

By Laurie Lynn Drummond  
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### **Absolutes**

This really happened, this story. I've never told anyone, not the whole story. When civilians ask, I say, "No, never killed anybody." Almost apologetically because I know they want me to say yes. Because then they can ask more. Because then their minds can twist the various elements of a-woman-with-a-gun-killing-a-man into their own vicarious masturbation of fact.

This will be just the facts: I killed a man. I shot him at 1:33 am. He died at 1:57 am. That's when I couldn't get a pulse, a heartbeat. That's when the EMS boys got there and took over CPR. When they said, "Shit, sister. You fucking flatlined him." I didn't have to look at the fist-sized hole in his chest where my own hands had just been, massaging his heart, swearing at the goddamn sonofabitch to come back to life goddamit. I knew he was dead.

This really happened; it's the absolute truth. He was twenty years old. His name was Jeffery Lewis Moore. He had a gun, and I shot him. My job is to enforce the law and protect citizens. Our departmental handbook stipulates: a police officer may use deadly force when her own life or the lives of others are in mortal danger. So it must be true.

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Every night when I go home after shift, I run my hands lightly over my body as I undress. The tips of my fingers catch the new scratches on my hands and arms, tiny red vines, an unreadable map. The burn from the teeth of the cuffs, I remember it catching

my skin only now; the new welt on my side, unexplainable; the constant, steady bruise on the hip bone where my gun caresses the skin a deeper purple day after day; the red mark, raised and uneven and mysterious on the back of my knee. The knot on my arm from the night before is smaller, less painful; the flesh is stained a darker green, a more vivid yellow. My breasts are sore and tender from the bulletproof vest. I unbraid my hair and shake it loose. One of my fingernails is torn and bleeding; my tongue glides quickly over the rusty sweetness. I taste others' sweat.

I stand under the shower, place both hands on the wall and lean into the water, stretching out the muscles, pulling them long the length of my body.

Okay, I tell myself. Every night I tell myself, *okay*.

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In the newspapers, they don't refer to us by name. Not at first. I am "the uniformed police officer"; he is "the alleged suspect." The official forms list us as Officer Joubert and Perpetrator Moore. Only in his obituary do they print the full name of Jeffery Lewis Moore. He is survived by his mother, two brothers and a sister, many aunts, uncles, and cousins. He graduated from Roosevelt High, liked to skateboard, sang in his school choir. Both of his brothers will serve as pallbearers. No cause of death is mentioned.

In the newspapers, there are editorials about rising crime: armed robberies, burglaries, car-jackings, murders. Reporters call the precinct. They call my home. "Do you believe your actions were justified?" they ask. "Was there anything else you could have done? How did it feel to shoot someone?" One reporter wants to write a profile on

female police officers; she says it's a chance for me to tell my story. "Which story?" I ask her.

In the newspapers, they print statistics about the use of deadly force: how many civilians have been killed by police officers in Baton Rouge in the last year, the last twenty years. How many were "clean" shootings, how many weren't. They compile a series of articles, *In the Line of Duty—When Cops Kill*, and linger over the details of my shooting. They print my age, twenty-two, and my time on the job, fifteen months. My boyfriend, Johnny, says, "Notice they don't say how many police officers have been killed or almost killed, Katie." I point out that I'm still alive. "Exactly," he says.

In the newspapers, they say I was in the right. "Officer Katherine Joubert handled the situation correctly, absolutely within departmental procedure," the chief of police says. "An unfortunate incident," he calls it. In private he tells me about a man he killed. "The guy was crazy," he says. "The impact of the bullets flipped him over backwards. Amazing. Never seen anything like it." He tells me counseling is available if I want it.

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The woman across the street from my house is sweeping her porch. She sweeps all the time—the porch, the walkway, the driveway, the sidewalk. Sometimes even the street. I've lived here over a year, and every day, except when it's raining, Miss Mary sweeps. She's almost seventy and as black and shiny as a plum. "You jist a baby, be doin' this kinda thing," she's always telling me. I laugh when she says this. She's told me I remind her of her daughter, the one in California; she says we have the same toothy smile. I help Miss Mary pick the figs she can't reach from her tree out back, and she always lets me carry some home, warm and sweet from the sun.

After the shooting, I sit out on my front steps, like I do most every day after shift, drinking a rum and coke, fingering the St. Michael's medallion around my neck, and watch her sweep. She won't meet my gaze those first days after. She sweeps fiercely—short, sharp strokes.

I like this neighborhood, my street in particular. The live oaks are old and heavy with ball moss, the crape myrtles fighting with them for room and light. When the wind comes through here, you know it; the trees sing to you. Most of the houses are shotgun style, built during the WPA. The yards are clean, and something is always blooming furiously in every one. We're all mostly blue collar here on the inside fringes of the Garden District. Two blocks west and you're in the projects—Magnolia Hills is the name on the map, but everyone calls it The Bottoms.

Cops tell me I'm crazy to live in this neighborhood, that it was foolish to buy a house here. "Dogs don't sleep in their shit," Johnny says. "You shouldn't be livin' where you're bustin' ass."

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I think about words, how definitions can be stories in themselves. I pull out an old battered dictionary and flip through pages and find *Incident*: an event that disrupts normal procedure or causes a crisis. *Kill*: to cause the death of, or to pass the time in aimless activity; to delete. *Absolute*: not limited by restrictions or exceptions: unconditional or positive: certain <absolute truth>; pertaining to measurements derived from basic relationships of space, mass, and time.

I stare at these words, let them swim into a blur of gray. I run my fingers over the fine, icy lines, but they are stories without life, these definitions—no pores, no bones, no unguarded pain. No answers. Not really absolute.

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I keep coming at what happened from different angles, like a tongue probing a sore tooth, testing memory against reality until the two blur. I never play what ifs; they don't pertain.

I go to work. I take long walks, clean the house, water my plants. I avoid the meat aisle at the supermarket. I cook meals for Johnny and me that require long preparation and we sit down to eat with a freshly laundered tablecloth and two candles just so on the diagonal; the flames dance, bending and rising in the tepid evening air. I pour wine and chew each bite of food slowly.

I sleep well, except when he starts breathing and I am jolted out of sleep. Jeffery Lewis Moore is breathing in my ear, the same desperate rasp as before.