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**Story by Nyanka Joseph**

**Winner of the 2016 Talking Writing Prize for Flash Fiction of the Absurd**



There's a shedder or two in every family. We keep it secret that one or two of us will fall apart once a year. Like trees wilting as the temperature drops—the way my hair, usually thick and shoulder length, sheds. My skin peels, too. It leaves thin translucent flakes under my sheets, inside the sleeves of cashmere sweaters and satin-lined hats. Every thin piece leaves an area of rawness exposed.

The only reason I like the cold is that no one can see me falling apart. Sometimes, I skip the long sleeves and sweaters and bandage my salve-covered skin, trying to keep myself from disintegrating into space.

My cousin calls us snake women. I heard her once in the bathroom on the phone arguing with her mom about spending the night in my bed, “rolling around in her dead skin,” she said. That night, I slept at the very edge of the

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bed, scared to shed on her. I slept at the very edge the way my mind has crept on the edge every winter for the last seven years. I've been reborn approximately seven times, skin a little harder and soul a little darker each time. I was fourteen then. I am twenty-one now. Last winter, I lay in bed for a solid week, a new record for me. No one came in to see if I had molted and was only bone and darkness. I survived anyway.

In April, I met Iggy. He is lean like pulled taffy. A staggering six-foot tower I couldn't help but watch as he bounced around the party.

It was my first night out of my hermit hole, emerging from the darkness of winter and my mind. It was spring, so my skin had just begun to glow again, and my insides had started to shed their shackles. The mind has a funny way of immobilizing you with anxiety. I imagine the blue-and-green lights hitting my cheekbones. I peeled my way through the crowd, entered his orbit, and felt the rhythm of the music pulsing through the floor, shaking bones and liquor-filled glasses equally. He smiled down at me, and I stepped closer. He pressed against me, and I did the same. We found our way out the doors, exchanging numbers, giddy off vodka and dopamine.

A week later, we met for brunch. He looked different in the sunlight, less warrior-like. He leaned down to hug me tenderly like an old friend.

"Your hair smells like coconuts. I like it," he said, his hands lingering on my lower back.

"Such a gentleman. Didn't anyone ever tell you no sniffing on the first date?" I smiled.

"Good thing this is the second date then."

We sat and ordered. I never got to tell him I like that he smells like the scent that seeps out of a bag of fresh mint tea. I thought I'd get to tell him later. I never did. I think about it now, as we lie in bed, and the flowers outside are dying, and it's September. I think of all the things we haven't said. He doesn't know about my shedding, but September is coming to an end.

Last night, he lay next to me, pressing his mocha-colored body onto mine. I fell apart in a new way, with someone else pulling me apart. He was gentle. I was loud. He was gentle. I wondered if he'd lick my neck when my skin begins to peel. I thought of telling him to stop. I didn't. I knew that by November, he'd have to stop out of disgust or fear or pity. I buried that thought and chose to feel how it feels to shatter with someone you love.

I get up to grab coffee. My kitchen is small, and so the scent fills every crevice. I think the smell wakes him up. I hear his feet shuffling and feel his hands drape across my body and his lips on my crown.

"Analyse, Analyse, of coconut and coffee," he says, burying his face in my already shrinking hair. "Do you know that fall is the worst season? Always has been. Everything's dying, and there's no end in sight."

He's right, I decide not to tell him that.

"Will we die, too?" I ask instead.

"Didn't you know, Ana, that I'm a voodoo doctor?" He laughs. "I specialize in reanimation."

I know that reanimation isn't the same as reincarnation. I'll wait until spring to show him why.

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Nyanka Joseph was born on the tiny island of St. Lucia and spent much of her childhood there reading and climbing guava trees. At the age of ten, she moved to Brooklyn, New York, where she swapped climbing guava trees for riding trains. Since then, she has found her way to the University of Connecticut, where she has received a BA in English and is one semester away from receiving a master's degree in public administration. She hopes to use her knowledge of public policy and her writing skills to bring attention to social issues, especially those pertaining to mental health and education equity.

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