

Second Prize
The Snake Was Always Just an Excuse
by Greg Beatty

Rahim and Janice had been talking off and on after mythology class for a while now.

At first the chats were practical, sharing notes and study tips for upcoming tests.

This built trust, and they began to joke now and again. Lectures about the Cosmic Egg led to speculations about cosmic omelets. Comparing stories of the Great Flood led to quick skits about ark salesmen. Laughter led to lingering.

But both had other classes after mythology, so those lingers had a time limit. Eventually, one of them mentioned a desire to talk more. The other agreed, the ideas floating so casually that they couldn't have said who made the suggestion and who agreed.

Nor could they have said if the planned walk in the university arboretum was intended as a date or "just" a step toward a stronger friendship.

They found out which it was when they left the main trails to take one of the still officially marked but much skinnier mud paths. Rahim pulled a branch back, Janice bobbed her head to get under, and then both stopped.

Stretched completely across the trail, sunning itself in evident pleasure, was the largest snake either one of them had even seen.

Rahim released the branch. It brushed over Janice's head, mussing her hair. The motion must have been enough, because the snake started to move its coils. It took its time, though, and that gave Rahim and Janice a long moment to stand within a breath of each other.

Janice half-turned back toward Rahim. Her lightly disheveled hair flickered across Rahim's face. She was, for the first time, close enough for Rahim to smell. He tried not to inhale with too much relish, and fumbled for something to cover his visceral response.

"So," he said, "What's your favorite myth involving snakes?"

"Hmm," she said, cocking her head. "Let me think. Do you have one?"

"Well, the obvious. The Garden of Eden. I mean, where everything was perfect, before ... temptation."

Rahim inhaled again, then looked away. When he looked back, he was blushing a little, and had trouble speaking. "Okay. Okay. Who— how about you?"

Janice tilted her head, slowly. She let her head roll down, her hair cascading in a curtain. When she parted it, she wore a knowing smile. "Mine's obvious too. Medusa. The woman with the hair who turned men hard. As stone."

She looked up at him, completely aware of her effect on him, completely in control of the situation. "Ready to go on?"

"Ah ..." he said.

"Need to adjust your pants?"

Janice didn't wait for an answer. She just led the way. She walked where the snake had rested. It took Rahim another moment to follow her. Before he *could* follow her. Neither one remembered the snake had just been there or even, to be honest, that it had ever existed. But then, the snake was always just an excuse.

Author Bio: Greg Beatty lives with his dog in Bellingham, Washington, where he tries unsuccessfully to stay dry. He writes everything from children's books to essays about his cooking debacles. His main hobby is martial arts. For more information on Greg's writing, visit <http://www.greg-beatty.com/>