

# Shame

## What is Sarah hiding?

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Kendra Keneilly knocked hard on the front door of 23 Jensen Grove. Looking over her shoulder she eyed her colleague Martine Griffith and wondered if the anxiety within her own small frame was visible on the outside. Martine smiled back at her, changing her androgynous face from hard strength to soft femininity. That smile was reserved for Kendra but it would be hidden upon entry to this house.

Kendra knocked again, noticing a tremor to her hand. The door opened sharply and she found herself taking a step backward as she studied the sweaty goliath.

“Yeah?” he grunted, annoyance radiating out.

“Are you Mr Grayden?” Kendra’s voice was strong and throaty, incongruent to her physical appearance and though she sounded confident she felt Martine flanking her and she was relieved.

Kendra introduced herself and Martine. “We work for the Department of Human Services Child Protection. Can we come in please?”

“Why?”

“We’ve received a report regarding your eldest daughter Sarah Grayden and we need to have a chat with you about that. If you are unhappy with the way you’ve been treated or any part of this process, you can make a complaint by contacting this number.” Kendra held out a complaints brochure and fingered the contact details. After watching Grayden’s eyes take in the information she moved the brochure toward his hand. He took it from her and stood back to allow them entry.

The smell pervaded Kendra’s skin, clothes and hair, her nostrils flaring in riot. Was that mould..., sweat..., shit...? She covered her mouth with her hand and tried not to retch.

She took a seat as close to the front edge of the couch as possible, Martine did the same. Debris littered the area. The smell seemed to clear a bit but she knew it was simply that her nostrils were becoming accustomed to it. The thought tested her gagging reflex again.

“Is your wife at home?”

Grayden got up from his seat and laboured down the hallway. Martine looked over at Kendra and stuck her pointer finger down her throat. Simultaneously Kendra squeezed her nose shut with her fingers and with her other hand waved it like a fan in front of her face. They quickly snapped to attention at the sound of Grayden’s voice.

“Rhonda.” Grayden bellowed toward a room off the hallway. “RHONDA!” He looked back at them using eye contact to agree with them that his wife was a stupid deaf bitch; he even

shrugged his shoulders as though he had no control.

“WHAT?” A gravelly voice called back.

“Get out here, we have visitors.”

“Tell them to fuckoff, it’s too early.”

Kendra’s eyebrows raised as she looked first at Martine wide-eyed, then at Grayden. He shrugged his apologies again and yelled back, “It’s child protection.”

Moments later the door opened and Rhonda stepped out in a night gown, wriggling her large body into a torn, dirty dressing gown. She didn’t say hello just sat next to her husband her face a statue. Within moments, though, the statue was hijacked by a snarl.

“Who’s dobed us in?”

Introductions aside, and after complaint policies explained, “Don’t you people ring first?”

“We’ve received a complaint in regards to your eldest daughter Sarah. As you can appreciate the person who made the report is protected and we are not allowed to disclose their name.”

“That bitch next door neighbour again?” Rhonda made to stand, pointing in the direction of their lounge room wall.

“We need to ask you a few questions regarding some alleged incidents of a sexual nature involving yourself, Mr Grayden and Sarah. The police have been informed about these same allegations and we are working with them. The information we obtain today will be shared with the police and they may choose also to seek an interview with you both to explore the allegations further,” Martine was direct, clear and precise in her delivery.

“Now, it’s been alleged that Mr Grayden has been visiting Sarah’s room most nights when he gets home from the pub after you’ve gone to bed Mrs Grayden and that during those visits, you, Mr Grayden have digitally penetrated Sarah, attempted sexual penetration and attempted to have her give you fellatio. What do you have to say about that?”

“Lies. That girl is constantly lying.” Rhonda stated firmly.

“Mr Grayden?”

“Same. Rhonda’s right. Lies.”

“Why do you think Sarah would lie about such a thing?”

“Don’t know.” Grayden snarled. “Because she’s a bloody trouble maker. Probably because she’s been grounded recently.”

**Me**

“Sarah Grayden. Come to the office please.” I looked at Mrs Howell, my English teacher,

who waved me from the room.

“Wonder what that’s about?” Jacinta whispered.  
I shrugged, poking my bottom lip out for emphasis and left quickly.

Entering the school office I noticed two police officers sitting off to the left. I quickly looked away, watching the floor until I got to Martha at the desk.

“You called me?” I whispered.

“There’s some police officers here to speak to you.” Martha’s eyes looked over my shoulder.

At that same moment the two female officers approached. I looked off past them through the glass doors and saw no students, then behind to see an empty hallway. I was relieved. How embarrassing.

“You can take that interview room to your right.” Martha stated pointing to assist.

Sitting in the interview room, door closed I studied the coppers and they studied me. One was very pretty, she was a blonde Sandra Bullock from the movie Speed. The other was plainer, plain Jane. Smiling, Sandra Bullock introduced them both, I missed their names though, sitting right in front of them and I couldn’t remember what she’d said. Wouldn’t ask though, too embarrassing.

“Sarah we have some questions to ask you about your family?”

Fear decorated my face, like that song... can’t remember the name. I didn’t answer but it was there on my face, implying 'go ahead' or was it 'leave me alone'.

“Somebody has reported to us that you spoke to them about your father. They said they’d keep it a secret but they knew you were at risk so they contacted us, in your best interest of course. Does that mean anything to you?”

I nodded, heart racing. They wouldn’t believe me, there was no way.

“Okay, we’re here to help you, alright.” Sandra Bullock looked me in the eye, smiling.

"Can you tell us what you told your friend?"

“Well,” I took a deep breath and studied my hands, cradled in my lap, “I told my friend Jacinta that my dad has been doing sexual things to me.” I didn’t look up. I felt heat saturating my face, every pore. I knew they’d think I was full of shit.

“Okay,” plain Jane nodded. “We would like to take a statement from you about what’s happened. Can you tell us about that in your own words?”

I nodded.

I heard voices outside the door, my face was pained, reddened, my embarrassment on display. I thought about mum. I didn’t want to hurt her and I didn’t know what was going to happen to

her, to me.

I already knew that everyone preferred Jack, my older brother, and I thought by telling my friend, somehow it would get easier, or dad might stop, and so might Jack, but they'd all blame me. For anything bad that happened to the family, I'd be to blame.

I told them everything and answered their questions. I thought I might get to go back to class, to my best friend Jacinta but the coppers left me in the interview room for ages; I was starving and watching the clock on the wall. The lunch bell rang out and still I had to wait.

After some time they came back. My stomach rumbled and I hoped it wasn't loud enough for them to hear. Sandra Bullock told me that I wouldn't be able to go home and that I couldn't go back to class today either.

They'd made arrangements for me to go stay with another family for a while. They explained that my parents have told a different story, it didn't match mine. I knew they would. I couldn't go home if dad stayed at the house and at the moment he was lying and staying.

I shook my head and some tears escaped my eyes. I turned away so they wouldn't see. My parents didn't care. I didn't want to go to someone else's house. I hated being around other people, why couldn't I go to a friends or something.

Pictures filled me. Memories of the time when I'd been babysat by some strange woman who offered me yoghurt, which I'd never tried before. Jack and I weren't used to being looked after by another person and we were scared to talk to the lady. Jack wouldn't even go to the toilet in the house. He went in their backyard behind an old door that was resting against a fence. I thought of him squatting there and doing a big poo.

I felt powerless now; I didn't want to go to a stranger's house. What about my things? I couldn't ask. I was too scared and knew I'd look stupid. The coppers led me outside during the lunch break. I had a chance to collect my books and bag, which I was glad about but I wasn't happy with all the kids in the whole school looking at me and at the police, they'd all be wondering what I'd done.

It reminded me of the time I'd been caught shop lifting and the police walked me out to the divvy van, people looking at me from all different directions.

~~~~~**You**

You were nervous. You'd gone through such a long process of questions, interviews, medical tests, case studies, identification checks, police checks and finally it had come to fruition. You'd been contacted by your agency to foster your first child.

You thought you were doomed in the first interview when they started asking questions about your views on race, religion, homosexuality and a whole bunch of other stuff.

You knew your husband didn't like gays for one thing but you were able to jump in quickly on that answer to relieve the workers of their worries. For you it didn't really matter if the child was gay, straight, white, black or whatever. If the kid's was really ugly then you might

not forge the same connection with them or if they behaved a certain way you didn't like but that's why you said you'd only take short term placements to begin with.

You and your husband both wanted to help out, you more than he, but still. Plus when you told him you'd be getting a reimbursement for your troubles, in the three hundred ballpark per fortnight, he was quite happy to oblige.

You'd got the call today; your first child would be dropped off soon. She wasn't the child you thought she'd be. You were hoping for a small child but instead you'd be getting a teenager. You weren't sure whether it was that that was causing your anxiety.

At least she was under sixteen, which meant you'd qualify for the family tax benefit. You'd be getting quite a sum of money for this girl. You didn't know much about her, not her school, not her medical background, not yet anyway.

In fact, you knew nothing except that her name was Sarah, she attended school, she was twelve, she had run away from home once; and her father was trying to have sex with her, the poor love.

You hadn't even a bed ready in the spare room. Luckily the agency had agreed to pay for one so you'd been down and purchased it from the local furniture shop earlier today. Your husband would put it together later. He was at work but you phoned him and he was pleased as well.

"When do we start getting some money?" He'd asked you. "Soon, soon" you'd soothed.

"Now don't ask a million questions of her when you get home and don't make any stupid jokes about her family or about sex."

"What do you take me for?" he'd said to you. You could picture him shaking his head and you shook yours.

It was early afternoon and you were expecting the police to drop her off any moment. She wouldn't be coming with any of her belongings. They'd come later you were told.

The door bell rang. You crossed the room quickly, your heart a flutter. You opened the door, a big smile across your face. "Hi, I'm Jackie." You say and your eyes rest on this girl. You take in her face, so young and innocent. She looks at you too. Her eyes touching every part of you. She's pretty the poor love you think. So pretty.

## **Me**

I looked at this strange lady. I'd been driven here straight from school. The house was tidy and newish looking. I could smell a floral type scent, it was nice. The woman, Jackie they told me, was staring. I knew Jackie would see my faults quickly, how ugly I am and how stupid. Jackie's clothing wasn't stylish but I knew Mum would say they had money. I was so ashamed I couldn't look at her so I looked at my feet instead.

Sandra Bullock introduced Jackie to me and then said to me privately, more closely, "We're

going to leave you here now and a worker from the foster care agency will be in contact shortly, okay?”

I was really scared and though I didn't know Sandra Bullock anymore than Jackie, I knew I liked Sandra better and I didn't want to be left. I said nothing. I watched them leave and then looked at my feet. Jackie invited me inside and showed me the house. She was proud of it. I would be too. It was much tidier than at our house. I felt ashamed again and went back to looking at my feet. I knew I looked too dirty to be standing here.

After showing me my room Jackie left me alone for a bit to unpack and stuff. She said she'd make me a snack and to come out when I was ready. I wondered what that snack would be. I felt bad for Mum that I might like the snack and I didn't want to be in this house with this strange woman and more than anything, I didn't want to meet Jackie's husband. Jackie said he'd be home soon.

→**You**

You invited Sarah into the house and showed her around. You had a lot of rules to tell Sarah but you didn't want to scare her off so you thought you'd wait a little while before you both sat down to discuss the placement.

Sarah was so shy and she wouldn't hold eye contact with you. You wanted so desperately to form a bond with this girl. You were sure she'd like your house though.

You and your husband had worked very hard to make this home a nice place. You'd cleaned it meticulously so that it would meet the approval of the agency staff, that was another check they'd put you through. So you wanted to make sure it stayed that way and those were some of the rules you were hoping to talk to Sarah about. You didn't want her eating in her room and you wondered if she smoked. You were hoping she'd have pride in your house the way you did, but you were sure she would.

You decided to let Sarah get used to her room for a little while. After meeting her and showing her around you needed to get your head together and take a breather. You set about getting a cake ready that you'd bought. Your husband would be home any minute.

Sarah had been in her room for about half an hour now, you'd hoped she'd come out on her own. You almost felt too nervous to go back to her there. The moment your husband walked in the door he started talking about Sarah, asking questions about her. You shushed him with your finger, your eyes wide and reprimanding.

“Where is she?” Your husband whispered.

“In her bedroom. I've given her some space for a bit in there.” Your husband walked in the direction of Sarah's room.

“No.” You said, moving to block his way. “It might frighten her.” He stood looking at you. You at him.

“I'll get her.” You said.

You walked quietly to her bedroom door and knocked to let her know you were there, looking back at your husband with a smile. You were excited and more relaxed now that your husband was home.

Sarah didn't answer and you thought about how shy she was and how scared she must be. Your concentration back on the door you knock again and this time open the door.

You look about the room but it is empty. Sarah's wasn't in there. You walk into the room and look under the bed and in the closet. Nothing. The bedroom window grabs your attention. It is wide open and you notice almost instantly that the fly screen is missing and you see it on the ground outside. You scan what part of the street you can see from your position. There is no sign of Sarah.

"She's gone." You say, astonished and suddenly worried about what the agency will think of you.

"I knew this wasn't a good idea," your husband says, "I knew right from the word go. Those kids are nothing but trouble. You better check your purse. Has anything been taken from in here?"

**Me**

I ran as fast as I could. Once I was several streets away I slowed and sat on the concrete path to catch my breath. What now?

THE END

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