

Sleeves

by Melanie Garcia

The sleeves aren't short. They reach down just below her wrist bone.

"Please," she had begs. "These sleeves are too short. Look" She stands still, letting the sleeves fall to their normal position. Tiny streaks of brown escape from the edges of the sleeve.

"You're being obsessive," the woman says. She reaches over and pulls the sleeves down as far as they will go. Only the heads of the brown snakes can be seen.

"I'm tired of playing this game," the woman says. "It's been over ten years, you can't hide forever."

"Yes, I can," she says.

She had wanted a tearing, ecstatic, hungry, heat. So, ten years ago, she had pulled up her sleeves, and let the hungry snakes loose upon her skin. She had not meant for the flames to reach her hands, but the snakes had slithered downward—their appetite not quenched by the flesh of her arms—they never went away. Once their incarnadine hunger had been suffocated under the pounding hands of her mother, they had withered away to slender brown streaks. The doctors and plastic surgeons had tried again and again but it had been no use. The snakes refused to leave.

She stands in front of her school building. She is surrounded by students; talking, gossiping, texting, but she can only look at her sleeves. She longs for her usual sleeves—the sleeves that reach so far past her finger tips that she slits holes in them to let her thumbs free.

She looks down. Tiny brown snakes are peering up at her from the backs of her hands. She shudders, pulling the sleeves down.

She is so consumed with her task that she doesn't notice the boy.

The boy is so consumed with a text that he does not notice the girl. He crashes into her arm, pushing the sleeve upward to the wrist. He is startled, and looks up to apologize. But he starts again and falls silent when he sees the ribbons of scars on the exposed arm of the girl. She shudders as the dreaded quartet of emotions flash over the boy's face.

His eyes widen with horror, then his mouth draws inward in disgust, and then the pale skin reddens in shame, and finally the eye brows draw together filling the dark eyes with pity.

"Oh, sorry," he mutters, lowering his eyes.

The burning heat of snakes courses through her brain filling it with the same incarnadine hunger to consume and destroy the pity and disgust of this boy. He is sorry for what?. For bumping into her? For the scars? For her existence? But she doesn't. She only nods at the boy and, moving away, pulls her sleeves back down.