

Tania Gets A

SHOCK!



By Kanika G

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Frightened

"Hey Tania. Where have you been?" Tanisha waved enthusiastically at her friend. "Come on, I saved you a seat." She called, as Tania wound her way through the narrow aisle cluttered with school bags. "You almost missed the bus, what happened?" She asked, beginning to feel concerned.

Without a word Tania plonked down on the empty seat and stared blankly in to space.

"Tania! Are you okay?" Tanisha shook Tania by her shoulders. She had never seen her best friend behave so strangely.

"I don't know Tanisha. I'm really scared." Tania's voice quivered. "I could be dying." She whispered. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"Are you crazy? What are you talking about? Is this a joke? Cause it's not very funny." Tanisha muttered.

"No. I'm bleeding." Tania whispered.

"Bleeding?" Tanisha blurted out. "Where? I don't see any blood." She peered at Tania's legs and arms.

"Tanisha!" Tania hissed, glaring at her. "Please speak softly."

"Why? Don't you need first aid? Did you see Mrs. Jain at the office? I still don't see any blood." Tanisha was baffled.

"I have quite a few spots of blood on my panty." Tania whispered.

"And my pee was pink, all mixed with blood. It did not hurt, but there was quite a bit of blood. What's happening to me?" Tania asked, her eyes wide with terror. "I need to talk to Mama."

Tanisha stared at her friend, too shocked to speak. But then she remembered something. "Oh no! Your mother is not home today, re-

member? Our moms are out shopping together, and your dad has taken Sonia shopping for roller blades, so you were supposed to come to my house. That's why I was so excited."

"What do I do now?" Tania asked, feeling gloomier than ever.

"Don't worry Tania." Tanisha squeezed her hand. "Trisha will be home. You can tell her." Tanisha suggested, brightening up. "She may know what to do. She can call your mother too, or even a doctor."

Tania blushed at the prospect of talking about blood in her urine, but Trisha had always been kind to her. "Okay. Let's talk to her and see what she says."

When the girls reached Tanisha's house, Trisha opened the door to let them in. "Why so glum?" She asked surprised by their serious expressions. "Mom has left *aaloo parathas* for you on the dining table, and some home made mango ice-cream in the freezer. Help yourselves. That's sure to cheer you up." She winked and turned to go back to her room.

"Trisha, wait!" Tanisha called out. "Tania has a serious problem. Can she talk to you about it?"

Trisha stopped and turned. "Of course." She replied. "What's it Tania? How can I help?" She asked, and Tania was comforted by the warmth in her voice.

"Um." Tania hesitated. "You see, it's kind of embarrassing." She said fidgeting with her fingers.

"Tania. It's okay. You can talk to me." Trisha put her arm around Tania and led her to the sofa.

"Well, you see, I have these spots of blood on my panty." Tania blushed and looked away.

"That's okay Tania. Don't worry. Are you also getting some blood in your urine?" Trisha asked, gently.

Tania nodded, unable to meet Trisha's eyes. But then curiosity triumphed over fear and embarrassment. "How did you know?" Tania asked.

Trisha smiled. "Because every girl goes through it. Tania you have your first period. Has your mother talked to you about it yet?"

"No." Tania shook her head, quite confused.

"Well congratulations! Just like your first step, and your first word, it's a milestone in the process of growing up. It's completely normal, and there is nothing to worry about."

"Mom hasn't talked to me about it either." Tanisha interjected. "Is it going to happen to me too? When?" She demanded.

"Yes Tanisha, in time you will have your period too. It's impossible to say when exactly, but girls usually have their first period between the ages of 11 and 13."

"I'm only 9. Is that bad?" Tania asked, still feeling shaken.

"No Tania. Like I said, most girls get it between the ages of 11 and 13, but anytime from 8 to 17 years of age is considered normal."

"Trisha, what exactly is a period? Why do girls get it? And what's going to happen now? How long am I going to bleed?" Tania asked. Tanisha too waited with bated breath for the answers to these questions.

Trisha hesitated. "You know, I think it is best that your mother addresses these questions and talks to you about it Tania. The bleeding is normal and should stop in a few days, or at most a week."

"A week!" Tania and Tanisha exclaimed in unison, their eyes wide with horror. "Trisha, if I continue to bleed, my uniform will have huge blood stains." Tania wailed.

"Yes, yes. Don't worry. I am coming to that. Just give me a minute." She went to her cupboard and returned with a panty and two soft

spongy white objects, each the size of a small pencil pouch.

"This Tania is a pad." Trisha explained, holding up one of the spongy objects. Tania noticed that they had a layer of thin soft plastic at the back. "You stick it inside your panty to absorb the blood when you have your period."

Trisha peeled away a layer of paper covering the plastic side of the pad, much like one peels away the covering of a *band-aid*, and revealed that the back of the pad was sticky. She neatly stuck the pad on to the inner lining of the panty she had brought with her.

"Tada!" She sang out, holding up the panty for Tania and Tanisha to examine. "See, now when you wear the panty, the pad will absorb the blood, and nothing gets stained."

"Oh! It works like a diaper." Tania realized, remembering the ones Mama had used for Sonia a few years ago.

"Exactly like a diaper." Trisha nodded. "Now Tania, take this one with you and stick it in your panty." Trisha said giving Tania the second pad.

Tania took the pad to the bathroom. The blood stains on her panty had grown a little. It was quite easy to stick the pad after Trisha's clear demonstration. As she washed her hands, she remembered something Trisha had said in passing.

It bothered her. What did she mean by first period? Was this going to happen again? How often? She had to know.

Betrayed

"Still, you could have told me. Do you have any idea how scared Tania and I were on the way home? It could have been me!" Tania heard Tanisha shouting, as she closed the bathroom door and made her way to the living room to join the sisters.

"Please Tanisha. Mom wanted to tell you herself ..." Trisha began, but just then she saw Tania. "Tania, did you manage?" She inquired. Tania nodded.

"I called your mother and told her that you got your period." Trisha informed Tania. "She will be here in about half an hour. I'm sure you are bursting with questions, but I think it's best if you talk to your mother."

Tania opened her mouth to say something and then closed it again. Trisha served them *aaloo parathas*.

But neither Tania nor Tanisha felt like eating. They were both lost in thought. "What did you mean by first period Trisha?" Tania blurted out unable to contain her questions. "Are there going to be more of them?"

Trisha sighed, resigning herself to being interrogated. "Yes Tania. There will be many more. You'll have them approximately once a month for many years to come."

"What?" Tanisha sprang out of her chair.

"Did you say once a month?" Tania was appalled.

"That's horrible. Why? Why should it happen?" Tanisha demanded.

"Please girls. Calm down. Your mothers will talk to you about this."

"Why have they been hiding this information for so many years? There must be something scary about it." Tania began to panic.

"I promise you, there is nothing scary about it. No one has been hiding anything. It's just not come up, and your mothers haven't got around to it. They thought there was some time before you needed to know." Trisha felt harassed.

"Trisha, how long have you had them? What about Mom? Does she have them too every month?" Tanisha asked.

"Yes Mom gets them every month too. I've had them for five years. I tell you there is nothing scary about them. They are completely normal."

"Five years? But we share a room! How come you never said a thing? How come I never noticed the pads before?"

"Okay fine, I have been hiding those from you. You were barely 4 when I got my first period. I didn't know what to tell you. If I told you the truth, the idea of so much blood may have frightened you. And I did not want to lie. I suppose I could have told you later, but hiding them just became a habit, and I figured Mom should talk to you first."

Just then the door clicked, and the two mothers entered. "Tania are you okay?" Mama asked, rushing towards her.

"Yes Mama. Trisha gave me a pad and showed me how to wear it. She told me the bleeding is normal, but I still have a lot of questions." Tania replied.

"Me too." Tanisha added standing with her arms crossed, glaring at her own mother.

"Yes, we'll get to them right away." Tanisha's mother promised.

"We'd better go home and talk about this Tania." Mama said, standing up. "Thanks so much Trisha for handling this unexpected situation so well. I really appreciate it."

"Yes. Thanks so much Trisha for all your help." Tania went up to her and gave her a hug.

Trisha smiled. "Glad I could help." She said ruffling Tania's hair.

What Now?

"Why didn't you tell me this would happen?" Tania asked Mama, as soon as they were home. "I was so scared. I thought I was dying. But it was embarrassing too. I didn't know what to do. How could you let this happen to me?" Tania's eyes flashed, and hot tears rolled down her cheeks. She felt betrayed by her own mother, a feeling she had never even imagined possible.

"Tania. I am sorry. It never occurred to me that you might have them so soon. I was planning to tell you after your 10th birthday. I got my first period after I was twelve. I am so sorry, Baby. I had meant to prepare you for it. I feel really bad about how it all happened, Honey. Can you forgive me?"

Tania wiped her tears and hugged her mother. She could tell that Mama was genuinely distressed. "Okay Mama. So tell me now." She urged.

"Since you have already got your periods, let's focus on the practical and hygiene issues first." Mama suggested. "Then we can go in to the *whats, hows and whys*. Is that okay with you?"

Tania nodded. "My panty is stained with blood. Should I throw it away?"

"No. It will happen again. Especially on the first day of every period, before you realize you need to wear a pad. Sometimes, the pad shifts, or gets too full, and then your panty or even your clothes may get stained. Why don't you change in to a fresh panty? I'll give you a new pad and show you how to wash off the blood stains." Mama offered.

She fetched a pad from her cupboard for Tania. It looked a lot like the pad Trisha had given her, but it had two thin round plastic bits sticking out on the side. "What are these?" Tania asked pointing at them. "The pad Trisha gave me did not have these ears."

"Ears?" Mama's lips twitched. "These ears, or wings as they are usually called, are also sticky. See, you can peel off the paper to reveal the sticky surface. Anyway, you can fold them around to the outside of your panty, and stick them. They help lock the pad in place and reduce the chances of staining." She explained.

"Oh. I see." Tania nodded. "But then they should be called anchors, not wings." She smiled.

"Hmm. That does make sense." Mama conceded.

Tania took the pad and a fresh panty from her cupboard and went to the bathroom to change. She returned holding the used pad and the stained panty.

Mama was waiting for her with a sheet of newspaper. "You need to wrap up the pad before disposing it." Mama showed Tania how to wrap the used pad in a newspaper.

Then she took the stained panty from Tania and escorted her back to the bathroom.

"Mama you said that the pad could get overfull. So how often do I need to change it?" Tania asked, as she watched Mama squeeze out a drop of liquid detergent on the stain.

"Three to four times a day is usual. If your flow is heavier on the first or second day, then may be five times." Mama replied, rubbing the stain till it faded. Then she rinsed the panty and put it in the laundry basket full of other clothes that needed to be washed soon.

"Should I carry a pad with me in my school bag, so I can wear one whenever I get my period?" Tania asked.

"Yes. You should keep a few pads with you when you travel too, like on school trips, or if you go for a sleep over." Mama added as she packed a couple of pads and sheets of newspapers in to a large envelope. "Here, put these in your bag." She urged, giving Tania the envelope.

"You should also keep track of the dates of your period. They usually follow a pattern and happen every 25 to 30 days. If you keep track of the dates, you'll recognize your own cycle pattern and know roughly when to expect them." Mama added.

"Oh will they always come after after a fixed interval? How often do you get yours?" Tania asked.

"If they are regular then yes, though since you started so early it may be a few months before your periods become regular. I get mine every 29 days. Mine have always been very regular."

"Mama, are you ever going to tell me what's really going on here? I'm bleeding continuously. Where is the blood coming from? Why does it happen every month? How does it know when to start and stop? What if it doesn't stop? Does it ever hurt? Does it make me ..." Tania would have continued with her endless string of questions, if Mama hadn't pulled her in to a hug.

"Tania, I'm really sorry you were caught unaware. I can't imagine how frightened you must have been. Let me tell you everything, I had meant to." Mama said, gesturing for Tania to sit on the bed next to her.

The Birds And The Bees

"Mama where is all the blood coming from? I mean, how can I bleed for days and not die?" Tania blurted out impatiently, as she settled down on the bed next to Mama.

"The fluid and gunk that's leaking out in to your pad is not purely blood, Tania. In fact, very little of it is blood. Usually, women lose no more than two teaspoons of blood a day during their periods."

"Then what's all the red stuff coming out? I'm sure it's way more than two teaspoons."

"Tania, do you remember that my tummy became huge when I was pregnant with Sonia?"

"Yes. What's the connection?"

"Well, you see, at some point a girl's body starts to prepare itself for the possibility of a baby. When your body starts preparing a home for a baby to develop in, you start getting your periods."

"But Mama, I'm only 9. Why would I want a baby?"

"I know, Honey, and 9 is early, which is why I hadn't got around to telling you yet. Usually, sometime between 11 and 13 a girl's body starts getting ready to host a baby, so that she can have a baby whenever she wants to."

"Does this have something to do with the womb? You told me that Sonia was growing in your womb and would stay there until she was ready for the outside world." Tania recalled.

"Yes. The womb, or the uterus, is an organ every girl and woman has. At some point, the uterus starts building a cozy home for a baby. Every month the inner walls of the uterus become thick and rich in blood to nourish the baby. But if there is no baby, then the uterus breaks

down the home, and all the excess tissue and blood leaks out. That's when you get your period. And then the whole process starts again."

"Does it hurt at all? I mean it's not hurting right now, but will it later?"

"It could hurt. Some people experience pain, and others don't. Most people experience at least mild pain from cramps. That's because the muscles contract to force out the material that was used to build the home for the baby. Sometimes you may even get a little back pain. If the pain makes you too uncomfortable, we can see a doctor and get some medicine for it."

"Does it hurt you? Do you take medicine for the pain?"

"Some months it doesn't, and some months it does. When it does, I take a medicine for the pain."

"The pain is not too bad, right Mama? At least with the medicine?" Tania asked, hopefully.

"Um ... for a few people the pain becomes intense and unbearable. Often, that indicates some underlying problem. In that case, it is best to get it checked out as soon as possible. So, do let me know, if at any point your periods get very painful. Then we will see a doctor."

"Ouch! That sounds really bad. I'm just glad mine aren't hurting. I hope I'm not one of them." Tania brooded for a moment, but then she was distracted by some baffling questions. "Mama, how does a baby get in to or out of the uterus?" She asked, puzzled. "I remember when Sonia was in your tummy, you said that it was difficult to explain, but the doctors would know how to get her out. So can I know now, how they got her out? Please Mama."

"Sure. Do you know where your period blood is coming out from?"

"From the opening which my pee comes out of, right?" Tania conjectured.

"Not quite. There are two openings there in your pubic area close to each other. The one from which you urinate is your urethra. The second one, a little lower and closer to your anus, is your vagina. That's the opening from which your period, or menstrual blood as it is called, oozes out. It is also the opening from which the baby comes out."

"What? That tiny opening? I mean, I know newborns are small, but not that small. How can they possibly come out of there?" Tania stared at Mama wide-eyed in horror.

"During pregnancy, the body prepares for itself for this. Eventually, the cervix, which is the opening of the vagina expands, but I won't lie, it hurts a lot pushing the baby through.

Tania nodded. Then she shook her head rapidly from side to side as if trying to shake off the frightening image her mother's explanation had just conjured.

"Tania, in time you will be able to handle it fine. We all do. As horrifying as it sounds, our bodies are built to cope with it. After all, we are a thriving species with numerous children being born everyday. So don't be frightened. I wanted you to have the truth, but I also want you to put it in perspective." Mama looked Tania in the eye.

Tania nodded. Mama's words reassured her, and she calmed down. "Mama, but how does the baby get inside in the first place?" Tania asked, curiosity still dominating other emotions.

Mama took a deep breath. "Every girl is born with about a million eggs in her uterus." She began.

"What? That's impossible! A million eggs wouldn't fit inside even your tummy Mama, let alone that of a new born baby."

Mama laughed. "You're probably thinking of a chicken egg, aren't you? Human eggs are just a single cell. In fact, they are the largest human cell, about the width of a human hair."

"Oh. That makes more sense. So how do these eggs become babies?"

"After you start your periods, once a month, an egg makes its way to the womb prepared for the baby. There, if the egg is fertilized, then a baby starts to grow out of it."

"Fertilized?" Tania knitted her brows in confusion. "Like with fertilizer? Do you have to eat cow dung or something?" Tania asked, repulsed at the thought.

"What? No." Mama shook her head and stifled a giggle. "No, a human egg is a female human cell that contributes to reproduction. It needs to be fertilized by a male cell called a sperm. When a sperm combines with an egg, the egg is said to be fertilized and then a baby starts to grow out of it."

"Oh, so the egg comes from the baby's mother, and the sperm from the baby's father?" Tania looked at Mama for confirmation.

"Yes. That's why children have traits and features resembling each of their parents. Like you have curly hair like me, but your eyes are shaped like your papa's."

"Where exactly does the sperm come from, and how does it reach the egg Mama?" Tania asked, trying to figure out the logistics.

"The sperm comes from a man's penis, the same body part from which a man urinates. When a man and a woman have sex to conceive a baby, the man inserts his penis in to the woman's vagina to deposit his sperm in to her womb, where it can fertilize the egg."

"Yewww Mama. That's just gross." Tania could not contain her disgust.

Mama shrugged. "It may seem so now, but some day it won't. In fact it will be quite pleasant. Hopefully, that day is a long time away."

"I can't imagine how it could be pleasant." Tania shook her head.

"In the mean time, your body, mind and emotions are going to go through loads of disconcerting changes." Mama continued. "Periods

are only the tip of the iceberg. Visually, it's the most dramatic change, but the emotional swings you experience may be far more overwhelming. I want you to know that you can always come and talk to me about anything the bothers, confuses or upsets you."

"How do you mean? What kind of changes?" Tania asked suspiciously, not wanting to be blindsided again.

"Well, periods mark the start of a new stage of your life called puberty. A number of other bodily and emotional changes accompany it. You will soon grow breasts, and then we need to get you proper bras that fit well and make you comfortable."

Tania looked down at her chest. "I think my breasts are just starting to grow. They are for feeding the baby, right?"

"Yes. Don't you remember me feeding Sonia?"

Tania nodded. "So what other changes will happen Mama?"

"You will grow more hair on your arms, legs, armpits and groin. You may start developing strong feelings for boys, or even possibly for girls. You may experience strange sensations of pleasure in your groin. You may experience a compelling urge to touch yourself there or explore your body. You may find some of these sensations, confusing, embarrassing, or overwhelming. Please know that you can come and talk to me about these things."

"My goodness. It all sounds whacky and a little gross. But thanks for talking to me about it. I don't think I could imagine talking to you about any of these things, if you hadn't discussed them with me first. I simply wouldn't be able to begin getting the words out."

Mama smiled. "Tania ..." She hesitated.

"What Mama?" Tania asked.

Mama sighed. "I know, when the time comes, you'll want your privacy, but I'd really appreciate it, if you could think of me as a friend

and confide in me. You may be reluctant to talk to me, so I want you to know that that I won't ever say anything that will make you feel ashamed."

Just then they heard the key turn. Papa and Sonia had just returned from their shopping trip. "Look Mama, I got pink roller blades." Sonia eyes shone as she took them out of the box to show Mama. Then she ran off to put them away in her room.

"So how come you two are back so early?" Papa asked, puzzled.

"I got my period Papa." Tania announced.

"Congratulations Tania." Papa picked her up and swayed her around. "My goodness, my little girl is growing up so fast." He said setting her down gently. "And getting heavy too." He groaned. "I don't know how much longer I can do that."

"Isn't it a little early though, for periods I mean?" He asked, and Mama shrugged.

"I'm guessing Mama's already explained everything to you." He said turning back to Tania. "I want you to know that I'm here for you too. I do not have any experience with periods, but even boys go through a lot of changes when they hit puberty. I'll be happy to tell you whenever you get curious about it."

Tania nodded. "Yes Papa. I'm sure I'll have loads of questions, but let me digest everything Mama has told me first."

"Information overload?" Papa winked. "I would never have imagined you feeling bogged down by information. But this is a lot to take in, so take your time to process it, and ask us questions anytime you like."

"Thanks Papa." Tania was about to leave, when she heard Papa call out.

"Tania just one more thing. I know this is a confusing time in your life. So, if you ever do something that seems stupid to you, or lands you in any kind of trouble, please don't be scared of telling me. I'll always do my best to help." He said, and Tania rushed up to him and gave him a hug before scooting off to play with Sonia.

Well, I'll make sure at least Sonia knows in time and is not horrified by her periods when she gets them, Tania mused on her way to their shared room, where Sonia was all ready in her pink roller-blades.