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Skin Story
With Critical Introduction: “Scars Left by the Commonplace for Women”

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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Scars Left by the Commonplace for Women

My decision to write “Skin Story” came as the result of thought processes that have been working in my mind throughout my university experience. I wanted to create a story which engaged the reader while also making some kind of statement that was worthwhile, without being pedantic in my writing. The core theme of this story is rape culture.

Rape culture is a concept I happened upon in my personal life, dealing with the fears of being a relatively small young woman with a limited social network of trusted peers on campus. Finding a name for this phenomenon was invaluable to me in dealing with it emotionally. Knowing that there were serious both academic and personal discussions of it gave me greater access to resources to understand and, at times, combat it. However, rape culture itself is so endemic to American society that most people, especially men, tend not to know that it is an issue by its name. Marshall University's Women's Center defines rape culture as the following:

Rape Culture is an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture. Rape culture is perpetuated through the use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women's bodies, and the glamorization of sexual violence, thereby creating a society that disregards women's rights and safety. (“Rape Culture”)

This definition points out that rape culture does not involve forced sexual intercourse alone. Instead, it is a description of an overall environment which disadvantages and abuses women as a normal part of sexual and intimate discourse. This story does not contain an act of forced sexual violence, but it is still about rape culture because of the complex feelings of attachment and

entitlement which ultimately lead to Lana Ashley's mother's death.

“Skin Story” is a fictional account of one facet of this subject, and one that approaches the issue somewhat indirectly at that. It is a work of fiction, not political commentary, and should be read as such. Individual persons have differing views and they may or may not be skewed by experience within their own lives. My story has a relationship to observed reality from my point of view within American society because it is my vantage point. This is not to suggest that the realities of rape culture are exclusive to the United States or that they are identical to issues confronted by women who are facing any and all forms of oppression within the same society. I also do not intend to suggest that men are never negatively affected by these same problems.

In my observation of media, I find that aspects of rape culture are both normalized and romanticized. Thinking back to internalized images in my own mind from real life experience, I can quickly call to mind real life examples of types for the kind of relationship between Lana Ashley's parents in the story. They are encapsulated in fragments of thought—a husband packing things away violently after a night spent exchanging kind words, children's confusion about whether or not they are allowed to love their fathers based on a mixed message received from family members all around him, the violent ends seen by some of these relationships. I found something very sad and very telling in the normalcy of these behaviors and circumstances, and there was something in them that I find myself regularly trying to unpack—why do I find domestic disturbance beautiful or interesting? There is nothing beautiful about violence, and it becomes even more deplorable when it is enacted under the guise of love. The answer I have arrived at is that, as a culture and especially within popular culture, we have not removed the idea of abusive, destructive love as a form of love from our internal emotional vocabularies.

However, I am not entirely sure that we should remove it entirely from that vocabulary, as I will explain later. Nonetheless, I think that this is a systematic problem that is extremely difficult not to internalize.

Some arguments against “feminism” and the idea that rape culture exists cite the fact that men are raped as evidence that rape culture is *not* a women's issue. Instead, it is treated as though women do not have the right to suggest that something like rape culture exists if they want equality, because it seems to favor women in that it addresses women's issues more readily. There is a defensive quality to the argument that rape culture doesn't exist—the “not all men are like that” stance which goes to show a deep insecurity on the part of men in general which is fostered in personal development in culture. In an article in the Harvard Law Review, Katharine Baker indicates that rape tends to become normalized in particular communities. In communities with a high incidence of rape, the incidence is five to ten times higher than in those communities without a high incidence (Baker 578). This, she says, suggests that rape is normalized by socialization in particular communities and in the communities where such behavior is normalized that there are ways in which it is “culturally dictated, not culturally deviant” (578). The idea that has been pervasive about rape itself is that it is a unique kind of violence that is perpetrated only by depraved, even insane individuals. However, these studies suggest that most rape and other violations of women's sexual autonomy and choice are perpetrated by psychologically normal individuals (577). This indicates to me that the tendency to dismiss aspects of rape culture as being a natural part of the anguish of romance and love show that rape and other personal violations of women's rights on the basis of their sexuality are considered simply a part of life.

Writing “Skin Story,” was an exercise first in trying to find a way to confront the notion of what would have been viewed as a tragic, tumultuous, truly *human* romance between Lana Ashley's parents. Rather than focusing on the romance, however, I instead chose to focus on a stark look at its end. I wanted to illustrate the unacceptable nature of the social acceptance of such behavior as a normal part of romantic and family relationships. Lana Ashley faces a lot of alienation as a character from other individuals because her existence is awkward for them in the face of tragedy. Worse than acknowledging her as simply a victim of a tragedy, people in the story tend to look at her both with human compassion and with an objectifying eye that indicates that she is somewhat the cause of the tragedy, tangible evidence of the connection between her parents. She could not have been expected to do anything to prevent her own existence, so the blame is never overt, but I wanted to approach the idea of blamed-femaleness from both the angle of the mother conducting herself “irresponsibly” toward Lana Ashley's father in a way that “got her killed,” and of Lana Ashley being in some way marked as the child of two individuals, one of whom killed the other.

What was the reason for Lana Ashley's father's visit? Did he come to kill her mother? Did he come to demand something of her? Why did she invite him in? Didn't she know it was dangerous? She was attacked in the midst of performing a simple, possibly hospitable act. Does that mean she was stupid and didn't read the signs? Was she trying to appease him? Was she blindsided entirely?

I do not have answers for any of these questions. I do not want to answer any of these questions because they are the kinds of lingering questions left behind when someone dies as the result of domestic violence. I want the reader to question their belief about Lana Ashley's

mother's complicity in her own death if such a question occurs to them, but I also don't want that question to be framed within a mystery story which seeks to answer those questions. "Skin Story" is not a mystery story. Instead, it is the examination of a series of moments which would mark a little girl's life and perception of herself forever, one way or another.

In spite of some of these questions I deliberately chose not to answer by choosing the vantage point I did for my story, I did make it a point to include the detail that Lana Ashley's mother had posited to her the idea that she did not need her abusive and neglectful father in her life. This was because I did want to plant the possible seed of a righteous anger against him in the reader's mind. I do not wish to paint Lana Ashley's father as a portrait of all men but rather as a portrait of a particular abusive one who is not necessarily psychotic. He is universally viewed as bad news by the adults in the story, but Lana Ashley has not received this perspective her entire life. Instead, she has received both good and bad ideas about her father during her life with her mother, and I wanted this anger in great part because of an observation I read about abusive relationships by Lundy Bancroft: "The abusive man's problem with anger is almost always the opposite of what is commonly believed. The reality is: Your abusive partner doesn't have a problem with HIS anger, he has a problem with YOUR anger" (Bancroft). The deep red tire tracks in the front yard evoke this interplay between the two even though it is never explained in anything but terms Lana Ashley would understand. This interplay is a *normalized* part of Lana Ashley's life, which is one of the problems I wanted to evoke in the reader's mind.

The choice of Lana Ashley as the focal character in my story was also a very different response to my experience of the concept of rape culture. One of the simultaneously most grave and glamorized cases I have ever seen in literature of the objectification of women's bodies

occurs in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. I find this work to be deeply interesting that it is some of the most beautiful prose I have ever read. The story is completely captivating, and yet the protagonist and narrator is a monster. He is a monster presented in the most sympathetic light that can be mustered for such a terrible human being. In *Lolita*, Dolores is objectified not only for her body but also for her conceptual meaning and status in Humbert's life as a "nymphet" (16). He says that these young girls he finds so attractive and tempting are "nymphic" and "demoniac" (Nabokov 16). They are to blame for what they do to him and others like him, though an individual nymphet may be "unconscious of her own fantastic power" over him to drive certain kinds of behavior (17). This concocted concept of his that justifies and delineates acceptable pedophilia from the true harm and degradation of a child is extremely thoroughly laid out in the book in multiple stages in a way that, based on the internal logic of the novel itself, makes sense. The fact that this can happen in a way that is cogent in a work of great literature is both a successful work of the literature itself and something symptomatic of the view of women and even young girls' bodies in society.

One need not look far in pop culture's response to *Lolita* to find the alarming embrace by some aspects of nymphets and the notion of little or teen girls being "sexy" to adults. One direct evocation of this romanticization and acceptance and neoteny toward young girls and women is exemplified in lyrics written by the artist Lana Del Rey, for whom my title character is partly named. The chorus of the song, "Off to the Races," begins: "Light of my life, fire of my loins / Be a good baby, do what I want" (Lana Del Rey). The song tells the story of a Lolita-esque character within the trappings of stereotypically "mafia" imagery, moving the story from suburbia into a noir urban setting with mentions of cocaine, Riker's and Coney Island, as well as

the female speaker's "Las Vegas past." Because of this, it seems to afford the song's "protagonist" technical adulthood, in contrast with the Lolita of the novel. The song's retelling of the story is also done from the girl's point of view and is presented in a largely *enjoyed* if not positive light, but it constantly expresses the speaker's perception of herself through the lens of the way she is viewed by her "old man."

Instead of approaching the idea of the little girl being the beautiful victim of exploitation in this way, I wanted to write a story which appreciated its young female protagonist for her innocent beauty. I tried to pay careful attention, at times, to painting an impression of her that is very beautiful but which is respectful of her stage of development and which does not in any way actively invite the presumption of uninvited sexuality upon her. Nonetheless, Lana Ashley is seen by some as a victim of a sexual crime in that her own existence is owed to an unhealthy sexual relationship. This uncomfortable closeness of a child to the reality of her own conception and birth was something that I wanted to comment about with the early exposure to hypersexualization girls face without inviting the idea of "reclaiming" one's own abuse as is the case in much of Lana Del Rey's music which evokes themes found in Lolita.

A final issue I would like to address in my work is perhaps the most obvious one. The explanation for the motivation of my work is very much wrapped up in the concept of "rape culture." However, there is no suggestion of literal rape in this story. There is no violent act of forced sexual intercourse, nor any suggestion that this particular violent behavior had ever occurred between Lana Ashley's parents. The ideas presented are still relevant to the story in a less direct or simplistic way. The idea that rape culture is a systematic problem in society is addressed in the initial definition given for it in this paper. "The glamorization of sexual

violence,” is everywhere. That is what I wished to bring to mind in this story—that, at times, rather than overt rape, sexual violence takes the form of romance and violence taking on a dual nature in which they are two sides of the same coin. In this case, ambivalence felt by lovers toward one another leads to outpourings of violence that are not directly connected to the sexual element of the relationship but which extend from ideas of entitlement fostered in the (usually) male partner which are inextricably linked to the sexual dynamic between the pair.

In another journal article by Katharine Baker, “Gender and Emotion in Criminal Law,” she discusses the ways in which criminal law views the appropriate response to threatening or violent behavior with a male gender bias. The notion that women should walk away from abusive situations and cut all emotional and sexual ties is based on the idea that the natural and appropriate *human* response to a threat of discomfort is the “fight or flight” response, but since the late 1990s, it has been recognized that most previous studies monitoring the “fight or flight” response were performed using only male subjects. When trying to rectify this, it was found that many women responded to stress with a different reaction they referred to as “tend or befriend,” which involved them turning either to social support systems or becoming even better caretakers to anyone perceived as a dependent (Gender 458). This was not found to be a universal rule in either gender, but it was so very nearly consistent that it was accepted likely as a result of biological differences between physical sexes involving the processing of oxytocin, a hormone released both in response to bonding and stress. This discovery means that it is possible that the responsibility placed upon women in domestically violent situations or in situations where coercion is involved not only places pressure upon them financially and socially but also goes against what might be a responsive instinct to a threat. Therefore, in my story, the fact that Lana

Ashley's mother responds with trying to be sufficient for her daughter on her own at times and, in contrast, sometimes letting her father back into their lives is consistent with observed, somewhat consistent behavior in real women.

Further, Baker discussed that there is a view held by some that demanding affirmative, healthy consent in every aspect of a relationship takes away from the spontaneity or passion of sexual relationships. Professor Niel Gilbert argues that it takes away from “the kaleidoscope of intimate discourse—passion, emotional turmoil, entreaties, flirtation, provocation, demureness,” which should be allowed to enrich the experience (qtd. in *Gender* 451). This view further corroborates the idea that the interplay of violence (emotional and otherwise) expected in “intimate discourse” is not considered dangerous enough to cause societal outcry until such behavior spills over into a different form of criminality or violence. It was this ambiguity, both in lived reality and the social constructs and fantasies that contribute to it, that I wanted to address in my story.

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Skin Story

If anyone else had been the first one home that day, they would have stopped her going inside. Anyone else might have seen the deep tire tracks left across the grass and gravel expanse that was the front yard. They might have seen them for what they were, for all their ghostly anger. All Lana Ashley saw was a long groove of ruddy mud that hadn't been there when she'd walked to the bus that morning. She knew her daddy had a truck. It stalled sometimes, and when they were with him Mama didn't like that. It had something to do with the money, the smell of cigarettes that made her so angry. It didn't make Lana Ashley mad—it gave her a headache sometimes though. Daddy always told Mama to shut up about it, that he needed something to take the edge off because she wouldn't. Lana Ashley wasn't really sure what that meant.

She looked down at her shoes as she walked, stopping at the edge of the yard right where she took a step down from the blue-black pavement. She kept her eyes focused downward as she stepped along the serpentine, reddish scar in the yard, wondering if it had been beaten down by the rain.

It hadn't rained since that morning, about ten, when her second grade class had walked from the big building to one of the modular classrooms. It had been pretty warm rain for the early fall of the year. It hadn't been sticky in her nose or her hair. The worst part had been the way it splashed up from the ground, making grass clippings cling to her lean calves, crisscrossing the barely visible traces of downy, sun-bleached hair. It had itched and itched for a while, but after she'd scratched a long just beneath the hem of her powdery blue capris, she had forgotten about it.

Coming to the most visible, distinct edge of the muddy strip, Lana Ashley stopped. She

studied her shoes. She remembered the day she'd begged for them at Walmart when she had seen the red sticker over the normal yellow price tag. They were white, sturdy, scalloped straps on a thick sole that made it easy enough to run. There were little stones on them Mama told her weren't really diamonds. She had never really been sure if she believed her. But best of all were the little blue lights that shone, twinkled and flashed each time she took a step, flickering among the stones in the solid part of the sandals that covered up her ankles.

Lana Ashley lifted her foot from the ground and twisted her waist to look past her capris to see her shoe press back down to the grass. If she messed up her shoes, Mama would be mad at her, and then she wouldn't have her pretty shoes anymore.

Finally, after her hesitance and deliberation, she toed her way forward right along the edge of the groove of reddish mud along the ground. She felt the transient squish of the ground with broken, damp blades of grass sticking to her toes. She knew that under the drying heat of the next day's sun, the ground would harden again. She stopped and shifted her weight back and forth between each sole.

Suddenly a bright, orangeish beam caught her right in the eyes, reflected afternoon sunlight blinding as it bounced off the glass pane of the storm door. Lana Ashley squinted and held up her hand to block out some of the rays that seemed to beam heat directly back onto her face. That was when she noticed that something was different. There was a deep, dark break in the reflection that recessed back into shadow. She could see that the hardly discernible dull, light blue door was open a crack behind the storm door.

Compelled forward, her right shoe squished down into the red gash in the ground, too close to the gray, green, brown front steps. She didn't notice the mud or the way her petite hands

shook as she mounted the steps, trying to calm the thumping of her heart. Both hands went up to the long curve of the storm door handle and she pulled, skirting around the glass as it swung out, ready to meet her face.

Backpack on the floor out of habit, Lana Ashley's feet kept moving without removing her sandals. When she breathed there was an acrid tingle in the air that turned yellow in her nose. Cigarettes. She wrinkled her nose and winced, hoping it wouldn't find a pathway from her nostrils up into the part of her head that throbbed sometimes. She cleared her throat. A path of red footprints trailed and coiled through the house behind her, staining already dingy but formerly clean carpet.

“Mama?” Lana Ashley called. Her clean shoe touched over the golden metal strip that separated the carpet from the linoleum that covered the kitchen floor. The other foot crept forward and the stained sandal touched another source of red. It was purple in places and seemed to reflect black rather than any of the light in the room. Her eyes followed the pool to its source and then cast up, around, making her dizzy as she took in the kitchen. There was a half-filled glass of cola, gone flat, right beside a two liter that lay on its side, the dark liquid that was left having settled after the majority of its contents had spilled out onto the floor, mingling with the darker pool.

When she looked down again, there wasn't any more thinking about it. She didn't understand and she understood all at once, but mostly she was running. She turned on the balls of her feet and the very toe of her shoe left a redder daub. It was like every time she'd come out of the bathroom late at night, lunging for her bed from the doorway to escape the dark into some kind of warm safety before something had the chance to scare her.

Instead, there were the front steps that jolted painful little shock waves up into her small knees and then there was grass. And mud was everywhere because when she ran, she slipped. A small grunt of disgust came from her lips, and it felt like the first time she'd made a sound, but she gathered herself up. She kept going. Back onto the grass and up toward the pavement she ran, and she leapt and pulled her way up—left, aching leg scraping along and getting blue gritty dust on it as little pinprick holes appeared in her skin. Then she was bleeding a little, too.

It took forever to get up to the road and past the wide strip of yard that was just past their line of trees along the edge of their property. She was going next door, but there was an unhitched trailer for a truck and a shady swath of darker mud and it made her slip again. This time she found her footing again before she found the ground and kept moving, treading water. Finally, she jumped onto the stoop and the screen door rattled on its hinges.

Lana Ashley remembered every time they'd quizzed them in Kindergarten and first grade. She remembered walking up to the teacher's desk, the soft procession of questions.

What's your full name?

Where do you live?

What's your address?

What's your phone number?

Who do you call if your parents can't be reached?

Who do you call if you're in trouble and need help right now?

She needed help right now. Her right hand balled into a fist and she beat the side of it into the door and against the loosely bulging screen and then the hard metal, putting little reddened welts in her skin.

Lana Ashley Morris.

Maple Grove.

720 Elm Street.

541-6725.

My nana.

9-1-1.

9-1-1. The number popped into her head and became the only thought she could hold onto. There'd been a phone in her house—black with a green Caller-ID screen, sitting in its cradle by the armchair in the living room. She should have called 9-1-1. It was important. Mama had told her about 9-1-1, too, long before her Kindergarten teacher had. As soon as she'd started learning how to dial a phone, she had known about 9-1-1. But she hadn't called. She beat with more wild desperation against the neighbors' screen door.

A woman came to the door. Her brown hair was tied up away from her face, falling down in loose strands. There was a slightly faded orange-checked dishtowel wringing between her hands to dry them off. It was different from the checked pattern on the big, unbuttoned shirt that hung down over a t-shirt and cut-off blue jean shorts. She was standing there and she was breathing, waiting for a moment. Lana Ashley noticed more than anything the way she was alive as her small mouth opened, lips staying parted as she looked for words to say. The woman standing in front of her was Reese Bailey's mom. Reese had baseball practice. He was a year ahead of her in school.

For those few seconds she took in Reese's mom standing at the door, she forgot all about 9-1-1. For a moment, she hoped. Reese had a mom. She'd always had a mom. This was all some

kind of bad dream and she'd wake up. Or maybe they could help her mom. Something. But she wasn't a baby. As much as she didn't want to understand, she did. The puddle in the middle of the kitchen floor had stained her mother's clothes too much. She knew that, and that's how her mind came back to 9-1-1.

“What's the matter, sweetie?” Reese's mom asked. When everything was still for an instant more, she balled up the orange dishtowel and set it aside on something by the door. She started to squat down but stopped and straightened again when Lana Ashley found her voice.

“Call 9-1-1!” she said, the way she remembered she was supposed to. Then she found herself on her knees, shins pressing painfully into the threshold though they were cushioned by the carpet. “... My mama... Mama...” And then it was like speaking had jarred something loose from her throat. She was quiet, breathless, a little high-pitched. Then she was quiet for a moment.

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The sky was turning a dull, muting blue. Sunset was gone and yet the sky hadn't gone completely dark. It was like there was a fuzzy, heavy blanket falling down toward the ground. But it didn't matter. Nothing was getting dark around Elm Street. There were too many blinking, strobing lights.

The screech of sirens had been deafening, but now there was just a rattle of some strange mechanism inside the lights that made a clicking sound. There were radios and telephones and audible, present shouts. There was an ambulance, but there wasn't a patient to take anywhere. Lana Ashley had been allowed to sit in Reese's house. She could still see the flashing lights from across the yard and between the trees, making their presence known in the reflections on the darkened TV screen and in the glass on picture frames. She was barefoot now, sitting on the very

edge of her sofa seat. They had taken her shoes.

Reese's mom came inside, pausing for a moment at the door to scrape mud off her shoe. Lana Ashley shivered a little bit.

“Do you want something to eat, baby?” Reese's mom asked, and her tone was sweet and soft and kind.

It made Lana Ashley's chest hurt so deeply that she wondered if this was what people were talking about when they said someone had a heart attack. Her stomach churned and she shook her head violently.

Reese's mom approached her and knelt down in front of her, placing her hands gently over hers.

“Is there anything you need, can you tell me?”

“Don't call me 'baby,’” Lana Ashley said, and her skin flushed because she felt like she was being rude. She cleared her throat to clarify. “My Mama called me that. Is she...?” She couldn't bring herself to ask the question that she already knew the answer to. Instead she looked down and began to cry again, making herself small.

“I'm so sorry,” Reese's mom said. Then, Lana Ashley felt Reese's mom's arms wrapping around her and hugging her close, and it felt like static shocks running along her skin—wrong because it wasn't *her* mom and never would be again.

The door opened and the brief peace was interrupted by the panted breath and audible, thick swallowing of Reese as he came through the door. The door rattled a little in its frame as it smacked against the back of the rubber cradle that kept the interior handle from knocking a hole in the wall. Lana Ashley curled up and hugged her knees again because of how cold she felt

when Reese's mom got up to turn toward her son.

“Mom!” the boy called as he ran into the room. He hadn't taken off his muddy shoes either, Lana noticed through her dampening, blurred vision. Her eyes ached and itched around the edges, just like the scrapes and bruises on her legs and knees.

“I'm right here,” Reese's mom promised, pulling her son's dark golden head in against her stomach. Lana Ashley was eight and wanted to tell the nine year old boy that his mother had to have been here. It was obvious. Despite the pain that settled like a blanket all over her body, she tried not to think about her mom, about what would happen to what was left of her because of the ugly holes left in her body that weren't the kind of thing anyone wanted to see at a funeral. She wondered if they even had funerals for people who'd been killed, who didn't just *die*.

She pushed her mind toward the back of her house, imagining what would have happened if she had gone left instead of right before she had checked the kitchen.

How long would she have stayed back there in her room, wondering why it was so quiet, before she had gone into the kitchen? If she'd let herself get really hungry, really thirsty, first, she wondered how badly she might have heaved over the blood in the floor. She wondered what would happen to the stuff that was in her bedroom.

The door opened again. Reese's father walked through the door and reminded Lana Ashley that some people had two parents who stayed at the same home they did. It was easy to forget sometimes. Her mama had always promised that she'd never need that, whether her daddy came to pick her up or stayed the night or not. Her mama had promised that she'd be the only parent she needed, that she'd be there for everything, but she was gone. There was a music presentation next month for all the parents in the school. She wouldn't have anyone to be there

with her. She wondered where her daddy was. Then, because she felt cold, she stopped.

“What happened?” Reese's dad asked Reese's mom.

Instead of a real word answer, Reese's mom shushed her husband. Lana Ashley looked up and saw the gentle push of Reese's mom's hand against his dad's chest. She knew that the following whisper of the wife into her husband's ear was probably about her.

“What's going to happen to me?” Lana Ashley asked. It seemed like a more important question. When she looked around there wasn't anything here that looked like home. Even all the stuff that was for kids was for boys. She thought she could handle that, since she didn't feel like playing anyway, but she also knew that people didn't just adopt kids because they felt like it one day. That meant they definitely didn't adopt kids just because their neighbors died.

“I think they'll call someone in your family, sweetie,” Reese's dad said. That was at least a little better than being called 'baby,' and the fact that he had a man's voice also helped her not think about her mom so much. She kept trying to remember what her mom's voice sounded like. In some memories, she could hear it. In others, she couldn't. She knew that meant she'd lose her again someday. Maybe the police would let her have something that had her mom's voice on it, but they had taken her whole house away. It was a crime scene now.

“Am I in trouble?” she asked.

“What? No, of course not,” Reese's mom replied, joining his dad in front of the sofa. They both knelt down and hovered. Lana Ashley kept her legs up, keeping a wall between them.

“Why can't I stay in my house? The whole house didn't have... my mom's—” Even as she tried to ask, Lana Ashley furrowed her brow until it hurt.

“They just need to make sure you aren't changing anything,” Reese's dad assured her.

“But I did! My shoes... my shoes had her blood on them,” she said. She wriggled her toes again.

“That's why they took them, Lana,” Reese's mom answered.

“Lana Ashley'.”

“What?”

“My name's Lana Ashley. My Mama said it made me special—that no one else had that name, if I had both.”

“Okay. Lana Ashley. Let me get you some socks to cover your feet,” Reese's mom suggested. Then she patted her softly as she got up and walked through their house. Part of her wanted to, but Lana Ashley didn't argue. Her feet were cold. Her whole body was cold.

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A long time later, there was a knock at the door, hard and loud enough to make Lana Ashley jump. She realized that she'd slid over to the left, her back and side rested against a throw pillow on the couch. There was a blanket draped over her, too. She didn't know how she'd fallen asleep, but she silently said she was sorry to her mother. She wasn't sure if she was ever really going to be allowed to sleep again. The only rules she had left from her mom were caught somewhere in her own head.

A woman in a dark blue suit with small white, shiny earrings—real diamonds, Lana Ashley realized, probably—short, curled hair, and dark brown skin stepped up onto the threshold from the front steps.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Bailey,” she said, and Lana Ashley realized they were still nearby. She hadn't looked around much. Maybe they were in the kitchen. Maybe she really could never

eat again, or only at school, if she got to go back. “My name is Thea Hayes,” the woman at the door explained. “I’m with Family Services, and I’m here to talk to Lana,” she said, letting her voice lilt up into something that wasn’t quite a question. It was welcoming—welcoming enough to draw Lana Ashley’s eyes back up to look at her. Then the woman knelt. She was beginning to hate that everyone did that. It made her feel even smaller. “You’re Lana?”

“Ashley.”

“Oh, do you go by your middle name?”

Her voice was too conversational. It was the same as if they ended every sentence with *'even though your mom is dead.'*

“No. Lana Ashley. Two names.”

“Oh, I see. Well, Lana Ashley, I’ve got to say I am *terribly* sorry this has happened to you,” she said, reaching out and touching her arm and leaning in just slightly to keep eye contact. Lana Ashley didn’t pull away, just like when she’d let Reese’s mom hug her. She wondered where Reese was now. His mom was supposed to take care of him but his parents were still with her. He wasn’t. They were supposed to take care of him and her mama was supposed to take care of her. Neither of those things were happening. Everything was sideways and slipping.

She felt indention, pressure on the couch cushion beneath her as the woman’s hand pressed down steadily as she rose onto her knees, settling in to stay. Then Lana Ashley heard a soft murmur work its way through a dull, underwater sound in her ears that she knew was in her imagination.

“What?” she asked, realizing there had probably been words she’d missed. She frowned tightly, confused.

“I was saying that we need to talk about some things,” the lady in front of her replied. “But I’m going to need you to come with me.” With that the woman offered her hand, the soft underside facing up. Lana Ashley regarded her hand, imagining that it might turn out to be slick, slippery like when too much lotion wasn’t rubbed in. “You’ll be safe,” the woman assured her again when she noticed the way Lana Ashley leaned far enough to the left to start to tip over. She felt her body straighten out and then she scrambled against the cool fabric of the sofa, a cartoon character skidding in place. Then she was on the carpet, feeling her scraped shin sting again. Running again, there wasn’t far to go in the strange house.

She found the bathroom when she heard the hum of a dryer and saw light reflecting off the hard, white floor. She felt her limbs shaking, quivering, fleeing from a nightmare and knowing she couldn’t close the door in time. She did close it. And then she felt the thrum and vibration of the dryer against her back and the strange, underwater sound was finally real. For another moment, she found a shaky peace when she close block out Mrs. Bailey’s please, the other lady’s calm insistence that she was there to help. She knew it couldn’t last forever.

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In the back of the car, the flashing blue and red lights were dimmed. She knew that no one could see inside. There were things about it that didn’t seem like a normal car—it was big and empty and dark with strange equipment surrounding where the radio ought to be. Lana Ashley leaned her head back and felt a soft vibration that made her close her eyes. She sniffed deeply and felt the way her eyes were gummy, tired, red. It felt like they were scraped raw from the way the waves of tears and the long, empty dryness had burned.

“We’re going to call your grandmother when we get to the station,” Thea informed her.

The car hummed and jarred beneath her and cool air spat out of the vents in the front. Lana Ashley tried to tuck herself closer to the door to get away from the goose bumps that formed on her pale skin. It looked as cold as her mom had under the blue flickers of light that touched it through the window, and the red flickers reminded her of blood.

“It's late,” Lana Ashley commented, her voice feeling like it bubbled up around a blockage in her throat. She thought about her Nana watching TV. She thought about her Nana getting a phone call that her own daughter was dead. She was tired and hurting inside, bruised all over, and that just made it hurt worse. She'd never had to think about anything like this really happening.

The car began to move and Lana Ashley felt her teeth chatter as it moved back onto the pavement from the loose gravel. She gave into the urge to shiver from the cool air in the car. She caught sight of Thea's bright eyes looking back at her through the rear-view mirror.

“You cold, sweetie?” she asked.

Lana Ashley didn't know why she shook her head, but Thea turned down the fan anyway. Lana Ashley took a few breaths and her skin felt less tightly pulled over her bones.

“You're going to be okay,” Thea said as they were winding their way out of the neighborhood. Lana Ashley went back and forth between looking out the window, memorizing things, and shutting her eyes, trying to forget them. “It's my job to make sure of that. If you think of anything—anything at all—in particular that you need, you tell me, okay? But otherwise... there's people who know what you need, too. You don't have to do anything. And there are going to be special people for you to talk to. Safe people.”

“Does this happen a lot? To a lot of kids?” Lana Ashley asked. She sounded almost angry

to herself. She didn't know if she really sounded mad or not.

When she didn't get an answer to that, she stopped trying to listen.

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The station was white. Lana Ashley's legs were going to sleep in her chair so she kicked them a little while she waited. Thea was nearby, just behind a desk. She looked up and caught her eyes. Thea wouldn't answer any of her questions. She felt stupid for thinking she cared.

She looked to the right. There was a man she could see through a gap left by an open door as he paced to one end of the room. His large hands touched at his hips and he occasionally gestured with them to something she couldn't see. Sometimes he frowned and sometimes he touched his face.

She couldn't hear every word he was saying. Even at night there were constant conversations, trilling phones, sounds that got between her and the man.

“Suspects,” was a word she caught first that made her interested to keep trying to listen. There were other words she caught, too. Some of them she'd never heard before and some of them she didn't want to hear. They made her look down at her lap and stop trying to listen, made her stomach crawl back toward her spine.

Then another word. Two words that Lana Ashley had been hearing all her life.

“James Riggins.”

A name. Lana Ashley got to her feet and took a loud intake of breath when she felt more feeling tingling back into her legs. For a moment the nerve feedback kept her from moving the way she wanted and she stumbled toward the crack in the door. Her left leg still hurt—a lot and from a lot of little things, the running, the scrape, behind asleep—but the Tylenol was in the

cabinet up above where her mother had been lying on the kitchen floor. She didn't know who else to ask.

The man heard her approach because of the dragging of her sock-covered feet. The socks were too big and Lana Ashley nearly tripped when the man looked at her, right in the eyes. *James Riggins*. And she thought she saw anger in the man's face. She looked off to the side, following down the pinstripe of his shirt to his pocket. She looked for a badge where she expected to find one but there wasn't one on his chest. He wasn't a policeman like the men and women in their blue and black padded uniforms were policemen, but he was important. He was important and he'd said her father's name and he'd shut the door. She wondered if that meant she had done something wrong, too.

She was back in her chair by the time she heard another familiar voice.

“Where is she?” came the wavering demand of a familiar, worn voice. There was always a slight shakiness to her grandmother's voice, even when she was perfectly calm. The words that were spoken were perfectly clear, but she could hear her grandmother's age in her voice. This time it was different—harsh to her ears in a way that for a moment made her stomach feel colder down either side, making her want to shiver again to get the uneven weight off her body.

“Nana?” Lana Ashley asked, pushing herself to the edge of the chair, feet finding the floor that was still cool in spite of the big socks.

She realized that her grandmother must not have heard her at first. The older woman pressed herself to a high counter top, elbows coming down next to a pen, making the little chain slide off toward the edge and into Lana Ashley's view.

There were some hushed murmurs from a man behind the desk and a woman in uniform

who spoke softly to Lana Ashley's grandmother. She couldn't make out what they were saying and she couldn't find it in her aching legs to run up to her.

“I know, but I need to know what I can do for her. I'm... sorry to say it, but I knew this was comin'... one day or another,” her grandmother said with a little more familiar clarity. “Do you know what he wanted? Money? Or—”

Lana Ashley was startled again when Thea came up in from the side, hands on her shoulders. She felt betrayed again by the woman's absence and looked up to glare at her.

“That's my Nana!” she said loudly.

“I know, Lana. I've come to—” Thea began, but Lana Ashley's exclamation had roused the attention of her grandmother.

She saw a floral print on the long, loose, button-up shirt her grandmother wore.

She smelled the perfume that seemed to match it and the sound of her grandmother's voice. She stopped caring whether or not Thea was going to leave her. Her grandmother wouldn't. And for a little while, she forgot that they had said James Riggins' name.

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Lana Ashley's father had been arrested. She didn't know how long it had taken—a day, two, three. It was a week and a half later. Now, she understood the tire tracks she'd found in the front yard. There had been weekends when he had promised to come while he told her he loved her on the phone, but he never came. She hadn't been home that day. He would have known that she was at school, but he'd come and left her alone without a mother anyway. He had stabbed her instead of kissing her this time, instead of coming in the middle of the day and waiting on her to come home, instead of promising her that she could have a real family one more time.

It was like looking at the shoes she'd ruined when she stepped down—the slow process of waking up each morning. Focusing her eyes on the wooden ceiling fan spinning around and around above her, she tried to remember each little speck of light that she'd felt when she got to see Daddy after so much time of him being away. Then she would let those lights wink back out when she remembered the angry phone calls, when she remembered those weeks he'd spent living with them like a normal family but breaking bottles on the wall one night after she'd tried to go to sleep. There was an ache inside her, but she reminded herself not to miss him, not to miss him at all.

She still hadn't gone back to school, so the thought of pushing back the quilt and getting out of bed seemed pointless. Her head hurt from lying there for too long and when she looked over at the bright red numbers on the clock, she read *10:19*. She'd gone to bed at nine and realized that must be why her head hurt. She took deep breaths and slowly pushed herself up into a seated position. She listened to the buzzing hum of the fan up above her and the louder rattle of the air conditioning outside the door where it was attached to a window up above the stairs to the basement. Her feet touched the floor and she got feeling into them and stumbled forward until she caught her balance. She went to the bathroom and brushed her teeth.

She was old enough, so she reached down to the bathtub and started running bathwater for herself. She watched it slowly start to fill the soap out into bubbles, but she was too big for bubbles to be any fun. Instead, she went back out into the living room while she waited, finding her grandmother at work with something she was sewing on a round wooden frame.

“Good morning, baby,” her grandmother said. Each day, after that night at the police station, hearing her grandmother sound normal was weird. Lana Ashley didn't know what to say

back to her this morning any more than she had any other morning since her mother had been dead. Only she realized that she finally did. She didn't miss him anymore.

“Why did my dad kill Mama?”

Everything was still for a moment. Then her grandmother set her sewing aside on the end of the table and reached out for her. She slowly stepped into the offered embrace, but she knew that it was being given instead of an answer. She knew that her grandmother was trying to make her feel better, but it just made her angry.

She leaned her cheek against her grandmother's soft shoulder anyway.

No one was ever going to tell her the truth because she already knew. They were waiting on her to realize it. It was written all over her skin because they'd made her. She knew that much. The reason her father had killed her mother was written all over her skin.

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