

Skindeep

by Epiphany Ferrell

I like to keep to myself in the waiting room. I make eye contact, by accident, with the woman across from me as I settle in to wait. All I see of her is her eyes. She is wearing a deep lavender hijab. She has a little girl with her, maybe four years old. She is in pink Capri pants and a t-shirt with flowers, her hair in puffy pigtails. She's the kind of little girl you can't help but smile at.

I'm dressed for work. Houndstooth skirt just above my knee, black short sleeve blouse, patent leather pumps. My legs are bare to show off my several tattoos. I wonder what the woman in the hijab makes of me. She's in America, she's seen plenty of women in various stages of modesty. She's here with just her child, meaning she got here somehow — a cab, perhaps she drove herself. I don't know much about the freedom of Muslim women except that to me they don't seem to have enough. I wonder if she looks at me and has similar thoughts.

The little girl has found a picture in a magazine she likes, and she makes a sound of discovery best described by the word “cute.” I glance up at her and smile, again catch her mother's eye by accident. I can see by her eyes, even though her face is covered, that she is smiling too. We've both brought books, the mother and I, and we both turn back to them.

I wonder about the woman's husband. Is he a good man? Is he kind? Does he value his wife? I glance at the little girl, who is playing now with an abacus-inspired maze game on a low table in the midst of the waiting room. Surely he sees her with all the love and pride of a good father. Surely he doesn't see her as “not as good as a boy.”

I wonder at what age she'll begin wearing the hijab, and what she'll think of it. Will she be excited, will she view it as a sign that she's grown up, a woman? Or will she dread it, will she feel confined, restricted in her movements, unable to swing her bare arms as she is doing now?

I've lost track of myself, the words on the page in front of me crawling like ants. I feel a hand on my leg, and look down to see the little girl touching the horse on my ankle. She's rubbing it a little to see if it will come off, she seems delighted when it doesn't. I can't help but smile at her, laugh a little — it tickles! I glance up at her mother, and her mother has smiling eyes. She makes a gesture that might be apologetic, and I smile at her to show it's ok.

The nurse says a foreign name and the woman stands up, holds her hand to the little girl, murmurs something in a low voice. The little girl takes her hand and walks through the door with her. She looks back at me over her shoulder and I smile at her again.

Outside, it's the sort of day that causes people to exclaim to one another, "It's a beautiful day, isn't it? Just beautiful." It is. The sun is warm, and a breeze with the softest suggestion of cool shimmers the leaves, lifts my hair, caresses my legs like tiny fingers.

