

# nymph skin

By Rena Graham

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Our nights were full of cicadas. We called them tree crickets. Their sound like dancing gypsies, arms raised high, castanets rhythmically clicking. While climbing trees, I'd be startled by the nymph skins left behind from their nocturnal molting. I'd grasp onto a hidden part of the tree, crunch down on a brown empty shell, and quickly pull my hand away. Cicadas live mostly underground, emerging in late summer. In living out their insect destiny, they leave a translucent, crackly version of themselves behind, before flying off into the world fully formed.

After I became more familiar with their delicate casings, I collected the shells and gingerly transported them to my bedroom. My small hands cradled them at a distance; not wanting them too close, not quite convinced they wouldn't flit away.

Southeast Kansas was beautiful hilly-green land, but with wild skies and winds that blew harder than any I'd seen before. It was late summer and night was creeping in. I was ten years old and fast at play. Angled out from the house to the edge of the sidewalk stretched doors to the cellar. We lived in tornado country and that mysterious buried cavern was typical to any house in our small town. Little used and mostly forgotten, I had just enough time before dinner to investigate our would-be sanctuary.

The cellar doors were wood planks, grooved and fitted. I stood on one panel, used both hands on the dull metal handle and pried open the other panel just enough. With both palms under the flap, I squatted down, and used my body like a jack. As I stood, the slanted awkward door raised, creaking on its rusted hinges. I sidestepped down to the sidewalk, sliding my hands down the edge of the dry wood to maneuver along the door as I went. Once stable, I walked both hands to the end of the panel to pivot it completely open. Passing the halfway point, it wobbled slightly, gained momentum and hit the ground, making a loud clatter.

"Stop that! Didn't I tell you?" Before I saw her coming, she had hold of my arm, squeezing, yanking. Her perfectly manicured fingernails shone a bright pink in the dimming light. "Weren't you warned about that door? I know you were told to stay away from that thing. You're going to rip it off its hinges doing that. God, why can't you ever listen?" She pushed me so hard I stumbled, nearly landing on the cold, sharp sidewalk. I ran across the yard, across the soft green grass and disappeared behind a giant oak tree. She pulled the door up and over, letting it fall into place. "We've got to get a lock for this damn thing."

With daylight fading fast, I ran past the kitchen window. Her head was tilted down and she appeared absorbed in the homemaking duties she took such little joy in. My bare legs carried me up to the top of the cellar door and I glanced in both directions. Not daring a second attempt at the concrete bunker, I left the doors intact and took a stance, knees bent. This was my sand dune and I would slide down it, like skiing in the Sahara. My only means of evasion, I would escape through sheer physical prowess. The first two times, I slid down the glossy white planks and ended up in a glorious run at the bottom. Those desert bandits would never catch me now! During my third slide down, something snagged. My left foot stopped short and knocked me off balance. I landed on my twisted ankle and gasped from the sudden pain. I've got to make a move before they catch me!

"Get up." I didn't answer. "I said get up!" She was standing over me. Her apron shone a bright white against the early evening darkness. When I answered with a pitiful cry that my ankle was hurt, she pulled me to my feet. The minute I shifted weight to my left side, the tears came tumbling out and I howled from the strain. "Alright, so you twisted something." She put her right arm around my shoulder, her iron fingers digging into the tender skin under my arm. "I wish your father was home to carry you but he's not, so you better try and walk."

I hobbled up the front steps while she gripped the brass doorknob and forced the heavy wooden door open. We stumbled into the living room like a three-legged dog and she told me to stay there while she finished dinner. I crumpled into the corner of our blue tapestry sofa, striving to find a position that didn't hurt. The searing sensation shot up my leg and I gasped for air between throbbing jolts. Left to fend for myself, an internal storm brewed. My mind slipped into a fog as I surveyed the living room and adjacent dining room.

I remembered how last week the thunder and lightning made me run from window to window, yanking closed tall draperies, recoiling from monstrous cracks and booms. How this old Victorian-style farmhouse was painted the perfect shades of clouds; white with gray trim. How the wraparound front porch hosted impromptu neighborhood get-togethers. How my father and I converted the attic to be my own private space. How we threw bricks from the discarded chimney out the window and later, stacked them neatly in a wheelbarrow. How she and I shopped for the ideal French Provincial furniture for my new bedroom and how she relented, letting me have the matching dressing table. How it had a mirrored lid that lifted up, revealing my secret treasures. How I stuck Silly Putty under the lip to leave incriminating fingerprints if anyone snooped.

I remembered how much work had gone into making this a perfect home. How much work went into making each place we lived a perfect home, but how this time, she hadn't bothered to plant flowers.

From that foggy, tear-stained place, I looked up to see my father. He stared down at me with an odd mix of chastising sympathy. "How could you do something so stupid? I thought you were smarter than that."

His strong arms picked me up and carried me two flights of stairs to my attic bedroom. Magnified through my watery vision, my father's eyes were as blue as mine, his hair dark and wavy. In his brown, short-sleeve shirt, he smelled like sunshine, wild animals and life lived under the big sky.

He laid me on the bed and took my shoes off, said how my ankle was swollen but how I'd feel better in the morning. How it was nothing. The affliction was so intense it sounded like he was speaking to me through a far-away tunnel. "I think it's broken." He shook his head and said it couldn't be. "But when are you taking me to the doctor?" He told me I was tougher than that and left.

That night I cried. The smells of dinner crept up the stairs but my punishment was to lie there hungry. I'd been playing where I was told not to and my disobedience validated their neglect. Shooting arrows traveled up my left side and squelched the hollowness in my stomach. I pleaded for a hospital and was told no, told it was nothing. I cried so long and hard that I passed out. When I woke up, my distraught pleading started all over.

I heard the tinkling ice and recognized the sound I associated with my parents. They'd traveled the stairs up to their bedroom, directly below mine. Their voices floated up through the open stairwell. Lying on my hard cold sheets, I tried to make out their words but they were only sounds, flat notes. Man and woman, sipping their drinks and making excuses.

The more I moved, the more it hurt. The pain was a torment so ferocious it caused my heart to race. I tried to think of other things in my restlessness.

The cicada's rapid "click click click" and dull screech circled through my head as I laid there soaked in my distress. Shifting position created another round of rambling, demented whimpering until I passed out. Every time I awoke from this fevered collapse, there was less of me. I clung to the bark of trees as my spirit dwindled.

As time wore on, my misery morphed into something hate-filled, wrapping me in a delirious rage.

The fantasies of revenge began in the early morning's light. I remembered the rolled-up seal skin in the shed next to the garage. We had toted it from Alaska to Texas to Colorado and now to this new place, this new home. I would soak it in gasoline, roll myself in it and burn to death. I saw myself running through the morning dew in my pink nightgown, tangled blond hair wrapped around my face. Wide-eyed, screaming, the only survivor of a horrific, mysterious blaze said to have been started in the cellar. Then again, maybe I could drown. In a town too small for hierarchies, we belonged to the local country club. They could find me face down in the pool. I wondered if they would pretend to care. If they would put on a show for their friends.

That night was not the first or last time I tasted their destructive brand of negligence but it was the time that cut the deepest. It altered my perception and branded me undeserving. My sense of self-worth left me to die alone in the woods. Its blood spilled onto the forest floor, soaking dried leaves into sour, spongy mulch.

He lifted me up the next morning, the smell of Scotch and cigarettes vibrant in their noxious intensity. Damp and limp, I reeked of my own sadness. Propped up in the back seat, dressed in the same cotton summer dress as the day before, my left leg prone along the green vinyl. There was a sucking sound as he pulled me from the car.

Dr. Kim played golf with my father. A large Korean man of consistent cheer, he greeted us warmly. Paper crinkled as he laid me on the examining table. The openness of his welcome closed to a tight grimace as he heard the story. He glared at them, wiped my hot face with a cool cloth and told them they should be ashamed. He told them they should be arrested but that it would only cause more problems. He called us a family that needed help. A family in trouble. My parents tried to explain. They thought it was a simple sprain. They thought it could wait. He asked them how they had been able to hear me cry for so long? What parent could stand to hear that? My father looked at the floor and said they'd closed their door. Dr. Kim made them leave the room.


When my cast hardened, he drew a cat on it. My knuckles made a dull tapping noise on the plaster and I thought of how I would leave this behind. Would anyone be able to tell it had come from me? Would some sign of me survive the shedding? Dr. Kim signed it, hugged me, and said he was very, very sorry.


In the prescribed amount of time, my leg healed. The bone knitted together as it should. A simple break, there was no long-term damage to the surrounding nerves or tissue. The same could not be said for the rest of me. I'll never understand the mindless neglect of that night, but it shaped my path. Unlike the cicada, I did not fly away fully formed when the cast came off, but found myself encased in an even tougher shell through which I viewed the world. Years later, I broke free of that constraint and propelled myself back to wholeness. Just in time to live out my human destiny.


- ***rena graham*** (<http://wp.me/p7apk6-1qk>)


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