

Molting

By Gabrielle Hodge

Each spindly leg twitched and shoved with force. One part of the body separated from another. The legs were held tight together, moving in unison towards a common objective. One after the other went limp as the spider wriggled itself free from its past form. The spider I was looking at before was no longer the spider in front of me. Once a milky shade of brown, similar to that of the coffee clutched in my left hand, now the creature was a shiny obsidian with deep blue hints in the center of its new body, looking fake and deadly at the same time. There appeared to now be two spiders sitting side by side, looking nothing like each other. It kept shoving the brown exoskeleton further and further away, although from my point of view, it wasn't making much progress. I felt bad for the spider, ready to be done with this tight, ill-fitting skin that no longer belonged to it. I felt something else though, too... jealousy? Yes, that's it. I chuckled at myself realizing I was feeling jealous of a spider. But as soon as my gaze settled back on the creature, writhing in an effort to separate from its old self, that feeling became heavy on my chest again.

I was jolted out of my self-wallowing by a piercing alarm. Startled and annoyed, I grabbed my phone and silenced it. Forced to return to reality, I took one last look at the spider, now completely molted. I wish it was that simple, I thought, and went to get ready for work.

This was my least favorite part of the day, looking in the mirror, pointlessly adjusting one part of my appearance after another, all to no avail. I straightened the dyed brown strands of hair, one lock after another. The hot metal clamped down, forcing them straight. I brought it up to my scalp to make another pass at the few remaining hairs. The burning plates seared my scalp, a puff of steam rising from my head, the smell of burnt flesh filling the bathroom. I flinched slightly, kept my gaze fixed at the stranger staring at me in the mirror, waiting for its next move, always

on the defense. It reached instinctively to the pain point, felt the tender skin like the soft spot of a baby's skull, dug into it with its spindly fingers. The wound opened up, leg after leg writhing, needing to make itself new. A gleaming new being emerged and stretched its limbs, the rest of my body falling to the floor in a boneless heap.

I blinked purposefully and reached to the spot on the back of my head. All my hair was still there, so at least I didn't have a bald spot. I winced in pain and put the iron down on the counter. Already tired of the day, I grabbed a worn baseball cap and gently placed it over my mostly straightened bob, careful not to irritate the wound further.

Work was only two blocks away, so I took my time gathering all my things, old laptop covered in stickers, chunky keychain with a smiling frog, and my notebook. It was all shoved in my backpack and goodbye kisses were given to my cats. I locked the door behind me.

The bells at the top of the door jangled, alerting the rest of the crew of my arrival. One of my coworkers was in the back corner of the coffee shop, a little nook with string lights, an olive green loveseat and a brown leather chair. She was wiping down the table in the center of the nook and when the bells rang, looked up and gave me a welcoming nod.

"Hey, Tarin! You're a rare sighting at this time of day," she said with a chuckle, knowing I hated early morning shifts, which was ironic considering it was a coffee shop.

"Yeah, I guess I had to come help you losers or else everything would go to hell," I responded, regretting my comment a little, although Alex and Laeton would never take offense at anything I said. Making fun of one another and dishing out insults were their form of endearment, and I just was never much good at it.

"Woah, getting a little feisty there now!" Laeton added from behind the counter.

"I know, look at her showing teeth! I like it," Alex responded.

When Alex said “her”, I cringed slightly. It was as if she was talking about someone else, a figure standing just behind me perhaps, whoever it was, it was not me. Lately, when someone referred to me as a girl, I would bristle up. I tried to ignore it for a while, but like a mosquito that is hungry for your blood, it would always come back to bite me again. I did not really know what to do with this feeling. What does it mean? What do I have to do to make everything normal again? Why does it feel like I’m the only one dealing with this? I was spiraling, all these questions swirling in my mind, when I heard a thud that jolted me out of my dissociative state.

“Oops, sorry! I dropped another cup!” Laeton said, defeated, but still amused.

“You know what to do,” Alex said firmly, like a disappointed mother.

Laeton slumped his shoulders and walked over to the small dry erase board on the back wall of the café.

“Do I have to?” Laeton responded.

“Yes, it’s the rules. How many is that this week?”

He looked at me sheepishly and then back to Alex.

“Four,” he said, head hung.

“Laet! It’s only Thursday! We won’t have enough cups to last us the rest of the month at this rate!” Alex said, teasing.

“Yeah, I thought I was clumsy. We’re gonna have to start taking it out of your tips or something,” I chimed in.

“You know what, we’re gonna make you dress up like Chip from Beauty and the Beast for the party on Friday. Oh yeah, Tarin, there’s a Halloween party at my friend, Chase’s house, on Friday night. You’re coming. You have to wear a costume or they won’t let you in,” she said, “Do you want to ride with us?”

“Oh, well, I’m not sure if I’ll be able to make it because—”

“Stop right there, you’re coming. It’ll be fun, I promise. Come on, they’re really cool people, I promise. Would I lie to you?” Alex asked, giving me doe eyes, a pleading look.

“Ugh, well you know I can’t resist that look,” I joked, mocking her. “But what will I wear?”

Our conversation was interrupted by the bells jingling again. The first customers of the day walked in and we quickly shifted to customer service mode. I took their order with as much of a smile I could muster at this hour of the morning. Business picked up quickly and we all fell into the flow of things. These were my favorite people to work with because we all worked so well together. We never ran into each other, always knowing what one needed to do for the other without saying a word, getting everything done efficiently.

There wasn’t a lull until 1p.m. We each sat at a long table doing whatever bits of homework we had for the week. All of us would graduate next semester and we were ready to be done. A blueberry muffin and a lemon loaf were passed in a circle until neither remained. The sound of keyboard clicking and coffee sipping occupied the space, R&B music playing softly in the background. A customer would come in every once in a while, each of us taking turns serving them.

At the end of our shift, Alex pointed her finger at me. “You are coming to the party,” she said sternly.

“Yes, ma’am. I wouldn’t dare argue with you.”

“Good,” she said sweetly, a drastic change in tone.

I sighed deeply when I walked outside. Chilly air entered my nostrils and I shivered, blowing out air from my mouth and like smoke from a cigarette, I watched my breath billow and

swirl in the winter air until it disappeared. Hands shoved in my pockets, I began walking home. Catching my reflection in a shop window, I quickly looked away, shocked at the stranger looking back at me. The party on Friday was the only thing in my mind. I began to feel sick at the thought of that many people in general, let alone ones I didn't know. Possible costume ideas ran through my head, each seeming more ridiculous and uncomfortable than the last until I was at a loss as to what the hell to wear. Maybe I could come up with an excuse, but that would result in Alex being forever upset with me and that just wasn't worth it.

I opened my apartment door and was met with two cats looking up at me, waiting for love, or more likely treats. I locked the door behind me and pet each one, asking them about their days, getting low purrs in response. Dropping my bags on the couch and slipping off my Vans, I walked over to the window where the spider was earlier that morning. The old shell lay on the sill, unmoved from the place it was shed hours before. The new spider was nowhere to be found which sent a shiver down my spine. Paper towel in hand, I scooped up the brown shell and tossed it in the trash, staring at it the whole time, waiting for a twitch or any sign of life. Of course nothing happened. That was no longer a part of the spider. He was a new creature, free and beautiful, wanting nothing to do with the skin he inhabited for such a long time. It was foreign to him now, unrecognizable and of no use to his new self. A thought sparked in my mind as I contemplated this spider's existence. Perhaps this party was an excuse for me, a way to escape the self I knew and hated right now. After all, it is Halloween, the one night where no one will be questioning my choices of self-expression. Excitement rushed through me for the first time in a while and ideas began running through my mind.

Friday night couldn't come sooner. This party was the only thing I could think of the rest of the week. I ordered a shirt online that had Superman's suit printed on it, a male silhouette

outlined in the print, muscular pecks and a six pack. When it first arrived, I put the shirt on over a sports bra and stared at myself in the mirror for ten minutes. Laeton let me borrow a suit he had from a wedding he was in last summer. Luckily, we were about the same exact build and height. On the days I had my hair pulled back, Alex joked that we were twins. I secretly loved it every time she said that. It excited me to be compared to him.

Sliding my arms into a white dress shirt, I buttoned each slowly and deliberately, staring at my reflection in the mirror. I tucked it into the black dress pants and slid a black leather belt around my hips, tightening the waistband as the pants were a little too loose in this section. My arms slid into the sleeves of the suit, shoulders lifting dramatically like a businessman putting on his suit dramatically to seem more masculine. I felt powerful. Now for the hair. Bottle of hair gel in one hand and comb in the other, I went to work. Fingers covered in clear gel, I raked them through my hair starting at my forehead and going straight back. Slicking my hair back felt like the final piece of the puzzle was complete. It made my feminine hairstyle disappear, leaving only little flips of dark hair curling along the back of my neck. I always wore glasses anyways, so the costume was now complete. Although this felt less like a costume than my normal appearance.

Alex picked me up in her rundown Honda Civic. She rolled down the window as I walked out of my apartment building and cat called me from the car. I laughed nervously, now painfully aware that a lot of people were going to see me tonight. Would they think I look stupid and wonder why I was dressed like this?

“Okay Clark Kent! You look handsome!” Alex said once I got in the passenger seat.

A rush of excitement ran through my body when she said that. I felt myself maybe starting to tear up, then realizing how embarrassing that would be, I shoved that down for a later moment.

“Oh, shut up,” I said, trying to act nonchalant, as if that wasn’t the most validating thing I’d ever heard.

We pulled up to the party and I tried not to show how nervous I was. Laeton pulled in right behind us and we all walked in together.

“That suit looks way better on you,” Laeton said when he saw me, although he was hard to take seriously considering he was entirely blue and dressed in a Squidward costume.

I blushed, feeling even more validated in my skin. We walked into the party, dark and hazy, loud with house music. I didn’t feel the usual pit in my stomach that always accompanied me in public settings. Everything felt light. I felt taller, stronger, more myself. I made new friends for the first time in years. I was new, shiny in my obsidian suit. My legs had finally shoved off the old skin and were able to stretch for the first time, taking up space with this new body.