras get it later, like I did when I was fifteen. It depends on your naturaleza. Just like the moon's cycle, nobody can rush it."

"You mean I might have to wait until I'm fifteen?" My heart races as if I've done a bunch of jumping jacks.

"Claro, everything will come in due time. But what's the rush, eh?"

"Can't you do one of your sobadora moves on me so that it comes faster?" I ask.

"Ay, mi'ja. I only fix what's hurt or broken, not what's natural. Every body is unique. Todo a su tiempo. No need to stress over it."

This is highly discouraging. I can't believe I might actually have to show up to eighth grade with this same no-period and, might I add, curveless body because "every body is unique." Just my luck.

We pull up to a parking lot of a huge brick-and-cement building, where dozens of Lalis are parked—all different shapes and colors but beat-up and crotchety just like ours.

A woman keeps the door open for us as we walk in. “¿Son madre e hija?” she asks.

*Well, duh, lady,* I want to say. We *are* mother and daughter. I mean, it is *so* obvious. Same larger-than-life forehead. Same big brown eyes. Same moist sand color in our skin. Same big knobs for cheeks when we smile. I’m just a scrawnier and much flatter-chested version of her. And I have tons of zits sprawled across my forehead that literally appeared out of nowhere just a couple of weeks ago.

“The office is through there, amigas.” The lady points, and we walk into a gathering of about ten people at what I can only guess is an orientation.

A balding rail of a man stands in front of us. His teeth are movie-star white except for a couple of missing molars I notice when he introduces himself as Mr. Chen. “After you fill out this paperwork, we will walk through the site and I will show you what you need to do.”

I whisper my Spanish translation of what he says to Amá. She doesn’t know a speck of English, though she’s lived in the United States so long. How could she? Amá only went up to third grade in Mexico. She was never able to do much more here. We live in Southeast LA, and

almost everything she needs can be found in Spanish because everyone speaks it here. Other things like school notes, DMV papers, and important stuff, Papi or one of us translates for her. Amá says she went to “la universidad de la vida.” The university of life is how she has learned to survive el norte.

A couple of women lean in. They look at me with bug eyes as if to ask me to translate for them, too.

Amá nudges me and says, “Sí, mi’ja. Translate.”

So not only am I supposed to spend my whole thirteenth summer quite possibly not getting my period and stuck inside this muggy building working on Lord knows what, *but* I am also going to have to translate for every Spanish speaker here. Great.

Mr. Chen walks us into a huge warehouse that’s stacked to the rafters with cardboard boxes and reeks of overly perfumed hairspray. The Spanish-language radio is playing my mom’s favorite station—KLUV—which makes Amá’s grin real bright. In the center are four long lines of tables linked together. People stand side by side as they face the tables and work. Some are assembling thin hot-pink cardboard boxes with plastic windows. The people in the next row over are taking out blond-haired, pale-skinned plastic dolls, about the size of my torso, from sky-high stacks of big cardboard boxes. People working at the third table

are dressing the dolls in little outfits, combing their hair, spraying them with that stinky hairspray. The fourth line of people is tying their arms and legs down with twist ties into hot-pink cardboard linings and loading the perfectly made-up packaged dolls back into big empty cardboard boxes.

Okay, so dolls. We are supposed to dress and box up dolls. I was so busy obsessing about when I'm getting my period that I didn't even bother to ask Amá on our ride over what the job was about. Just great. The truth is, it doesn't even matter because all I can think about is how I'm going to have to fake my period all through eighth grade and probably ninth grade, too. Fifteen is a ridiculously long time to wait. Like, really long.

"These are our assembly lines," Mr. Chen continues. "You will be working on one of these, but *I* will select which one." Mr. Chen notices me translating and pulls me by the arm to stand beside him as he continues to explain. My face feels so hot and red, I bet even my zits aren't noticeable. I feel a sharp tugging in my guts like maybe I need to poop. When I look at Amá, she gives me several quick little nods and shoots me some eyes that say, *That's right. That's why I send you to school in el norte, so you can help our gente when it is needed.* Ugh. Amá with her always-helping ways is so extra.

“Just look at what your neighbor is doing and follow along,” he says, not to the group anymore but to me. I clear my throat and begin to translate, but then Mr. Chen scolds me: “Speak up. They need to hear you.”

I nod and try again, fighting the urge to double over because my guts are starting to ripple with sharp pains. Uh-oh, maybe these torzones are because of the machaca burrito I had this morning. It feels like my guts are twisting and getting ready to push out a big poop.

When I look over at Amá, her head is completely turned and focused on the doll-dressing row. She is almost googly-eyed with adoration. It is the melty-faced look she only gets when she sees a baby.

“All right, let’s begin.” He counts the first three people on the left and sends them to the first row.

“These people will work on assembling the doll packages,” I repeat in Spanish.

When Amá sees this, she slowly inches away from them. She can tell how this is going down, and I can see her trying to get in on the third row. Mr. Chen picks the second set of people, which doesn’t include her. Then Amá quickly moves in front to make sure she is picked next. Mr. Chen doesn’t even see Amá making moves, and so he picks her for what I know she wants—the doll-dressing row.

I get stuck with the last row, putting the finished

packages back into new cardboard boxes, which I guess I don't mind since I am so over playing with dolls anyway.

The place suddenly gets loud with Spanish as the workers on the line show us, step-by-step, how we are supposed to do things. I hope it means that I don't have to translate anymore.

A man next to me works lightning fast. "Watch closely, chaparrita. Ours is the easiest job." Chaparrita? Sure, I am shorter than everyone else because I am basically the only kid here, but who does he think he is, my tío or something? Anyway, he's right: our job is to tie down the dolls and slide them into the hot-pink boxes so their faces look out the plastic windows, then close the top lid, secure it with tape, and put it back in the bigger box. Super easy, right?

But then why do I feel queasy, like my guts are folding in on themselves? I take big gulping breaths and begin to work. I try not to think about how creepy these dolls look with their plastic white skin and plastic hair and mechanically blinking eyes that look dead when they open and close.

Though her back is to me, I hear Amá getting all excited about playing with the dolls.

"Ay, these muñecas are so precious. Look at their little outfits! They are so well made. And they fit! Mira, just look at their eyes, light blue like the sky. And their hair looks like it is made of gold." Amá turns to me, cradling a doll in

her arms like a baby. She looks like she is about to fly away with happiness.

I suddenly remember that once Amá told me about how she and her sisters made dolls from scraps of old clothes and burlap sacks. She got married to Papi at nineteen and started having babies right away. She never got a lily-white girl doll like these, not of her own, at least. She got all of us brown babies, cuter than these dolls, I think. But honestly, we *did* get zits on our faces, and hopefully not for too long. It makes me happy for Amá to be able to play dolls, even though they are creepy and not brown, and even though she is all grown up and is really supposed to be working. She seems too in love to notice my face prunning up in pain. I wish she would at least come over to see if I'm okay.

My lower panza pain does leave once I start moving. I get to thinking about my never-coming period again and scan my mind to remember anything Amá told my sisters about their lunas. I remember when my oldest sister had just gotten some fancy "NoWet" underwear, which are basically like super-absorbent underwear you wash so you don't need a pad. They're kinda genius. Anyway, Amá was shocked at how well they worked. She said that in her rancho, women made pads using the same scraps of old clothes and burlap sacks they used for dolls, and

sometimes they made them of soft leaves and grass. Then, once the homemade pads had soaked up their luna blood, the women would bury them in the ground and they would just turn into compost. She said everything was connected—us, our blood, the earth, and la luna. But of course, it's probably nothing I have to worry about now that I am basically going to be a child until I am fifteen.

After a few hours of hustling at the factory, the pain in my gut returns strong like a tug-of-war.

“Amá, my stomach hurts,” I finally yell over the song blasting on KLUV. “I think I have torzones.”

“¿Qué, mi'ja?” She turns to me. At least her mom sonar hasn't been affected by the dolls.

“I feel like throwing up,” I say, feeling a warm dizziness buzzing in my head.

“Go get some water, mi'ja. Lunch is going to come soon,” she says, first frowning at me like she doesn't believe me, then throwing her eyes over toward the water fountain near the office.

I walk slowly over to the fountain and drink about six small paper cups full of water. I figure this feeling is either from that darn machaca burrito this morning or the fact that Amá is showing more joy at being with dolls than she ever does with us.



I try to walk back to my station, but I can't take it anymore as barf inches its way up my throat. I'm not throwing up here! So I book it to the bathroom.

Mr. Chen shouts at me, "Hey, girl, where are you going?"

I ignore him and burst into the stall and bend over the toilet. Nothing comes but drool. I seriously don't know what is happening. So I sit down to see if something will squish out of me another way. When I look down at my panties, I notice there is a small, round, bright brownish-red dot right in the center of the crotch.

Could it be? Oh snap! It's here, it's here, my luna is finally here! Hey, Period! Where the heck have you been, anyway? Don't you know I am literally the last girl in seventh grade to get it?

I am sooo glad I don't have to show up to eighth grade a total fraud! Oh, wait, is *this* what it feels like to get your period? You get too many zits, knots in your panza, and want to throw up and poop or both? That's when I realize, *OMG, I'm in a doll factory bathroom getting my very first period! Where the heck is my mom?*

I start hacking a maxi pad by wrapping half the roll of toilet paper around my hand and trying to figure out how to put it on my panties so it stays when I hear someone come in.

"Mi'ja, are you okay?"

“Amá!” My avalanche of questions, my wooziness, my panza achiness, my relief that she’s here—it all tumbles together into that one word. Amá. She never let a scrape go by without her saying, “Sana, sana, colita de rana.” And we would use this baby rhyme on each other, too. But this isn’t a scrape on the knee. I am thirteen and too old for a silly kiddie rhyming healing spell to work on me. The pain feels like it’s deep inside. My unique body. I don’t think Amá’s bone-mechanic skills can help me with this.

“Do you think it was the machaca?”

“No, Amá. I started my luna. But it hurts my panza real bad.”

“¡Válgame, María Purísima!” she prays. “Mira, just when you were asking, it comes. Let me see . . . No. There isn’t a machine in here. Mi’ja, why don’t you make a pad with toilet paper?”

“I already did.”

“Good! That’s the best part of having older sisters. You’re probably more prepared than most.”

“Pero, Amá, why does it hurt so much?” My whimper turns into a full-on cry.

“Now, that’s not a good sign. That didn’t happen to your sisters on their first time. Hmm? I know, let’s go ask Mr. Chen if we can take an early lunch.”

“No, no, no! I don’t want to tell Mr. Chen!” I say. Just

thinking about it feels like an explosion of embarrassment detonating in my head.

“Well, *I* can’t tell him. He doesn’t understand me, mi’jita,” she says. “It’s just a half hour before noon, anyway.”

“Can’t I just sit here until lunch?” I let out some gas and feel a slight relief.

“What, and suffer unnecessarily? Mira, we only need to get you to Lali so I can lay you down.”

“But do *I* really have to tell him?”

“No, no. Don’t worry about it, mi’ja. I’ll see if one of our new friends out there will help me explain to Mr. Chen.”

“Please, Amá. Don’t tell him!”

“No, amor. A little white lie is all I’ll have to tell. God forgives those easily.”

As I wait for Amá to come back, I break into a sweat, and the pain is like a growing orb in my lower body. I groan and hug myself. I feel nothing but anger at her, for not speaking English, for paying more attention to the dolls than me, for bringing me to work in this factory, for not knowing when my period was coming and saying stupid things like “all in due time.” I feel a few drops of blood fall into the toilet, and when I look down, the bright-red liquid surprises me with the way it spreads in pretty ripples in the clear water. I am legit bleeding.

Just then, Amá walks in and says, “Lista. We got the okay.”

I unlock the stall, and she comes in to help me up and checks to see if my hacked pad is in the right place. Luckily, we don’t have to walk through the workspace to get back out to the parking lot.

When Amá opens up Lali, I feel happier than ever to climb into that beat-up old van and its flimsy old mattress to lie down. Amá revs her up to get the AC going because the LA heat makes it volcano-hot inside Lali. Now the pain comes in crashing waves. It grows strong and then relaxes, grows strong then relaxes. Back and forth. *Lali, lali, lali* and the whir of the AC are a soothing song in my mind, though I feel like a wounded animal.

“Come here, pobre muñequita,” Amá says as she lays her hands on my lower belly, takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and stays still. Amá’s given me sobadas a bunch of times before, but somehow this massage feels so different. “What’s happening is that your uterus is out of place.”

“What? Why?” I begin to ask and then add, “None of the period books ever said anything about an out-of-place uterus.” She sees my face loaded with confusion and responds, “Your grandmother and many sobadoras like me believe that sometimes, when we take a fall one too many times, our matriz will shift out of position. It causes us to

cramp when our lunas come and needs to be realigned with your body. It's our way of healing. It's older than the stars. And probably not going to be in those gringo menstruation books of yours."

"Amá, it hurts," I almost growl.

"I'm going to give you a special sobada, a womb massage, to set it back into its place."

"Me duele." I can't take it and shake my head from side to side.

"Quieta." She hushes me and starts to bend me like a rag doll. She pulls and pushes at my skin, my joints, and my back. With every position she puts me in, I wince with pain but then feel the tiniest bit better as my body sounds off dull firecrackers under my skin. *Crackle, crackle, crackle.*

I hear her praying quietly. Then finally, she pulls some hand cream from Lali's glove compartment and rubs her hands briskly as if to get them hot. Amá moves her hands in big, smooth circles right where it hurts, which she ends with a quick move up to my belly button.

Amá looks down at me with the same sweetness she gave those dolls, and I feel guilty for having been mean to her in my mind. She grabs my hands then and moves them across my belly in the same big circles. My hands slide with the secrets and knowledge my mother, my grandmother, and her mother kept—our own kind of medicine. Together,

we pull an imaginary string out of my belly button with our fingertips, and Amá blows it into the air. Maybe I am too distracted by what we are doing to notice, but suddenly the pain is almost gone.

“Do you feel any better, muñeca?” Amá’s eyebrows lift with the question.

“Sí. I can hardly feel the pain anymore.”

“Well, let’s see if Lali can get us to a café to get you a manzanilla tea to finish the healing.”

I close my eyes, not sure how to say it, but the words “Gracias, Amá,” squeak out with tears of relief. But then a little sharp pain comes haunting back for a second. Amá places her hands over my panza again. They are warm with all that she knows beyond period books. She doesn’t have to say, “Sana, sana, colita de rana,” because her hands hold the magic of that childhood spell, and her touch, her mamá’s muñeca touch, only for me, is more than enough to make it all the way better.

# Turning Point

LEAH HENDERSON

Mica and Nica walk behind Mom in a perfect line, chins up, shoulders back. Hair in perfect topknots—her mirror. While here I am in the back. Hitting the pavement hard, leaving a trail of mud behind.

“Must you, Imari?” Mom asks as we make our way into the mudroom. But it really isn’t a mudroom at all, except where I stand, with a muddy soccer ball under my arm. My sisters hang the ribbons of their pointe shoes on wooden pegs, and I knot the laces of my cleats and loop them around the last one. As the shoes smack together, dirt hits the floor. I go right for the closet and grab the miniature broom Mom bought just for me. “Come over here and let me do something with that hair. Does it have

to stick out every which way? Why don't you let me make it into a smoothed-out bun?"

I dodge her hands the way I fake out players on the field. A perfect bun is not for me. I like my curls free. Besides, can I help it if after a header or two, a couple of them really want freedom from my ponytail elastic?

"Mom, it's fine," I say. "We're home. No one's going to see."

"I see." She looks at me like *How did I get this child?*

My heart burns a little, but I shake it away. It doesn't matter.

Nica runs her hand over her hair as if my popping curls might be contagious, and then she and Mica prance off. Yes, prance, like they're still on some stage.

"I like Mari's curls," Mica whispers, but zips her lips fast when Nica throws her a classic Mom stare—right eye narrowed, left brow reaching for the sky. They're three minutes and forty-eight seconds apart in age, and Nica will never let Mica forget it, and even though I have three years and nine months on both of them at twelve, sometimes Nica feels like my second mom, too.

I grab my soccer bag as the side door opens and Dad strolls in. My face splits into a smile. Then his briefcase and two shopping bags are down on the floor and he's loosening his tie, like he's ready for some freedom, too.



“Hey, how’s my Rocket? How was your game?” he asks as he leans in and kisses Mom. “Hey, beautiful,” he says to her. She’s already trying to straighten his tie again.

“I scored two goals and had an assist,” I say, cheesing wider than the distance between goalposts. We played the only team that has a better record than we do, so that’s saying something.

“Ah, so you showed ’em a thing or two.” He nods. “That’s my girl!”

“Your girl needs to bring that smelly bag to the laundry room and go take a shower. You’d think she likes walking around caked in dirt.”

“She was working, Viv. That’s what happens when you’re doing your thing on the field. You get dirty sometimes. But go get cleaned up.” He nods toward the stairs. “I need my sous-chef to help me throw down in the kitchen. We’re making my world-class stuffed peppers tonight.”

Mom is about to protest about the need to get “that dirty” like she does *every* time, but Dad kisses her again. He puts his suit jacket over his arm and grabs the groceries. “Get to it, Rocket. So we can make our masterpiece!”

“And get those shin pads out of that bag. They need air!” Mom says between kisses with Dad. “I don’t want them stinking up the whole house. And spray that bag with disinfectant!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I rush to do everything Mom expects so I can be Dad’s sous-chef.

Midnight black, Othello lays on the steps, wagging his tail as I greet him. “Hey, Thello. I scored two more today—that makes eleven for the season.” He nudges me to pet him, and as soon as I do, he rolls on his back so I can get to the good spots.

“Shower. Now. Imari,” Mom calls.

She can’t even see me. But she knows everything happening in this house even when you think you’re invisible.

“Sorry, little man, gotta go.” I jump up and grab my bag.

Thello grumbles but rolls onto his stomach and hops up to follow me.

In the upstairs study nook by the wall of windows and bookshelves, Mica is standing on the couch. She leaps off, lands wobbly in fifth, and stumbles backward as Thello and I come up the stairs.

“Buuuusted,” I sing as Nica eyes me, feet perched on the edge of the couch, ready to take flight.

“Get a run in those new tights, or let Mom see you standing on the couch, and I’m not saving you,” I warn, coming closer.

I run my finger across my neck, and Mica’s eyes go a little wide while Nica’s narrow. Then Nica arches that one

brow again. She's scared of nothing. I like that little bit of rebel in her.

"Your funeral," I say as I come to my door.

In my room, I kick my bag into the corner and race to get in the shower. I don't want Dad starting without me.

I finish showering and wipe off, dropping my towel over the side of the tub. As I'm reaching for my clothes, I feel more water running down my thigh. I guess I missed a spot. But, yikes, it looks like I missed . . . "What the heck?" I pull the towel away and freak. Blood! I grab at my leg, searching for a cut, before I realize how far up the blood's coming from. I race to the toilet and sit, grabbing wipes and cleaning myself off. Small droplets of red hit the toilet water and spread wide. This doesn't seem good. Did I get kicked somewhere I can't see? I wipe again and again. And realize exactly what's happening. Ms. Claiborne's mentioned it in class before. Not much, but she has. I need to relax. I'm not dying. Or at least, I hope not.

I think I just got my period.

Dad whistles in the hall as he knocks on my bedroom door.

"I'm coming," I shout from the bathroom and then quickly add, "Dad . . . um?"

"Yeah, baby girl?"

"Never mind."

“You sure?”

“Mm-hmm, I’m okay. I’ll be down in a minute.”

“All right, hurry so we can light things up.”

I shake my head and roll my eyes. Dad can’t help but be corny. I smile. Then it slips, because even though I need his help—and I know he would totally try—he’s clueless when it comes to stuff like this. Though he’d read *everything* he could to figure it out. But instead of asking the person I know could help me, I stubbornly wad up a handful of toilet paper and push it into my underwear. That should work for now. I’ll google what to do after dinner. And I’ll probably need to figure out how to get to a store.

After flushing the toilet, I try to scrub the blood out of the towel with soapy water until the evidence fades into the yellow and white stripes. It’s stubborn, though, not totally disappearing. So I bury it at the bottom of my hamper and add a couple clean towels, just in case. I know it sounds bizarre, but as I straighten, I feel my reflection staring back at me in the mirror over the sink. I mean like really staring.

*Just talk to her*, it says.

Nope. I pull on an old Juventus jersey and black shorts and switch off the bathroom light and my reflection. When I open the door, Thello is on the other side waiting for me on my bed, tail wagging.

“Come on, boy. Let’s go help Dad.”

He looks past me into the bathroom as if he knows something big just happened there, but he doesn't say a thing.

When I get to the kitchen, Dad has Donny Hathaway blasting from the speakers. I can already tell it's going to be a good cooking night. I grab the black apron he bought me last year that says BEAUTIFUL BLACK MAGIC IN THE KITCHEN, while his reads CULINARY WIZARD FROM THE MOTHERLAND.

Dad's put all the ingredients on the counter, and I know my first jobs—washing, cutting, and deseeding. As he dances around the kitchen singing, he leans a wooden spoon toward me. I'm backup vocals on this one and that's cool. When it's Chaka Khan or Beyoncé, it's all me.

But when Mom walks in the kitchen and turns off the music, everything stops, including the water for a second, like it's not sure it's safe to come out of the faucet anymore.

“Ba—” Dad starts, but Mom shakes her head, looking at me with a smile, as if I just did a pirouette.

“Mom?” I ask, the green pepper still in my hand.

“Imari, is there anything you want to tell me?” she asks.

I look between her and Dad. There is no way she could know. How could she know? My eyes zip down then back up.

Phew.

Nothing. Good thing I have on black, though.

“Um, no,” I say. I want to turn back to the sink, but it’s not wise to turn my back on Mom when she’s speaking. So I just stare. Her eyes roam over my face. What’s she looking for?

“You’d make the perfect Clara!” she says. Her face is shining, like *I need sunglasses* kind of shining.

“A perfect who?” I’ve absolutely no idea what she’s talking about.

“I just got off the phone with Katlynn’s mother. Katlynn told her . . .”

I try not to roll my eyes for the third time today. Mom hates when I roll my eyes, but whenever she mentions Katlynn—the last person you’d ever want to sit next to in class, because you might lose an eye with the way she waves her whole body when she raises her hand for *every* question—and her mother in the same sentence, things are never good.

“Clara from *The Nutcracker*. Marlene said they’d thought about doing *Coppélia*, but decided on *The Nutcracker* in the end.”

*They? Who?*

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asks. “It’s being cosponsored by your French Club and the theater department. Auditions are Friday.”

That’s what she’s on about? I almost drop the pepper

in relief and shrug. Why would I have told her about that? No way I'm trying out for any part. Nope . . . uh-uh. There's nothing to tell. Katlynn and her mom can have all that. And as my sisters burst into the kitchen, I'm just glad I don't have to blast my business to the whole family that, yes, I just got my period.

"That's why you're turning off Donny Hathaway? Come on, beautiful," Dad says, wrapping his arms around Mom, dancing and humming in her ear.

That's it, Dad. Keep her busy so I can get back to cooking.

Mica and Nica twirl around them, hopping up and down as Dad sneakily pushes the play button on the music.

All through dinner, Mom talks about how wonderful it will be for me to play Clara. But somehow she's forgotten: *I don't do ballet*. Besides, I need to figure out what to do about my situation and how I'm going to get to the store. I could call Nasha—she's my best friend, after all. Her mom is always sending her to the store around their way. So maybe she can grab me something, but I know she'll squeal to her mom without thinking, and Nasha comes by her squealing honestly. Mom would definitely find out.

I'll think of something. I know I can. That's what the internet's for.

When I get to my room, I race to the bathroom and

wad up another roll of toilet paper. Then I flop on my bed and slide my finger across my iPad screen. Toilet paper isn't a long-term solution. But what do I type? I try: *my first period*.

Yikes!

A ton of stuff comes up—tampons, pads, period underwear, discs, cups. Cups? What am I going to do with a cup? There are videos about period horror stories. Most embarrassing period moments. And videos about what moms said, or didn't say. I pick a link for *first period*.

“What to expect and how to get prepared.”

Too late. I'm already past the *preparing phase*. The next site is all about talking to a mom, a big sister, a dad, or the school nurse. But none of those options are going to work right now, either. Mom and I never get on the same roadway, as Dad says. So, I don't even want to think what talking to her about this would be like.

I skip to another video that is a *huge* mistake. It's all about what happens after this girl wads up a bunch of toilet paper like I did, but at school. Why didn't they label this most embarrassing period story? I'd die if someone thought I sat in chocolate sauce, like the girl in the video, and then, to make it worse, her teacher and school nurse didn't help her. Clearly, TP is not the safest bet.

There is a light knock on my door. “Come in, Mom,” I



say, knowing it's her before she even has a chance to speak. I clear my screen and turn toward the opening door.

"Listen, I know you don't think of yourself as a ballerina. But you used to go to every class I taught before you started soccer, remember?" She comes in and sits next to me on the edge of my bed. "You liked it."

No, *you* liked it. I had no choice. "Not really," I say instead.

"Well, I don't remember it that way." Mom reaches out and tries to smooth back my curls again. She can't help it. But they can't help springing out of place, either. "I think the role of Clara would be a fabulous opportunity for you to get back into it."

It's like she doesn't even hear me. Or see who I am—a soccer player, not a ballerina.

"It's a small production, Imari. You could come back and take classes with me to prepare. I know your grandmother would love to help. It'd be wonderful."

I push my hands deep into my lap, trying not to ball them into fists.

She squeezes my knee, looking around my room. Soccer posters of Pelé, Kylian Mbappé, Paulo Dybala, Crystal Dunn, and Maria Alves are spread across my walls; trophies, certificates, and medals sit on my shelves, along

with pics Dad took at some of my games and tournaments. I have a few jerseys that never made it to the hamper hanging over the back of my chair, and I know what Mom is about to do before she does it. I spring off the bed, knocking over my iPad, and rush to grab them up to drop them in my hamper. The hamper with the telltale evidence.

“Imari Camille, what on earth has gotten into you? Slow down.” Mom stands with her hand on her chest. “We might as well pull everything out of there.” My collapsible laundry basket is out before I know it. “I don’t understand how one little girl can fill a hamper so quickly.”

Pushing out the basket, she starts toward the hamper.

“I’ll do it,” I shout. “I mean, I’ll bring it to the laundry room and, um, load the wash . . .”

“Okay?” Mom’s face scrunches up. “You sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I shove the jerseys in the hamper and close my bathroom door. Then I take the basket and my iPad, which Mom picked up off my floor. “Just been thinking about the tournament this Friday—that’s all.”

“It’s just a game. You’ll be fine.”

I want to explain that it’s not *just a game*. The way a dance recital for her isn’t *just a recital*. But what’s the point? I know she wishes I was anybody but me sometimes.

“Well, if that’s all, I’ll leave you to it.” She steps toward me again, running her hand over my curls. “But think about Clara. It would be wonderful.”

“Yes, ma’am.” There’s no point arguing. But there’s also no point in thinking about an audition that’s the same day as the first tournament game, not that she’s even noticed.

When Mom reaches my door, I can feel the toilet paper bunching up, and I panic a little, thinking of chocolate sauce. I open my mouth, then snap it closed. Then blurt out, “Can we go to the store real quick?”

“What store? Why? What do you need? Poster board? A notebook? I can send your father out now. That’d be easier.”

Of course, this isn’t going to be easy. “Um, never mind. Don’t worry about it.”

“No, really. Imari, what do you need?” The question just hangs there. Then I think about all the embarrassing stories on the internet and don’t want them to be me. “I . . . um . . . just need some cups. Or maybe pads—I’m not really sure.”

At first she looks a little confused. “Cups?” Then her face lights up, and she steps back into my room. “Aww, Imari. Precious.” Suddenly my face is smashed against her dress, and she is rocking me back and forth. “You got

your period. Why didn't you tell me? We have so much to do!"

So much? Like what? "I just need some cups or pads. Honestly, that's it."

"Nonsense." She cradles my face in her hands. "This calls for more than that."

"That's not what the websites said. They said it's no big deal."

"Of course it's a big deal!" She holds me at arm's length for a moment, smiling. "It is the biggest deal. It is for all young ladies. I'll be right back." She bounces up and rushes toward my door, then looks back again. "Oh, Imari, I've waited for this day."

Then she's gone, and I drop onto my bed and bury my head under my pillow just as Thello comes into my room.

"I told you she was going to make a big deal out of this." Thello ignores me and walks in a circle in his favorite spot while I yank the pillow back, dreading whatever Mom's doing.

She comes back with a box almost bigger than her. It's wrapped in cream-colored paper with thin dotted black lines. And of course, it's tied with a pink bow. "Here," she says, laying it on the bed like it's a trophy. But it isn't one I've earned.

"What is it?"

“Open it and see.”

I just stare.

“Go on.”

I scooch forward and pull at the ribbon. The bow unravels. I carefully peel back the taped edges because Mom hates ripped-open gifts she’s carefully wrapped.

There’s a hot-pink box inside. Hot pink! In my experience, nothing good for me ever started with hot pink.

Inside isn’t what I expect. I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this. I look up at Mom and then back down again. That site that said *what you need to prepare* has nothing on her. I don’t know if every girl-stuff brand is in this box, but it looks like it.

“We can still go to the store to pick out what you want. These are just a few things I thought you might need,” she says quickly as if I’m disappointed by the selection. She reaches into the box and pulls out three containers of tampons, but there are more. “They’re all different, sweetheart. Some with applicators. Some without. Some for a heavy flow. Some for a light. Here’s a scented box.” When she hands it to me, I sniff. Nothing. “But I also got you two that aren’t.” She looks back into the box that now seems never-ending. “There are also pads with wings and pads without.”

“Wings?” What in the world?

“Don’t make that face, Imari. This is just a box of options. Once you know what you like, you can ignore the rest,” Mom says. Then she claps her hands. “Tonight is a celebration of you. Your Turning Point Celebration.”

“My *what?*”

“Your Turning Point Celebration. The day that begins your journey into womanhood.”

I didn’t see anything anywhere on the internet about any “turning point,” which sounds like a made-up ballet term. I think she still has Clara on the brain. And “journey into womanhood”? I’d never call Mom a liar, but she’s definitely making this up. Isn’t she? I eye her suspiciously as she continues to pull stuff out of the box. When did she do all this?

She hands me a flappy purple thing. “It’s a hot-water bottle. You may thank me for it down the line, but I hope you won’t need it, or these. She takes out a bottle of Advil. Then one of Aleve, and then a box of something called Pamprin.

“Oh, wait.” She takes the box back. “What’s the expiration on these?” she says more to herself than me. “We can get you some more tomorrow. I’ve had this box ready and waiting for you for a while.”

What’s a while? Don’t pills last years? Has Mom really been thinking about me? About this? Of course, she has.

It's not about me slide-tackling in the mud; it's about me being "a girl."

"For tonight, why don't you try the overnight pads." She nearly sticks her whole head in the box. "They're somewhere at the bottom of all this."

"There's a bottom?" I say peeking back inside.

"I heard that," she says, eyeing me from inside the box. Then she sits back, a dark-blue package in her hands. "It's okay if you prefer trying tampons and a panty liner in the morning. I can talk you through that, too. I know as a dancer, I prefer that over a pad, so maybe you would, too. But you can try what you like. Okay?"

"Okay," I say, ready for her to go. Why can't she just be normal and hand me one box? Not fifty with wings and scents and things!

Mom holds out the dark-blue package with stars and gets off the bed when I take it. "I need to call your school."

My head pops up in horror. "Wait! Why?" Oh. My. Goodness. She can't tell my school about this. And she definitely can't leave it on a voice mail in the middle of the night. Who knows who'll hear that message!

"I told you, it's your Turning Point Celebration, and it needs to be celebrated. No school for you tomorrow. We have to acknowledge this new part of your journey."

I stare. Mouth open.

A huge sigh that starts in my belly escapes when Mom finally leaves. Oh my goodness, how ridiculous can she be?

“I know there’s no such thing as a Turning Point Celebration, Thello.” He gives a wide yawn, teeth showing, not caring a bit about my situation.

I drag the box off my bed and barely make it to my desk without stumbling. Standing on my chair, I take everything else out of it. Pads, tampons, wipes. Then I stop.

At the very bottom is an envelope with my name in Mom’s perfect penmanship.

I pull it out and sit on my desk, my feet in the chair (even though Mom would have a fit).

*Dear Imari,*

*I have created step-by-step instructions for all you will find in this box. Sometimes package instructions just don’t do.*

*Love, Mom*

Is she serious?

I open the piece of folded paper and nearly drop it. Mom has drawn girl parts and underwear all over it! I’m used to her diagrams for beginners’ ballet class, but this is something else. However, the longer I stare, stuff starts



making sense. I grab the overnight pads, her directions, and head to the bathroom. At least this one part might be easy.

In the morning, a bunch of pink, red, and white balloons walk into my room with Mom's and Dad's legs attached. Whose idea was this? Mica and Nica poke their heads in, too.

"Stop pushing," Nica nudges Mica's shoulder.

Mom strolls to the bed, holding a tray till I sit up.

"Breakfast in bed," she says. "Your favorite. Strawberry and Nutella crepes with lots and lots of whipped cream."

And she didn't even forget the rainbow sprinkles. She can't stand those sprinkles. There's also orange juice and a champagne glass. I look at it, then over at Mom, as Dad ties the balloons to my bedpost.

"Don't get too excited," he says. "It's sparkling cider. But don't drink it yet." He hurries back out the doorway.

"She doesn't look any different to me," Mica whispers. "Why is she getting a turnover celebration?"

"It's not a *turnover* celebration," Nica huffs. "It's a turn-it-up celebration. You know, a *real* party."

Mom and Dad look at each other when Dad comes back, not bothering to correct them. Then Dad stares at me for a long time.

“My baby girl isn’t a baby anymore. You’re becoming a beautiful Black young woman.” He shakes his head and pulls a bouquet of flowers from behind his back. He usually sends flowers to me at school for my birthday—been doing it since kindergarten—but this is different. He’s giving them to me the way he gives them to Mom, and he says, “For the beautiful Black Queen that you are.” I take them and smell them, just like she does, hiding the bigness of my smile. Maybe this whole period thing isn’t so bad after all—no school, breakfast in bed, special flowers. But it still feels a little off, being celebrated for something I didn’t actually have control over. I wish Mom would be this excited when I score a hat trick.

“Go get the other glasses, hon.” She squeezes Dad’s shoulder. And if I didn’t know any better, I’d think Dad just wiped his eyes.

In two seconds, he’s back with two more champagne glasses and two plastic pink ones for Mica and Nica. Everyone has an equal amount of sparkling cider. But actually, I have a little more. We clink glasses and drink. The bubbles tickle and our fake champagne is the perfect kind of sweet.

“Okay, everyone out.” Mom claps, taking Mica’s and Nica’s glasses before they find their way to my floor. “Let her enjoy her celebration in peace.”

Dad gives me one more forehead kiss, and they all turn for the door. Mom slows.

“Be ready at nine thirty, all right? Our first appointment is at ten.”

“Appointment?” I ask, a mash-up of crepe and strawberries puffing out my cheek.

“Yes. And you have a day full of them. So be ready. And, Imari, just for today can you wear something . . .” She looks up at the ceiling as if the right words might be up there. But I already know what she wants to say, but won’t.

“Pretty?” I add for her.

She smiles. “Let’s just say something nice. Whatever that might be.”

Her hand rests on my door. “You all set with everything for now?” She nods toward the “Period Survival” box on my desk. Half the stuff from inside is now spilling over in piles I don’t think I could get through in a lifetime. Or I hope not. I don’t think I have that much blood in my body. “Need me to explain anything?”

“No, I think I got it.” I don’t know why, but I don’t admit to her that her diagrams really helped this morning.

Othello pushes past her leg into the room and plops on his bed as she closes the door.

“Where’ve you been?” I say to him. “A lot’s been happening around here.”

His tongue hangs as he pants, and I know just where he’s been. Soaking up rays in the sunroom after having his breakfast.

“Well, don’t think you’re getting any of this.” I shovel up another mouthful of crepe, whipped cream, and sprinkles.

“Ready?” Mom asks as my seat belt clicks into place.

“I guess.”

“Come on.” She nudges my knee and pulls out of the garage. “This’ll be fun.”

Cucumbers on her eyes and polish on her toes is fun to her. I’d rather eat the cucumbers and skip the polish.

A sportscaster’s voice blasts through the speakers.

“Oh, my word, turn that down for me, will you?” Mom always gets flustered in Dad’s car, as though every button is in the wrong place. But since it’s her day for car-pool, she didn’t have much choice since Dad’s doing it instead. No way five eight-year-old ballerinas are fitting in here safely. She takes a breath, then speaks like she was never ruffled. “Turn it to whatever you like. This is your celebration.”

“It’s fine.” Kind of like everything else has to be fine.

“What’s the matter, Imari?” She glances at me while turning out of our neighborhood.

“Nothing.”

“Well, show a little excitement. This is a big day. You’re a young woman now.”

I give a half smile. Yippee!

“Okay, fine, sulk, but you aren’t going to ruin this celebration with an attitude, young lady. So I’ll give you a few to get it together. Got me?” Her eyebrow raises. Yep, exactly where Nica gets it. “I’m trying to do something nice for you, Imari.”

My eyes lock on hers, annoyed. “But it’s what *you* want, not me.” The words slip out before I can snatch them back in.

I stare forward, biting my lip, feeling her watching me. She starts to respond, but stops.

Then starts again. “That’s exactly what I said to my mother a long time ago.” Her voice is even quieter than the sportscaster’s, whose voice barely comes through the speakers now.

I want to ask when? Why? But I know she’ll probably only say “Oh, never mind” like she always does. So, instead, I stare out the window, wondering. The houses, trees, and fresh-cut lawns change to sidewalks, cafés, and shops. At the red light, I look over at the soccer fields at the

side of my school grounds. I should be headed to gym class right about now with Nasha, not a stupid spa!

A car behind us honks.

“Mom? The light.”

“Oh, right.” She holds her hand up and peers into the rearview mirror. “Sorry.” She waves even though the other driver can’t see her as he speeds around us. She glances at me as I watch the fields move past the window. Then suddenly I’m sliding across the seat, grabbing for the door handle.

“Mom!” I shout as she makes a U-turn. “Did you forget something important?”

She doesn’t answer at first. “Yes, I have.” She looks over at me and smiles the kind of smile people make when they’re a little sad.

“What?” I ask softly.

She’s quiet as the left blinker clicks in the silence.

Soon the nose of the car turns into the school’s back parking lot. I’m so confused. Maybe she’s changed her mind? I shouldn’t have said what I said. She is trying to be nice.

“Sorry, Mom.” I’m not sure if I should get out of the car or wait. When she doesn’t move, I say, “Um . . . the doors back here are locked.”

“You’re not going to school,” she says in her ballet-teacher determined voice, the sad gone.

“I’m not?” Now I’m really confused.

“No.” She climbs out of Dad’s low-to-the-ground car.  
“You coming?”

I look around again and then take off my seat belt and follow her to the back of Dad’s car. She’s already bent over in the trunk, pulling a duffel bag closer to her.

“I’d be careful if I were you,” I say before she pulls back the zipper. “Stuff probably stinks in there.” I eye the bag suspiciously. Even though I like dirt, I’m not a fan of funk, and surprise funk is the worst funk. Ew!

But when Mom opens the bag, I don’t even have to pinch my nose. Nothing’s stinking. I wouldn’t be surprised if she goes to the garage at night and sprays it with disinfectant.

“Perfect,” she says, yanking it out of the trunk. “Let’s go, you.”

“Where?”

“To practice.”

“Practice what?”

“PKs,” she says.

I stop. Does she really want to do piqué turns on the soccer field?

Then I watch, eyes wide, as she stalks across the parking lot into the grass, blush-colored high heels sinking into dirt, duffel bag slung over her shoulder, wrinkling her cardigan.

What in the world?

I search the deserted parking lot. Have aliens taken my mom?

“Put some smoke under those Converse, Rocket!” Mom yells. She called me Rocket. She never calls me Rocket. “Come on. Get a move on.”

I sprint across the baseball outfield, catching up to her. When we reach a goalpost on the soccer field, she dumps the duffel in the grass.

“Why the long face?” she asks, studying me.

Ugh, is she kidding? I don’t know what’s worse: possibly getting mani-pedis or practicing piqué turns for Clara where everyone near a classroom window can see.

“Mom?” I start as she reaches to unzip the bag again.

“What?” She looks at me like I’m the one who’s lost it.

She peels off her cardigan, then folds it neatly and lays it in the grass.

Okay, she’s not totally gone. Or is she?

She tosses a soccer ball to me from the duffel bag, kicks off her high heels, then hikes up her skirt a little and crouches a bit. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Huh?”

“Am I speaking a different language or something? What’s wrong?”

Or something. Mom’s standing between goalposts,



basically barefoot. Bugs probably coming for her toes. And she's asking me what's wrong?

"Kick it, child." She widens her stance, palms up. "Let me see your best penalty kick."

"A penalty kick?" She's not talking about a ballet move? My mom knows what a PK really is?

I glance down at the ball and then back up at her. What is going on? She must hear my thoughts because she gives me an unsure smile, dusting off her hands.

"You were right," she says. "This is your day, not mine. It should be about what you want, not me."

I look down at her stockinged feet in the grass, not believing this. Reading my thoughts again, she says, "I used to play softball, you know. I was pretty good, too."

"Softball?" My mom?

"I was a little older than you and loved it."

"Why'd you stop?"

"Your grandmother wanted it that way. Wanted me to be a ballerina. So I was." Mom looks off, then back at me. "Luckily I love ballet, too. It wasn't a tough choice. I did both for a while. But I know the same isn't true for you. I shouldn't have pushed so hard to reshape you."

I hear the words she says, but I don't quite believe 'em. And besides, I can't imagine Mom getting sweaty, let alone willingly playing in the dirt. A giggle slips out of me.

“What’s so funny?”

Does she really need to ask? “It’s just cool—that’s all,” I finally say.

“Well, there are a lot of cool things about me you don’t know. And I realize there are lots of cool things about you I haven’t gotten to know, either, but I want to.”

I still hear her speaking, but I’m not sure I hear her right this time, either.

“Moms make mistakes sometimes, Imari. But like everyone else, we can learn. And I think you’d be a pretty cool teacher.” She claps her hands together again, crouching and eyeing the ball. “And I could teach you a couple things, too. That is, if you’d like to learn ’em?”

And right there on an empty soccer field, me and Mom in the dirt, I realize a Turning Point Celebration, my period, and what comes out of a hot-pink box might not be so bad after all.