



300  
GRAMS

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### **TRIGGER WARNING:**

This novella contains graphic scenes around the themes of self-harm, bulimia and anorexia. Please be aware that this may be triggering for some.

There is a resource section at the end of this document if you need additional support.

*“The things that women reclaim are often their own voice, their own values, their imagination, their clairvoyance, their stories, their ancient memories. If we go for the deeper, and the darker, and the less known, we will touch the bones.”*

- Clarissa Pinkola Estes

## SKIN

My skin hides me, contains me, holds all the pieces together.

I don't feel like I own it, but more like my skin owns me. I can play with its elasticity and stretch it over a fat thigh, or I can pull it tight like cling wrap around an arm that lost all of its muscle. I can cover it with lines of scars, burn it with the hot orange kiss of a cigarette, and tattoo ink in many colours across its surface, scald tan lines in my back on the days I forget to untie my bikini top. But still, it owns me.

I can't live without it holding my blood, and sometimes I like to test the boundaries, play with the rules, and take a blade to the top layers of skin, to get a taste for the underneath, for the me inside, to feel something other than contained. Cutting gives me room to let the air in. Gills to the outside world, a different way of breathing.

I always feel closest to my skin in the bath. I close my eyes and blue darkness surrounds me.

The cold white of the ceramic pushes hard against my skin and I fumble for the plug so that I can turn on the tap to swarm warm water around my body. My nails are violet. Winter is in my bones.

Hands tremble around the cold edge of a scalpel. I still have the not-so-over-the-counter blade from Physiology class. When I wore a white lab coat and peeled off the skin of dead rats to splay their bones open and spike them to a wooden block with pins through their miniature hands. I was fascinated by the tiny organs, the heart barely bigger than the nail on my thumb. I used to whisper in its paper thin ear, as if it were still alive, telling it how sorry I was. I spoke about how it was better to be dead than in a cage, that sometimes breaking free meant breaking completely apart.

Talking to dead rodents made the others in white coats think I was crazy. Maybe I was. But my madness was always in a straight line. Strategic. Planned. I was

obsessive about details, the order of words I spoke to the rats, the sequence I followed when slicing a Y across their tiny chests. Always their left side first. One diagonal inch across the heart space. Measured. Precise.

I meticulously sliced out the organs and laid them in a straight line on a paper towel. The small white pelts were tossed away, considered waste, but I was intrigued by the skin the most. I would slide off my rubber gloves and run my finger along the innermost layer, the part of the skin that rested against muscle and bone. It felt smooth and wet, like a tongue or vaginal wall. Vulnerable. Exposed.

My attention returns to my own body in the bath, the scalpel in my hand, now pressing against different skin. Stroking the metal soothes me, as if holding death beneath my fingers gives me some sort of control. I never cut deep enough to bleed more than a few lines of red. Just below the surface of the skin; shallow and safe. I guide tiny scratches with the blade, proving to my skin that I can pull my will in on tight reins.

My skin believes me. It no longer flinches. Soft and supple it leans into the sharpness.

Inch-long stripes appear in rows, like days scratched off on a prison wall. Perfectly parallel lines the same length, bar-coded onto my inner thigh.

I hold the skin taut with my left hand, as my right meticulously measures each line as it glides through the surface, just deep enough to not be *too* deep.

Blood licks its tongue down my leg.

Pain speaks in seeping fluid syllables; bright red streams like wet paint into the bath water. I watch with fascination as the blood dilutes around my body, swirling in the small current between my legs; shivering, still cold.

I close my eyes into the blue darkness again, drop the scalpel into the bath, and rest my arms on the sides. This is the moment I cut for, the few seconds of ecstasy, an orgasm of nerve endings in my mind. It's a sheer blankness of respite from the voices

and sadness. Pain dissipates as my body lets go of blood. The bath fills with red thoughts and my brain finally gets a break.

I reach for the plug, to watch all the muck of my mind go down the drain. I forget the scalpel lying on the bottom of the bath, its silver lining hidden beneath the liquid clouds of red. It was always the first rule in Physiology class. Sterilise your instruments and then pack them away safely.

The weight of my body on my palm slices me into the blade so swiftly that at first I don't notice. Only when the water becomes instantly darker, the crimson of a cut too deep, do I feel the flapping of skin on my hand. I feel consciousness shift. I battle to stay awake, to keep my eyes open.

I feel myself losing so much more than blood.

I clutch my uncut hand between my legs, and feel something slide through my fingers. It disappears down the drain, and I can't stop it. Her. My thoughts return to rodents in the lab, but this isn't a rat. It's fluid and smooth and part of me. I panic in the uncertainty and confusion. I have lost something I cannot name.

Lines disappear and I feel all sense of order seep from the pores in my skin, a thin membrane to the outside, allowing my perfect rows to mingle in the water and lose their form.

I cut too deep, I let out too much blood, I made a mistake, it's all my fault. I see splayed rats come to life, airless lungs breathing again, and I become frantic. Guilt clutches at the scalpel and demands atonement.

I no longer have control of the blade. I let it stab deep. I allow it to carelessly carve jagged lines, randomly across my skin, slicing through arms, stomach and legs. Deep tissue, muscles, touching bone.

Blood sprays on white tiles.

I imagine lining up my organs on a paper towel and counting them. I don't toss away the skin, I allow myself to feel the soft jelly coating of the inside, run my finger along the lacerations and reach within, my lips searching for open ears, to say I'm sorry. This is better than the cage.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF HYBRID BEINGS**

Skin adapts to its environment.

Over millions of years of evolution, animals have grown fur or scales, extra fat beneath the epidermis, transparent thin wings for effortless flight, or thick hide to scrape painlessly against thorn trees.

*This is important.*

*It's the only way you will understand what happens next.*

Some creatures have developed more than one type of skin on a single body. A frog with webbed toes, the skin between each one only a film, while its spotted back is slippery and gelatinous. A human being with incredibly sensitive fingertips but wrinkled elbow skin that can be tugged and stretched.

Evolution creates hybrid beings.

The same genes that develop teeth and hair in humans also create scales on the skin of sharks. Line up that snippet of fish DNA next to a person's and discerning which one has a soul is impossible. On the surface they are identical.

*Every detail matters.*

Man has tried to play around with this biological twirling. There are pigs that carry human DNA, mimicked in the lab by replicating the science of latticed species in nature. Parental origin becomes elusive; where one animal starts and another ends is blurred.

Chimeras are individual animals and people who develop from more than one set of genes. Their skin usually shows interesting waves of colour, as the skin cells composed of different DNA lie next to each other. Interesting patterns form on fur and scales, and in humans there are stripes that run down their back. These lines are

often visible to the naked eye, but explode in brilliance under UV light.

*I'm not making this up.*

Shine that same UV just below the lateral lines of a fish, and its flanks light up. A sleek skin adaptation for living underwater. Rows of sense organs run from gills to tail, lines of slightly modified epithelial cells that ensure survival in a wild and brutal ocean. These scratch marks from mother nature's nails ensure that the fish is highly sensitive to vibration and movement, which makes the most attuned the most successful predators.

*That important part is coming soon.*

Sharks swim at the apex of this food chain, with skin transformed into spined scales, flattened through forward movement in water. They are sleek, silent and split-second fast when attacking prey. Even when they are swimming at normal pace, their drag through the water is nearly ten percent less than other fish.

*Listen.*

A girl lies in a tub of water, cutting vertical lines into her skin, alive to each tiny movement, her sensitivity heightened to emotion. The subtle vibration of a scalpel falling on ceramic travels along pipes and drains leading to the ocean.

Lateral lines light up and a swift silver motion sinks below the surface, too fast for a person, but the sound its heart makes in the water is distinctly human. The rhythmic *ba boom ba boom* echoes around its body as the predator snakes downwards and disappears into the ocean's darkness.

*Put your hand on your chest and feel the rhythmic drumming beneath your fingers.*

*It's the same heart.*

*It weighs approximately 300 grams.*

## **FIELD NOTES**

The flat was immaculate. Counter surfaces and floors reflected the light. Furniture was coloured in tones of pearl. Sparse.

A single shelf displayed marine biology textbooks; alphabetised and book-ended with white marble mermaids.

There was no carpet, no curtains, no warmth.

Dust-free blinds on all the windows, as if a cloth had just been wiped across each row. The windowsills were void of knick-knacks and pot plants. Stark.

- She would have washed the mug in the sink first.
- She'd have taken the empty can of Coke Light to the recycling bin downstairs.
- The book on cephalopods would not be on the bedside table, but shelved by author like the others.

If this was planned, it would have been cleaner.

Pills not blade.

Note not silence.

Sterile.

Jane's skin had blindsided her.

## SLEEP

Unconscious, I can breathe underwater.

I slip through blood into clear sea, currents carrying me beneath one surface, and then the next. Layers of water within one another, a descending ripple to depths that smell like home.

When I reach the bottom I lie on the sand and look up, the sea turning into a watery sky filled with clouds of fish. They cast moving shadows on the ocean floor, tiny hermit crabs scurrying in and out of them, constantly following the shifting dark patches. Safety cannot remain in the same place for long.

I lift my arm to create a shaded spot for the crabs, but light simply travels straight through me, as if I'm not even there. I feel curiosity tapping like fingers behind my eyes, a camera lens focussing. Then, as if I thought it into being, it slips into the world I can see, swirling into form. Curiosity itself casts a shadow on the ocean floor, becoming larger the more fascinated I become. Hermit crabs scuttle into the shifting shape and I try to focus my attention to keep it more stable for them. I keep the shadow still by being content with the sensation of being inquisitive.

I watch the miniature crustaceans settle into my thoughts, as they forage in the sand for even tinier crabs and translucent plankton. Little pointed claws sifting through granules, a faint mirrored tapping behind my eyes, the same thing. As I watch them they become a part of me. Yet, when I touch their shells with my finger they don't respond. I'd expect them to immediately crawl inside to hide away, but they simply carry on, oblivious. Strangely, I can't feel the shell on my fingertips either. I become more curious and the shadow grows larger.

Larger still, enveloping mine, is that cast by the creature now right above me. I immediately recognise its beautiful form: *Enteroctopus dofleini*.

It's clearly interested in the crab activity, an easy source of food. One arm reaches for

a hermit, gripping it with a suction cup, then passing it from one cup to the other up the length of its arm, until finally crunching down on the shell with its beak. The entire time, the great eye of the common octopus is focussed on me. At first I think it can see me, and then as I make small movements without it responding, I realise it's using a different sense. I may be invisible down here, but it is obvious that I can still be smelled.

I close my eyes and breathe in the sea, my lungs accepting the water like gills. The sensation blooms in my nostrils. Scent that feels like touch, travelling into my bloodstream and coating my artery walls with kelp, fish and dessicated crab. When I open my eyes again the scent has turned to colour, morphing into different shades, like the chameleon skin of the octopus. The ocean world blends from blue to red then green.

I hear the beak crunch down on another crustacean and relax back down on the sand, forming shadows with my curious mind as I watch intently. We are both being studied.

Although I know that an octopus cannot display human emotion, the sensation that clings to the water surrounding me is what I imagine a smile would feel like against the skin.

I allow the current to lull me closer to the octopus as it eats, my thoughts changing the colour of the water, and then instantly the hue of its skin. Our scents touch and begin to merge until, through the sense of smell, we appear as one beast.

Pieces of broken shell crush between my teeth.

## **THE BIZARRE SLEEPING BEHAVIOUR OF MARINE LIFE**

When octopuses sleep, their skin remains awake. Their eyes will still be tightly shut while brainwaves associated with REM sleep spike up and down. As they dream, their colours rapidly change from milky white to muted grey and then to spots of black and brown. In these 15-minute increments of dreamlike sleep, their arms twitch involuntarily and eyes move beneath their lids.

This movement and dramatic colour change all occur deeply hidden in the octopus lair. They only allow themselves to sleep when they feel safe.

Many marine animals don't sleep this soundly, however.

Most sharks need to swim constantly to keep water moving over their gills.

They have active and restful periods, and move much slower while "sleep swimming." The shark's spinal cord, rather than the brain, is responsible for the motion of swimming. Due to this, they can switch off parts of their brains while resting.

Some species like reef sharks have spiracles, which are small openings behind each eye. These force water across the shark's gills so that it can lie still on the ocean bottom for a short while. However, they still keep their eyes open (they have no eyelids) and respond to what is going on around them.

*Ocean naps are not always what they seem.*

Other sharks rest during yo-yo swimming. They actively swim to the surface and then rest as they descend. They also swim close to the shore in shallow waters at night, sometimes with their mouths open. The oxygen-rich currents carry them and water still glides over their gills. In this state they appear to be almost catatonic as they sway, but the resting periods never last long.

Pelagic sharks in tremendously deep waters have even shorter periods of rest, and some never sleep at all.

# THANK YOU!

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I hope you enjoyed the first few chapters of 300 Grams. If you would like to read the rest of the book, you can order a copy here:

[Click here to order 300 GRAMS](#)

There is additional material related to the book on my website: [www.michelleainslie.com](http://www.michelleainslie.com)

I have also included a list of resources below, in case you need someone to talk to.

Sending you so much love,

Michelle

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# WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

## IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING WITH SELF-HARM OR ARE FEELING SUICIDAL, PLEASE REACH OUT.

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The following page contains emergency lines you can call in South Africa, the UK and the United States. There is also a link with a full list of international numbers for most other major cities in the world. You are not alone.

## **South Africa**

SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group)

To contact a counsellor between 8am-8pm Monday to Sunday:

Call: **011 234 4837** / Fax number: **011 234 8182**

For a suicidal Emergency contact **0800 567 567**

24hr Helpline **0800 456 789**

## **United Kingdom**

Crisis Text Line UK (SHOUT)

Text SHOUT to **85258**

## **USA**

If this is an emergency or if you are worried that you or someone you know may be at risk for suicide, please call your local authorities (**911**).

Crisis Text Line: Text TWLOHA to **741741**

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline **800-273-8255**

For hearing and speech impaired with TTY equipment: **800-799-4889**

## **All other countries**

<https://twloha.com/find-help/international-resources/>