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Opening extract from
Paper Aeroplanes

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Inside the sick room both bunk beds are empty. Good, there's nothing worse than having to share the sick room. I always regret skiving when I have to lie there pretending to be ill with someone puking into a bowl underneath me. I lie down on the bottom bunk and wait for whichever member of staff is on duty to come and make me a hot water bottle. My tummy is already feeling a little better.

After ten minutes no one has come and I start to feel anxious. I need to change my panty pad. Knowing that the middle drawer in the office just off the sick room is full of them, I get up and creep in. This is where I've been getting them ever since I started my periods over a year ago. As I stuff as many as I can into my waistband, my bra and even a couple in my socks, I hear the door open.

Oh, SHIT!

'What on earth are you doing stuffing sanitary towels into your bra, Miss Sargent?'

It's Miss Trunks. She is taking up the entire doorframe. Even if I had wanted to escape I couldn't have. She looks angry, but equally as pleased to have caught me. Catching people break school rules is why I think Miss Trunks became a teacher.

'Stealing school property is a serious crime. Put those back. NOW,' Miss Trunks says, spitting all over the place.

I start to unload my bra and waistband. Of all the things to get caught stealing, at least good stationery has some level of kudos.

‘So what is this about? I suppose you sell these for money to buy cigarettes, don’t you?’

‘No, Miss Trunks. I just needed some.’

‘Don’t you lie to me, Renée Sargent. A girl of your age can buy her own protection. No one steals sanitary towels unless it is to sell them to make money to spend on things like cigarettes or alcohol. Is that why you never come to hockey training? Drink? Hurry up and put those back. We’re going to see Miss Grut,’ she screams, winding herself up into a melodramatic frenzy.

She leads me down the corridor, pushing my elbow like a gear stick. I sit outside and wait for half an hour. Then the unthinkable happens. Pop walks in.

We sit in silence in Miss Grut’s office. Miss Grut, Miss Trunks, Miss Anthony, Pop and me. Pop and I sit on two separate chairs in front of Miss Grut’s massive desk. Miss Trunks, who is wearing over-stretched sports gear, and Miss Anthony, who is in a pretty high-necked flowery dress, share a two-seater sofa to the right of us. Miss Anthony looks a bit squashed.

‘Renée has been caught stealing school property. Sanitary towels. The *school’s* sanitary towels,’ says Miss Trunks to break the silence.

‘Yes, Miss Trunks,’ says Miss Grut, ‘we all know why we are here, thank you. And thank you for coming in so

promptly, Mr Fletcher. Renée, have you been stealing from the school?’

It feels strange being asked a question directly by the headmistress. She doesn’t have much to do with us on a one-to-one level. She’s a bit like the Queen. Everyone stands up when she walks in or leaves a room, and if you see her walking towards you in the corridor the natural reaction is to stand still until she has passed. Being asked a question by her feels part privilege, part the scariest thing I have ever experienced. Pop is sitting next to me breathing really loudly, and there’s a giant pile of panty pads on her desk, deliberately positioned by Miss Trunks to remind us why we are all there.

‘Not stealing, miss, borrowing.’ I don’t know why I say this. I obviously was stealing them.

‘Why were you in the sick room?’ asks Miss Grut, trying to piece the story together.

‘I sent her down there,’ says Miss Anthony. ‘Renée had terrible cramps this morning.’

Pop shuffles uncomfortably in his chair.

‘I sent her to the sick room to lie down with a hot water bottle,’ Miss Anthony continues.

‘And THAT is when I found her stuffing her bra with the *school’s* Always Ultra,’ barks Miss Trunks.

‘That is quite enough, Miss Trunks. We can take this from here. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.’ Miss Grut’s eyes fix hard on the door. The horrible fat cow leaves.

‘Mr Fletcher,’ continues Miss Grut. ‘Do you know why

Renée might feel the need to steal sanitary equipment from the school?’

Sanitary *equipment*? Adults are so weird sometimes. A minute’s silence nearly deafens me. I stare at the pen pot on Miss Grut’s desk to distract myself from how hideously mortified I am.

‘Well, Renée is a girl, isn’t she?’ Pop rubs his nose and does a fake cough.

‘She is, yes,’ agrees Miss Anthony.

‘Well, then. Girls need them things for stuff I don’t know about, but you know more than me, I’m sure.’

Never have I wanted the earth to swallow me up so much. Pop trying to explain what I might use a panty pad for is as bad as the time I farted when I sneezed during prayers in assembly. At least that was funny. There is nothing funny about this. Through pure fear of him being asked to elaborate, I start to speak.

‘I know it sounds stupid but I’m too embarrassed to buy them in shops, Miss Grut. So every few months I go into the sick room and take what I need because . . .’ I mumble, ‘. . . I don’t like strangers knowing I have my . . .’

‘Period,’ offers Miss Anthony.

‘Yes, that.’ I nod.

‘Periods are nothing to be ashamed of, Renée. You are a woman,’ says Miss Grut.

If one more person says the word period or panty pad in front of Pop I am going to have to jump out of the window, run to the sea and swim to France.

‘Look, I don’t steal stuff usually, it’s just those.’ I point

at the pile of pads on her desk. ‘I’m sorry, I won’t do it again.’

‘Well, your regret seems genuine, so we’re done here,’ says Miss Grut. ‘Mr Fletcher, maybe Mrs Fletcher can help Renée in the shop next time she has a period?’ I wince, but Miss Grut continues. ‘I’m sure your situation makes all sorts of conversations very hard, but as Renée turns into a woman she’ll need your help on matters like this. Renée, I will let this go this time, but please don’t let us catch you doing this again. Thank you, everybody.’

Pop and I are up and out the door as quickly as we can. I walk him to the foyer.

‘Pop. I’m really sorry,’ I say, so embarrassed I can barely get my words out.

‘I will speak to your grandmother and she will take this from here. Don’t be late for dinner.’ Pop makes it very clear that the subject is closed. As I watch him walk away I feel like I don’t know him at all. He’s just a stranger who knows I am on my period.

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

‘Renée?’ It’s Miss Anthony. ‘I used to be the same when I was your age. Here.’ She hands me a cotton pouch. ‘Have these. Do try to build the confidence to buy your own, but this should get you through this month.’ She smiles. ‘Now take a minute to get yourself together and then get to class. You can still make the last half-hour of drama and I’ll make sure you don’t get an order mark.’

‘Thank you. That’s really nice of you.’ I start to walk away, but Miss Anthony puts a hand on my arm.

‘Renée, I lost my mother when I was young, too. I know how lonely it can feel.’

‘I’m not lonely, Miss Anthony. I have lots of friends,’ I answer defensively.

‘Are they good friends? People you can talk to? It’s really important to talk about how you feel.’

‘Of course.’ I nod. ‘Best friends. We talk about it all the time.’

‘Good, good. I am glad,’ she says, looking pleased.

Later, in the afternoon, Miss Grut comes into our French class unexpectedly. Everyone stands up, but she tells us to sit straight down. Assuming she has changed her mind and is here to punish me for theft I start to pack up my pencil case, but instead she walks over to Flo Parrot and asks her to follow her downstairs.

I have only ever seen that happen once at school before. When I was seven years old.