

MOSTLY FOR MEN

By Michael Ventura

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Several women laughed, snickered, or sighed, and, with resignation and/or superiority, said most men wouldn't have the balls to read this column to the end. That would be a shame, since women know very well what's in this piece and we know next to nothing.

See... Hannah was having her period, and I realized, to my embarrassment, that in more than half a century of a more-or-less sentient life, I'd never asked what it felt like. Half the population goes through this for five days a month (which amounts to two months of the year!) and I hadn't a clue. So I asked. Minutes into her description I said, "Could I tape this? It would make a great column." She said, "I dare you." That settled it.

I've shortened her rap to fit the space, but didn't alter a word.

Hannah: "Even before I actually get the cramps, I have this almost excruciating sensitivity in my skin. My skin gets warmer, almost hot, and I feel very aware of anything touching my skin. And you're especially sensitive around the skin that's most sensitive -- your vulva and your breasts. (It's a great time to wear something silk on your nipples.) Something also happens to my sense of balance. I get a little bit dizzy. And then I always feel afraid -- because I'm afraid that it will be the way it was. I had really excruciating pain at one point in my life, just blinding pain, where I could just crawl barely to the toilet and throw up. It was more pain than you have an analogy for. You can't say it was like a knife, but if I had to compare it to anything I'd say a knife. That's how it was. Now it's very different."

Michael: "Where exactly do you feel it?"

Hannah: "When the cramps are first starting to come, it's not even really pain. It's in your uterus, and of course the whole female reproductive system can fit in the palm of your hand. The whole thing. Ovaries, everything. So you feel, in the pit of you, [in] the uterus, heat. And it feels like this wave-like movement that's very subtle. There's not a total release of energy. It's this little movement, a little clenching. If you can imagine a muscle clenching at the very center of your body. Kind of like a hand starting to open and then closing again, but not making a tight fist. That's how it starts. And, again, there's a lot of heat. And I always feel moist all over. And I become incredibly sensitive to smell. But this is before the blood comes, like an hour before.

"The pain gets more regular -- that opening and closing feeling. And the clenching gets harder. And for me what used to happen is that eventually it got vicious, 'til it was like a fist imploding on itself. Then [I'd be] in this completely altered state of mind [for] about an hour or two hours. For one thing, your vision alters, or mine does. Where space has more space in it. I've had experiences of feeling like I can see the particles and everything. Or sometimes my vision blurred. And eventually what happened to me was that the pain became like a force field that I fell into. And it just felt like there was no escape.

"So one time I talked to it. And asked what it wanted. And it said it wanted to be given into. That was the only thing that ever did any good. [Here she explained that over several years her pain became less severe, "very uncomfortable" but not horrible. In

addition to the uterine pain] you get pain in your lower back. And there's two points on my ass, about four inches from the hip, that get very very tender. Then you start bleeding. And it's hard to move. There's a feeling of being very heavy, that comes right away. Not of being fat but of being really slowed down. I'll get very clumsy suddenly, I'll knock things over, [especially] just before I start to bleed.

"The pain feels like a ripping open. Well, the lining of your uterus is ripping away from itself -- that's what's happening. You're shredding something. [The initial pain] is the beginning of that shedding, and in order for it to begin it's got to rip away. And so it's your body initiating a movement that's a ripping. Then it accelerates. But you don't. You're in this slow, clumsy kind of ox-like state and the pain is picking up in intensity. It affects digestion a lot. I don't feel pain in my stomach but I will sometimes feel sick to my stomach. And if I've eaten something rich or spicy I just want to throw up. And if I've been drinking I'm really sorry that I've been drinking. It's almost [as though] your body just wants to reject everything that's impure."

Michael: "How does the bleeding feel?"

Hannah: "Everybody's different. Some women have this gush, right away, Old Faithful. It's never been like that for me, it's a very small amount at first. Later in my cycle I'll get a lot more blood. It's like you start to pee your pants. It's pretty much indistinguishable from peeing, except that it's hot, and you don't have that feeling of pressure and release in your bladder. It's just there. And gushing can happen when you cough or laugh, big-time. And I've been surprised late in my cycle, laughing real loud or coughing, and all of a sudden I thought [my period] was over and there's this big mess. And it'll always happen when you're wearing white. Guaranteed.

"And did I mention that the small muscles on your calves cramp up?"

"The weird thing about having a period is that even though it happens every month it's always a surprise. Even if you're like me and you're real regular and it comes every 28 days, it's still always a surprise. Because we are beings who are constantly renewing ourselves. All this nutrient-rich stuff is built up in your uterus and, biologically, your body is saying, 'OK, let's make a baby!' And when you don't, it's, 'Oh, OK, everything's going into a different mode, let's get rid of all this stuff.'

"What happens later [in my cycle] is, [the blood] smells sweet. Like sweet bread and sweet flour mixed together. And of course all the 'feminine hygiene' companies heavily deodorize all of their products to cover the smell. But if a lot of women actually just smelled it, without judging it, it would give them a whole new feeling about themselves."

Michael: "When you feel sexual desire when you have a period, is it any different?"

Hannah: "I'm not like some other women I talk to in this respect. A lot of women don't want anybody to touch them when they're bleeding. For me... it's more like I just want to be made love to very gently and sweetly. It's also a time when I'm very in touch psychically. And the crying."

Michael: "The crying. What is that?"

Hannah: "What is it? It's crying!"

Michael: "In my experience, being on the other side of it, it's a very different kind of crying."

Hannah: "For me part of it is total frustration. Because this is a world where there isn't any time for [your period] to happen in. Women are meant to be able to rest at that time. Just to rest. You just really want to lie down. And have somebody rub your

feet. Or just lie down by yourself and not have to do anything. I think it's naturally a time of total inertia. Where pretty much you just want to sit around and have visions or feel whatever you're feeling about your life. It's not a great place to be if you're standing in a bar, if you're on -- and we're required to be on all the time. So I think when a lot of women cry it's just because we don't get the time that we need to do this. It's almost like the body's way of breaking, some kind of release, since we're not getting the release we need, which is to be released of all responsibility during that time.

"[She speaks of the menstrual practices and rituals of tribal peoples, in which the women seclude themselves.] All that stuff that the [tribal] men say about it being a time when the women are unclean and that's why they're put off by themselves, I think the women made that up. They said to the men, 'Hey, it's unclean, so we just need to stay away from everybody for five days.' So that they could just have some time alone.

"During my period, yeah, I cry a lot more. Whatever I'm feeling, I feel five times as much. If it's joy, if it's anger, if it's sorrow. And I become much more aware of what I'm really feeling. If I'm lying to myself, I can't lie to myself anymore when I'm having my period. And THAT!"

Michael: "What?!"

Hannah: "All this bullshit about your period and your PMS -- what it really is, is for a lot of women it's the only fuckin' time that they ever tell the truth about their lives. About how pissed off they are at this deadbeat sonofabitch that they're married to. [Laughs] How pissed off they really are that they work in an office. The problem is not that they go nuts five days a month, the problem is that those are the only five days when they're totally sane. They're totally IN their right minds, saying what they really feel."

Michael: "What do you feel when men say cavalier things about women having their period?"

Hannah: "Basically -- I feel like I just want to take them by the back of their hair, pull back so that their throat is exposed, and just rip their throat out with my teeth. And taste the blood."

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