

AUNT CHLOE

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How Old Are You?

You'll never forget the day when your brother's friend from down the street sauntered up to your doorstep

and asked you if you were 14 with that predatory look in his eye. You told him no, because, actually, you were 11. You watched him closely as he sized you up from head to toe. Your breasts had grown from last month, he was looking at those. All you wanted that day was a trip to Toys "R" Us—you hadn't quite grown out of Barbies yet. What you got instead was what you couldn't understand. Sexual undertones. Unwanted propositions. That uneasy feeling. When you went back inside, your mother didn't do anything. Remembering things like this made you resent her because she said you always looked older. You hated how she thought it was always the girls' fault.

Later she'd sit you down in a panic: "We need to talk about the 'husband and wife thing.'" This was the first and last time she would do this. You asked her, "what's that?" She said when you were married, you'd know. This information didn't bother you because you didn't think about marriage or sex. But when you noticed how your pants didn't bulge at the center or how your shirt got tighter each year, it bothered you. It bothered you because, instinctively, you knew you were experiencing something you knew nothing about.

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In school, you met a boy. During the middle of class, he pulled out what you'd later understand to be a

penis and prompted you to look at it. You didn't do it. You were too scared. You just looked down at your

lap and peeked behind your pink floral underwear. Hair. Not a lot, but some.

The thing with the boy continued for some weeks after. You didn't like him. He was too loud. Every day during quiet time he'd ask you to look at it. The other kids at the table told the teacher that you were looking at each other's "thingys." He moved to a new desk and you met a girl who was just as curious as you. You liked her better. She wasn't loud. You both would go to the restroom, when classrooms still had restrooms in them, and stare at your butts. You'd wiggle them in the mirror and laugh because the crack down the middle seemed like the stupidest thing. She was a nice girl. You don't remember her name.

A year later, you set your eyes on Damian. Your first real crush. He told you that he didn't like you and you prayed to God that he would one day. Touching you during a rerun of Spy Kids was his way of showing affection. You were uncomfortable. You told him to stop, but he said you were supposed to like it; "that's what girls like." Afterward, you felt guilty. Had you asked for it? You weren't able to tell your mother this. You knew she'd agree with you. So, you swore off prayer. You didn't think you needed forgiveness. When you got older you'd add heretic to your list of sins.

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Your mother had the look of shame when she left the bathroom; two spots of blood on the tile and a pad hidden between her fingers. She said it was her period. Every woman has them. For the next month, you walked around with a wad of paper towels telling people you had your period. You were panicked when it came the summer before 6th grade, dark red and thick, spotting a fresh pair of Fruit of the Loom. For an occasion like this, your mother had no words. She gave you a book called "Periods" and two packs of Carefree pads; the pink ones that fit right into the palm of your hand. They absorbed nothing. You didn't know how to properly take care of yourself and wouldn't for another four years. The used pads that you balled up and stored in a hamper would stay there until a Tampax commercial told you it was okay to be a woman. Of course, your mother hated your new obsession with Tampax. She wouldn't buy you any. She'd said virgins can't wear tampons. It ruins the hymen. Men want virgins. You should be what men

want. You ordered a sample off the Internet. You watched for the mailman and hid the box when it arrived. You lost your virginity to Tampax.

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When you became a teenager, you hated how everything was taboo. Sex was taboo. Periods were taboo. Everything that happened to you was taboo. It didn't take you long to realize that men had more power than you thought they deserved. You realized this every time you left the house. As soon as they thought you were old enough, they'd come running with their hands in their pants asking how old you were. You hated that you felt obliged to answer. You'd say, "I'm not 20, I'm 15." Now and then a guy would laugh, give you a once-over, and tell you to come find him in ten years. You thought the ones that said this were better than the ones that asked for your number.

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Later, you told your mom that she took your childhood away. She denied it. She'd said she was just looking out for you. She said that you were being ridiculous. The next day you argued again because a guy at church tried to talk to you. You knew he'd been watching you for a while. A wife was what he wanted. Your mother said you couldn't begrudge him that. You had made it your duty to look as unapproachable as possible. A small act of resistance. She asked you why you weren't nice to him when he finally spoke to you. You simply said, "he asked me how old I was."

Ramour M. uses writing to illustrate and uncover the diversity of black women's experiences. She is an activist and a resource advocate for underprivileged communities. She is a proud Spelman Woman fighting for change.

Also by Ramour M.: Mailbox Whore

Mailbox Whore

I was your little whore
peering into the opening of a mailbox,

fishing out circulars, and debt collections.

Was that where I met my conquests?

Was that how I lured my victims?

My outstretched hand,

my bent knee—

The shameless eight-year-old paraded for men to see.

In your defense, I was born like this—

vagina, vulva, vixen, vamp.

We'd pray, you'd fast,

and ask for my virginity to last.

How long would the spell remain?

When would the whore say it was offered in vain?