

Under My Skin

When I close my eyes, my skin is clear.

I don't avoid eye contact, or watch the floor with a timidity that makes me look anti-social or as if I lack confidence – because I don't.

When I sleep, the fact of my reddened and angry skin that so offends onlookers on the street — to the point where they feel they need to point — falls to the wayside. It floats like a feather falling to the ground, down, down, down to the back of my mind until it melts into the base of my skull, dissolving as if it were not something that consumed my every waking thought.

In these blissful dreams I find myself roaming rain forests, the green so lush I can't open my eyes wide enough. I'm on the beach as the sun rises, the waves gentle and sleepy and accepting. Then I'm staring down at red dirt, up in the branches of a ghost gum tree at sunset, but without the dry heat. A cool breeze caresses my face, smooth and unflinching; I lift my head and stare out at the horizon that stretches out and find myself smiling.

When I close my eyes at night, I am on my own.

I am not on display, open to the world for commentary. I am not in my living room, surrounded by my immigrant family who claim, *“Nobody in Bosnia had skin like this, it's this Australian climate. It's this Western food. You shouldn't wear make-up. Don't get angry, it will make it worse. Why is it so bad today?”*

It appears that this first-generation Australian is special. My DNA is different. Maybe if I was more ethnic, the constant bubbling fear and anxiety that sits in the pit of my stomach every day like a heavy stone wouldn't erupt onto my face, there for the whole world to see and promptly dismiss after gawking.

Or maybe it is my ethnicity that spearheads this vendetta against me.

Maybe I should turn to drugs, to numb the pain and treat the symptoms: isn't that what a displaced immigrant does? Isn't that what my immigrant family does? That's if they ask for help in the first place.

We all know full well that the root cause is untreatable (*“maybe you're just one of the unlucky ones,”* an indifferent doctor says, *“you're going to have to move on, eventually,”* he sighs), so here, have a pill, but don't stop taking it because it will all come back.

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The doctor smiles at me. “How can I help you today, Allira?”

I wave my hand around my face, as if presenting a prize on a game show. “Well, as you can see, I have some issues.”

“Go on.”

“So, I’m twenty-four and I have the skin of a teenager in full bloom puberty. Maybe worse. It’s pretty shitty and I think I’m well and truly over it?” I say, adding the last part as a question, perhaps hoping she’d agree with me, that I should be over it.

“Tell me a bit about yourself first.”

I suppose that’s a no on the agreement. “Well, like I said, I am twenty-four...I work full-time...I’m Bosnian...” I trail off, unsure of what identity I should pin on to myself next.

“When did you migrate?”

“I didn’t. My parents did in 1993. I was born here almost a year after they arrived? They left because of the war.”

She nods. “I remember seeing that on the news in the nineties. It was horrific.”

“Yeah, pretty bad.” I don’t know what else to say, don’t know how much detail I should go into, so I stupidly say, “Genocide, right?”

“Right.” Well, at least she agrees with me on something. “And your family?”

“What about them? The war or the acne?”

“Whichever you’d like to address.” She smiles again and I wonder if she’s trying not to burst out laughing at me. She probably won’t be able to wait to go home and tell her friends or family or partner about this weird girl who rocked up in her office, spotty and awkwardly dropping the word ‘genocide’ into everyday conversation.

“Well,” I say, “nobody else has acne. My parents say that they had acne growing up and that it was as bad, but I know they’re just saying that. The acne they talk about is real teenage acne. A few spots here and there, nothing that Clearasil can’t sort - and that stuff doesn’t do shit, usually. My mum had me when she was twenty-four and I’ve seen photos - she looks like an angel with some kind of permanent glow around her face; kind of like that circular

light that Kim Kardashian carries around? You know the one she brought - or was it one of her sisters...I can't remember - to use when she was getting her drivers license photo taken?"

"I don't follow the Kardashians."

"Oh, neither do I." She doesn't say anything for a few moments, writes a few words down onto her notepad before I feel the burning in my cheeks and the sudden, persistent need to fill the silence. "So, you know, uh...my parents think the reason my skin is like this is because of the Australian climate. Or the food. Or both. They're pretty adamant that this—" Fancy game show gesture, "—does not exist in Bosnia. It is a phenomenon unique to this country."

"And what do you think?" she asks me.

"Well...I think it's ludicrous to assume that two people who come from cities the size of one Australian suburb can with full faith say that a country with the population of about three million odd does not have a single case of acne. I think."

"How long has this been going on?"

"About three to four years? Since I hit my twenties basically."

She nods and types again. "And what about stress?"

"What about it?"

"Do you have any consistent stress in your life in general or any particularly stressful events that have occurred recently? Oftentimes stress manifests physically."

"Well, work has been fine. Relatively uneventful; I went full-time recently. I wouldn't say that I am generally stressed out."

"And at home? Anything particularly stressful going on at home?"

I think about home and how my family goes about their day, waiting for it to end so the next one can begin. How they survive. How my dad has barely eaten in over two weeks and can't get out of bed most days. "Well, for the most part, the ongoing commentary on my skin and the push to get medicated irks me a bit," I say instead.

"That sounds frustrating. Do you want to go on medication?"

"No." I glance away from her face and at her bookcase. "I don't know."

I gave myself a pep talk on the way over here that I would look her in the eye no matter what. She is here to help and this should be a non-judgemental space so I shouldn't stare off to the corner of the room or at the floor the way that I usually do.

I fix my gaze back on her but now I can't stop noticing how perfect her skin is. She's wearing foundation, obviously, to cover her flawless skin and it probably physically hurts her to look at my face.

"It's just bullshit," I finally say, shaking my head. "Medication can't be the only answer. It can't be the only answer to a question that nobody is asking."

She places her pen down on to the notepad and shifts in her seat. "What question should they be asking?"

"I don't know – how about, *'how are you'?* I think that you're the first person that has asked me to explain what's going on, what might be causing it. Everyone else in my life just gives me solutions that I didn't ask for." And now I can't stop. Shit. "Wash your face, drink this green smoothie, get more sleep, and they do mention stress – but not seriously. They tell me to relax, not to stress out, as if saying those words works like a light switch. My parents say 'stop stressing out' so often that all it does is stress me out! But then, of course, I can't show them that I'm stressed out because it will stress them out and as if PTSD weren't enough, they need to watch me having a breakdown—"

My rant is cut off by my breath hitching in my throat. I know my face is red. I know my eyes are full of tears. I know my hands are going leave sweat marks on my jeans. I know that this is too much, but I'm awake. I'm awake and on display and open to commentary. The weight of the buried fear in the pit of my stomach begs me to curl into a ball for some kind of relief.

Now I can't look at her.

She slides the tissue box across her table to me and says, "It's okay. Take your time."

When I regain some sort of composure I say, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be here."

"Why not?"

"Because I know what people with actual problems look like and they don't look like me."

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When I close my eyes, I wonder if this will be the day that I don't get out of bed. It wouldn't be a new occurrence around here.

I close them and wait to drift off to a part of the world I've never been, feel my body sink into the mattress, until a low groaning, quickly gaining volume begins to echo throughout the house. My eyes flit open; it's coming from the living room where my dad has been laying for a couple of weeks now.

As I sit up, I hear my mum padding through the hall on her way to the living room. Within a few moments, the night terror ceases and I hear the low mumble of their conversation.

"Was I shouting?" my dad asks.

"Yes. Do you want some water?"

"No."

I wait until I hear my mum go back into their bedroom before making my way out to check on him. I stand in the hallway and peer over the low wall that separates the living room and hallway. My dad lays on his back under a blue blanket, the palm of his right hand covering his face. Only the light from the hallway seeps in and illuminates his gaunt figure.

I take a few steps closer and he startles. "Allira," he sighs.

I sit on the edge of the coffee table and watch him. "Are you okay, Babo?"

"I'm fine," he says, feigning a smile. "Why are you up so late?"

"Some guy was screaming," I tell him and I hear him huff: a small laugh.

"Your skin looks good tonight," he says, as way of conversation.

"Thanks, it does always pop in a dark room."

Silence drops between us until I ask, "Why did you stop taking your anti-depressants?" He turns his face away and stares up at the ceiling. I add, "I know you stopped."

"I've started again," he finally replies. "Today."

"But why did you stop?"

Time inches past us as he lies there, eyes fixed above himself. The clock in the hallway ticks as crickets in the front garden chirp to their hearts content.

“I felt better,” he whispers. He clears his throat and looks at me. “I finally started feeling better. It’s been over twenty years. I thought I could do it slowly. That I could stop slowly and that I would adjust.”

I reach out and run my thumb over his forearm to stop my hand from shaking.

“And I was fine, for a week. I felt amazing. I had energy, I was going to work with no issues and I was happy. And then I skipped a meal. And then two. And then I started sweating...”

“And now you’re here,” I finish for him.

“Now I’m here.”

I don’t think that he’s going to say anymore, so I ask him if there’s anything that I can get him. I try to joke, “Perhaps a sock for your mouth so that I can get some sleep?” and he smiles, but he’s not back yet. Not fully.

We sit in silence for what must be half an hour; I listen to him breathe and suspect he’s fallen asleep, but can’t push myself to leave his side yet.

When my eyes begin to burn from exhaustion, I stand and my father’s voice cuts into the dark. “You’re strong,” he sighs. “Stronger than me.”

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A week has passed and the doctor smiles at me as I sit down in front of her again. “Allira. I’m glad to see you. How may I help?”

“Well, as I mentioned last time, I do have some issues.” Cue gameshow presenter hands at my enraged skin.

She nods and says, “I remember. I suppose I might as well drop this in the beginning of the conversation, just so that we start off on the same page. I can help you, but if one of your main concerns is your skin, I’m not a dermatologist. I’m a psychologist.”

“Yes, I know.”