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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

THE CICADA SKIN

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THE CICADA SKIN

Felicity - she had never had any other name, certainly never a warm intimate nickname - stood at the bus stop. There were four other people standing there, but somehow they gave the semblance of being bound by some cohesive force. Maybe it was a purée quality about them, that kept them together and her apart. It was a cold biting wind that morning, blowing ice cold water into their faces. Their heads were down, the collars were up, vainly attempting to shield the four faces, each set in stone with an apparently steely determination for who knows what. They appeared purposeful, but for what purpose.

Felicity seemed ill-prepared to brave the elements. Her wispy figure and long light brown hair presented a waiflike appearance belying her 20 years. She was like gossamer. She had no collar to pull up to guard herself against nature's missiles. She made no eye contact nor did she attempt to. She actually thought to herself that the weather was a relief – she was not obliged to lock eyes with anyone there. She believed that she had avoided doing that for the major part of her life. She had often wondered whether it was a way of avoiding seeing the condemnation of herself in other people's eyes.

This morning about 8:30 AM, she was standing there on her way to her therapy appointment. She had been seeing her psychiatrist for over a year now on a weekly basis. It puzzled her why she kept going, as she got nothing out of it. It struck her that she felt that way about everything else she did in her life, doing it because it was expected of her. This morning she had dressed up

as she tended to do whenever she went to him, to her psychiatrist, and in a way that distracted from what appeared to be his issue with her – seeing her as emaciated and telling her repeatedly that she had a sickness, anorexia. Initially she had thought that at least she had his attention and apparent caring, but this was soon negated by an awareness that his attention was only there as long as she paid for her therapeutic hour. Once again she was being short changed – a therapeutic hour lasting only 45 minutes. Waiting at the bus stop, she didn't feel the bitter biting wind – in fact, there was very little that she did feel in life, she decided. Her psychiatrist disagreed with her, suggesting the presence of anger and bitterness. Those emotions were certainly there after he said that. Long ago, she had decided that even pain was better than the numbness she experienced most of the time.

Over the years, there had been occasions where she inflicted that pain on herself, and for a small moment felt alive. It amazed her what it took to feel that someone cared about her. All of her life she had the attention of people whenever she achieved. There were some distant and warm memories as a child of being dressed up and cuddled and people saying “isn't she beautiful”. As an adult she realised that if they had not seen her as being attractive, their attention would have vaporised and been non-existent. As she got older, it was apparent that she was a very bright student and her academic achievements drew the attention of teachers, her parents and friends. She performed well in sports and won events, once again bringing attention and praise. As she got older and began dating, there appeared to be a queue of boys willing to take her out and record another notch as they compared notes with each other. She

decided that not once had she experienced people caring about her as a person. Looking back, no, that was not totally true, as she recalled her mother's father having loved her in a genuine uncompromised fashion for who she was, whatever that was. For him it didn't depend on her coming first, it didn't depend on what other people thought about her, as his caring was undiluted and genuine. But then he died over two years ago.

After his death, her image became more and more what she saw mirrored in other people's facial expressions. About this time she began losing weight dramatically and had bouts of nausea and vomiting. Yet again she got attention. Maybe for the first time in her life she felt potent. There was nothing any one could do to prevent her losing weight. They attempted to frighten her with threats about her shrinking to nothing and dying, but how can you die when you have never been alive, she thought to herself. It hit her over and over that she had never really had a clear sense of who she was. Who she was had always been determined by how others saw her and reacted to her, and what they told her she was.

Her parents in their own way were probably seen in the community as model parents, she felt. She was an only child and they were both professionals and proud of their careers. They were proud of their house and their car. They were proud of their daughter and her achievements. They were both God-fearing people secure in their place in the world and in the society where they lived. They were in total agreement and equally certain about the choice of lifestyle they had mapped out for their daughter. Initially what appeared to be a hiccup in their plans

confused and angered them, but gradually her condition and behaviour became an embarrassment and a concern as it continued. They avoided telling people that their daughter was seeing a psychiatrist, and certainly told no one that the psychiatrist had asked to see them with their daughter on several occasions.

The bus came and went with the four other people mounting the steps and the doors closing behind them. They had paid no attention to her when waiting at the stop, nor did they pay any note to the fact that she had not joined them on the bus. She was a non-person but that didn't surprise her. They had more important issues on their minds. By the next day they might give her a thought, but possibly not.

Before the bus arrived, she had come to a decision – decisions were something that she had not actually done for a long time. Most of the time she felt swept along with the ebb and flow around her. Now, having made a decision, there was no point getting on the bus. She didn't need a bus to travel to where she was going. Even now she was not battered by feelings of pain or sadness – just emptiness. She allowed herself to fantasise whether after her death her soul or whatever was inside would just evaporate, and people would come along and find some leopard skin patterned stockings, a pale blue blouse, a cream skirt and brown boots. Memories from her childhood floated in as she recalled that during summer she would find cicada skins that had been shed as the cicadas emerged from their holes in the ground. They shed their skins and flew off, and if they were fortunate enough to avoid being eaten by birds, they lived

for three days as far as she could recall. It felt strange to her was how her life superficially, could be seen in a similar fashion. Would anyone truly miss her? Some so-called friends would talk about how sad they were and it would be a topic of conversation for a week or two and then fade away, she believed. Her doctor – would he feel any guilt wondering if he could have done anything more? However, he would soon fill that timeslot with another name. Her parents and other family members would be '*shocked*'. Would they genuinely feel there was a gap in their life now, or would they be embarrassed wondering what people might be thinking, and even feel relieved of the ongoing pressure, but only expressed as thoughts in the privacy of their own minds . They had noticed her when she came first and scored prizes. They had noticed her when she was ill in a public way. Now they could notice her when she was no more.

Both her parents were God-fearing people and what she was about to do would be a crime in their eyes. Her father was a rigid man who pigeonholed everything, but she was sure he did not really have a pigeonhole for what she was about to do, and it would throw his structured life out of kilter. Her mother was a smothering and equally controlling parent who would be troubled by the thought that people might have in their minds that she had failed.

There was an ephemeral quality about Felicity, almost transparent, as she moved slowly in a gliding fashion towards the nearby park. Once there, she did not loiter and took a syringe out of her pocket. She knew the steps required, as she had rehearsed them many times in her mind. A faint smile played on her lips. She lay herself back on the wet grass. Slowly she shed her skin.

The End