

# SHORT STORY NIGHT

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DEESHA PHILYAW!


DEESHA PHILYAW  
"SNOWFALL"



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# Deesha Philyaw: Snowfall

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## Deesha Philyaw

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### Snowfall

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*Black women aren't meant to shovel snow.* Rhonda mumbles this as we are knee-deep in the stuff. We have to do it. When it snows heavy overnight, we wake before the sun comes up to get dressed, shovel ourselves out, clear off our Honda, prevent slip-and-fall lawsuits from neighbors, and still get to work on time.

But I know where Rhonda is coming from. We, who apparently are built for everything, are simply not built for this. No gloves exist that keep our hands from freezing as we move snow and ice from one spot to another and from the car windshield. No boots exist that can keep the cold from numbing our toes. No amount of layers and waterproof pants keep the chill at bay. We feel it through our chests. And no, the physical activity does not warm us up. It makes us resentful.

We don't like to admit it, but the snow is beautiful. When it's that light dusting that rests on bare branches, when it looks all puffy and cottony and innocent. The problem is the work snow demands.

Still, I say, "Maybe it's just us," as I clear a stripe into the snow on the trunk of the car. "All the black women born and raised in this city . . . well, yeah, there aren't *that* many . . . but they must be used to it by now. It's only our first winter here. Maybe in time . . ."

"Not everything has to be interrogated, Arletha," Rhonda says as she scrapes away at a patch of ice on the edge of the driveway. I'm "Arletha" when she's pissed at me; I'm Leelee the rest of the time, which is most of the time. Most of the time we live in the space between my need to dissect and her need to keep things whole with declarative statements.

Right now, we are living in the space of the morning after yet another bedtime conversation that started innocently enough. We are living in the space of me staring at the ceiling for hours, then oversleeping, again, of Rhonda having to do the bulk of the snow and ice clearing, again. The third time I rolled over and asked Rhonda to give me five more minutes, she didn't answer. By the time I woke up, I could hear her shovel stabbing the sheet of ice on the driveway. Through our bedroom window, I watched her work. Skull cap pulled down tight over her locs which fall over her shoulders and are dotted with snowflakes. Slim arms delivering harder blows to the ice than seem possible.

I brush the last mounds of snow off the hood of the car and return my scraper to the trunk. Rhonda is almost done clearing the ice.

When my teaching job at the university brought us here last fall, we knew there would be snow, but we didn't know the stuff would shape the course of so many of our days and nights. Neither of us has fully mastered driving in the snow yet, and our experience with Uber drivers has been hit or miss. So we stock up on groceries and run as many errands as possible on clear days.

But it's not just the snow. The cold temperatures alone have kept us in binge-watching episodes of *The Office* and having Thai food delivered. There's just something about being out in it that makes us mildly cranky and singularly focused on getting to the next heated place.

We were born and raised in warmer places, Georgia and Florida. Warmer too in the residual charm, polite smiles and gentility of the white people whose ancestors owned ours. In the South, the weather does not force tears from your eyes causing the faces of passing strangers to register worry about you, for a millisecond. It's the wind, you want to tell them, but a millisecond is not enough time. In the South, the weather does not hurt you down to your bones or force you to wake up a half an hour early to remedy what has been done to your steps, your sidewalk, your driveway and your car, as you slept.

But the South has hurricanes, they say. Yes, but not damn-near daily, not for a full quarter of the year.

You tell people up here that you're from the South, and nine times out of ten, they say the same old thing: "I'm sure you miss the sunshine." Rhonda and I both miss taking sunshine and easy morning commutes for granted. But what we really miss are the laughter and embrace of our mothers and grandmothers and aunts, kin and not kin. We miss the big oak tables in their dining rooms where, as kids in the '70s and '80s, we ate bowl after bowl of their banana pudding as they talked to each other about how much weight you'd gained, like you weren't even there. We miss helping them snap green beans and shell peas sitting at their kitchen tables watching "The Young and the Restless" on the TV perched on the pass-through. We miss how they loved Victor Newman, hated Jill Foster, and envied Miss Chancellor and how she dripped diamonds and chandeliers.

We miss their bare brown arms reaching to hang clothes on the line with wooden pins. We miss their sun tea brewed all day in big jars on the picnic table in the backyard, then later loaded with sugar and sipped over plates of their fried chicken in the early evening. We miss lying next to them at night in their four-poster beds with too-soft mattresses covered by ironed sheets and three-generation-old blankets. We miss their housecoats, perfumed with Absorbine Jr. liniment and hints of the White Shoulders they'd spritzed on from an atomizer

that morning before church. We miss tracing the soft folds in their skin when we held hands and watched our favorite TV shows in their beds. Dallas, Dynasty, Knots Landing and Falcon Crest.

We miss how they laughed and were easy with each other. How their friendships lasted lifetimes, outlasting wayward husbands and ungrateful children. Outlasted that time Alma caught Joe cheating and she whacked him in the top of the head with the sword he'd brought back from the war, but he told the people at the hospital that he didn't know who did it. Outlasted having to hide your medicine bottles in your shoes because otherwise, seven of your nine children are liable to steal them. We miss how they seemed to judge everyone but themselves. Or maybe that judgment was in the "nerve" pills they procured from the Chinese doctor on Bay St. who didn't ask questions. We miss their furtive cups of brown liquor on Friday and unabashed cries for Jesus come Sunday.

We miss their one gold tooth that made us wonder who they had been as young women.

We miss their blue crabs, the shells boiled to a blood red in wash tubs atop bricks over makeshift fires built in the yard. The wash tub reminded us of a cauldron full of rock salt- and cayenne-drenched water bubbling and rolling, mesh bags of seasonings and halved onions and peppers floating on top, along with potatoes and ears of corn. We miss how they stood over those cauldrons like witches, stirring a potion. With sweat beading on the tips of their nose and smoke swirling around their hands and wrists, they wielded long-handled spoons to press the frantic, flailing crabs toward their deaths.

We miss how they made our Easter dresses and pound cakes and a way out of no way.

But we lost all of those things when we chose each other. Only the memories remain. Which is why, even though we grew up in different places, so many of our bedtime conversations start with, "Remember when . . ." as we lie there in the dark with our nostalgia and nothing to distract us from it. Not even each other, not anymore.

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It did snow once in my little town in Florida. In 1989. I was home from college for winter break. I was visiting Tonya, a childhood friend, when my mom called her house looking for me, worried. Had I seen the weather report? I hadn't. When she told me the forecast called for snow and ice, I laughed and asked if she'd been drinking.

Mama huffed. "Girl, I'm serious. This weather ain't to be played with. Mayretta said over by her, cars just slip-sliding all over the road because these people don't know how to drive in it. I know I asked you to stop by Church's on your way home and get me a two-piece, but you just come straight on home now."

"Yes, ma'am."

But of course I didn't listen.

I stayed at Tonya's another hour. Mama told me later that she tried to call back, but apparently Tonya's mother was on the phone and they didn't have call waiting. And when Mama finally got through, I'd left. Of course this was before cell phones. So the minute I walked in the door, Mama started fussing.

"I was worried sick, thinking you were dead in a ditch somewhere!"

I held out the bag of Church's chicken to her, and she looked at it like it was an alien.

"I told you—"

"I know," I said. "But the roads between Tonya's and Church's and Church's and here were fine. And I know you really wanted the chicken. I got you all wings." I held the bag out to her again. "And I remembered your hot pepper."

My mama dropped down into her favorite armchair and laughed and cried all at once. She pulled me down onto her lap and rocked me. I was as big as she was, so we must've been a sight.

"Leelee, you're all I've got in this world," Mama said. "The idea of anything happening to you . . ."

It had always been just Mama and me. Mama never married or, to my knowledge, dated. My father didn't want to be one, at least not mine. Mama told me he had a wife and kids and was a deacon at the church she and her family used to go to before I was born. She said that the Lord had given me to her when she was forty-one—"No spring chicken!"—and He doesn't make mistakes. I knew Mama loved me. I knew she always worked two jobs and sacrificed so that I could have everything I needed and most everything I wanted. Disney World when I was five, when it was all she could do to keep the lights on. Sending me ten-dollar money orders at college when my tuition was the same amount she earned in a year at her second job. That's why I'd insisted on bringing her the chicken; she did everything for me and so little for herself.

But like a beautiful quilt in summertime, my mother's love was the suffocating kind, the kind you chafe against and don't miss until the seasons change and it's gone.

Back then, I didn't know if my mother would still love me if she knew that Tonya was more than just a friend. And I wasn't trying to find out.

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Rhonda and I are not without black women friends in this city. There's Faith, Staycee, Olivia, Kelli. But friendship is not the same as history, just as a bone is not the same as its marrow. These friends, they tell us that this city—of iron and steel and cold—is better, safer than where we come from. They imagine where we come from and see Confederate flags and rednecks and dusty dudes with gold grillz rapping about bitches and hos. They don't see home.

When we lie in bed at night and “remember when,” Rhonda doesn't see home either. Just sepia moments and sepia people, artifacts frozen in amber. Like putting the well-worn photo album back on the shelf, or turning off the TV after watching “Good Times” on TV Land. She drifts off to sleep so easily. Leaving me alone to fend off my thoughts.

Last night, my thoughts won. I stared at the ceiling and thought about my mother lying in her bed, a quilt and a portable heater sufficient for winter in her world. I haven't spoken to her since October, but even then we pretty much just checked in to make sure the other person was alive. We talked about the ladies' auxiliary fish fry and the hat she bought for Women's Day at church; which elderly neighbor's son got sent to prison, third strike, for selling them drugs; whether or not I like my job at the university (yes). And then the usual tension returned and the regret we each felt—for calling, for answering—was palpable.

On these rare calls, my mother never asks about Rhonda. I stared at the ceiling and wondered if my mother still refers to Rhonda as “some girl she met on the Internet” when she talks to Miss Mayretta and her other friends about us. She knows Rhonda's name because I told her. I told her everything about me that she claimed she didn't know, an ignorance belied by her questions, years of endless questions, about the nameless boys who never called, never took me to prom, never gave her a different reason to be ashamed of me.

But my mother knew Rhonda's name and she refused to say it. Refused to meet her. Refused to do anything but pray for my soul. As I walked out her front door for the last time eight months ago, she hurled the words at my back: “Running off from here with some *girl* you met on the Internet. Who raised you?”

*Leelee, you're all I've got in this world...*

How could my mother's world just keep right on spinning without me in it?

Maybe it hadn't. Maybe she was lying in bed thinking about me too, worrying. Maybe.

Rhonda's mother had put her out as a teenager. They hadn't spoken in twenty years. Rhonda had couch-surfed for a while, turned eighteen, moved to the city, and got a job at the post office. She saved up for an apartment of her own and vowed never again to be anywhere she wasn't wanted. When I met her, we were thirty, and she'd just bought a house. We'd visited back and forth between her town and mine for a few years until I got the job at the university. She didn't hesitate when I asked her to move here with me.

“You are home, Lee,” she’d said. And at first I didn’t catch what she meant. Then I did. When we first moved here, I believed she could be right. I believed that we were all the home either of us could ever need. Through the end of a mild summer, and through a gorgeous red-gold fall, I believed it.

And then last night, after an hour or so of staring at the ceiling, I did something I never do. I woke Rhonda up. And I asked her, “Do you ever think about us moving back home?”

Earlier this year, a cousin had told Rhonda that, whenever people asked about her, her mother said she was probably dead somewhere, even though the cousin had let her know that Rhonda was alive and well.

In the dark, I couldn’t make out Rhonda’s face, but in the ensuing silence I imagined her blinking her way out of the sleep fog. Then she said, “Arletha, I already told you where home is. For me.”

And immediately, I wished I could take the question back.

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Rhonda leans the shovel against the side of the house and sprinkles salt on the cleared driveway and sidewalk. I wait for her inside the warm car. With only one car and a shitty mass transit system, I will drop her off at her clerk job at the courthouse and then drive to campus. On Fridays, I teach an afternoon class, Black Feminism, so I have a few hours to get some grading and prep done.

When Rhonda is done with the salt, she climbs in beside me. I brush a smattering of snowflakes from her locs and they melt from the heat of my hand. I can’t tell if she stiffened at my touch, or if I just imagined it. Her silence as I back out of the driveway suggests the former.

“Forecast says there’s another storm coming through later,” I say. “How many more weeks of this shit?”

“Whatever that groundhog says, I guess,” Rhonda says.

It’s slow-going down the steep hills that lead out of our neighborhood. I fear the brakes locking up and us coasting right through a stop sign. A bigger fear is other drivers, probably natives who slow down very little if at all on days like this. Once the roads are clear, it’s a free for all. But I guess if you’ve been here long enough, you have more confidence that the black road is just road and not black ice. Rhonda and I don’t yet have a critical mass of data points to give us that confidence. But the natives don’t know this, of course. They ride our bumper, honk or swerve around us when we go too slowly for their liking. I want to hang a sign in the back window that says, “We are not from here. Please understand.”

Rhonda just says, “Fuck these people” and flips them off as they whiz by us.

But today's ride into the city is fuck-free. Rude drivers pass and honk without a word from Rhonda. In front of the courthouse, I lean over to kiss her before she gets out of the car, and our lips barely touch before she's gone. How long had it been since we'd done anything more in bed than kiss and reminisce?

But the kiss, such as it is, is still a kiss. And I wonder if I will ever stop noticing and cataloguing all of the things we do here that we didn't—couldn't—do back home. I wonder if that catalog will ever grow long enough to become enough. For me.

Once I get to campus, it's harder than usual to find parking because snow has been plowed into some of the spaces. Eventually, I find a spot two blocks from my office on a tree-lined side street. I brace myself for the cold and throw open the car door.

I step out and my feet slide from under me in an instant. My butt slams onto the patch of ice, and my shoulder and back scrape against the base of the car when I land. The car door blocks my view, and my first thought is, “Does anyone see me?” But I'm not sure if I want to be seen or not.

The cold seeps through my waterproof pants and pain shoots up from my lower back to my shoulders. I want to get up, but I'm afraid of slipping and falling again. I can hear people walking and driving past. I could call out to them. I could get help. I look up at the sky which is gray like the branches overhead. The branches bend toward me, yielding beneath the weight of the snow piled along them.

A thought crystallizes and takes hold, a thought I haven't had in years, maybe a decade: I want my mother.

If my phone wasn't in my purse in the backseat of the car, I would call my mother right this minute. My mother who had been my soft place to land. Until she wasn't.

Everything hurts, and I suspect standing up will hurt even more. I wince at the thought of walking the two blocks to my office. Then I tell myself I'm being ridiculous. *Get up. Get up get up get up.* I repeat this in my head and then under breath until I am on my knees. I hoist myself back into the driver's seat and slam the door shut. I turn the car on and the heat. I'm sobbing now, and it's as if the sound belongs to someone else. Like the time I woke up from minor surgery annoyed that there was a woman nearby who wouldn't stop crying, not realizing that the woman was me.

It hurts to reach back and grab my purse, but I do it anyway. I take out my phone and pull up my mother's number. I sit there with my finger hovering over the “call” button, for forever it seems. But then I scroll through the Recent Calls list and tap Rhonda's name. I try to get the crying under control before she answers, but I can't.



“Leelee, baby, slow down, slow down” she says. “I can’t understand what you’re saying. What happened?”

“I hate this fucking snow!”

“Okay . . .”

“I hate the snow. I hate winter. I hate this city! I don’t want to be here.”

Silence. Rhonda sighs. “Where do you want to be?”

“I . . . don’t know.”

“I think you do know.”

“I slipped.”

“What?”

“I slipped and fell getting out of the car. I’m fine. But...I almost called my mother.”

Silence. And then Rhonda says, “Must be nice.”

I want to explain how it was just a primal reaction, this urge to call my mother. I want to tell her that she is home too, that she is now my soft place to land, and I am hers.

But nothing I can say will change the fact of my mother-privilege: I could call my mother if I wanted to and she would answer and she might even offer a modicum of comfort and concern, same as she would offer a stranger. I could get that, at least. Rhonda could not.

“Lee, if you’re sure you’re fine,” Rhonda says, “I have to get back to work.”

Fresh tears sting my eyes. “I’m sure. Yeah.”

The call drops, and I return the phone to my purse. I push through the pain and get out of the car again, this time stepping over the icy patch. The walk to the office isn’t too bad, but I can feel a bruise pulsing across my back and shoulders.

By the time my class starts, I’ve taken three Tylenol, and I get through it by sitting in a chair in the front of the room instead of standing and lecturing like I normally do. I feel like maybe I’m moving a beat slower than usual. But my students, a really engaged group of twelve women and two men, don’t seem to notice. I tell them that they are the only bright spot in an otherwise awful day. I’m certain this weirds them out, but I felt like saying it.

Later, when Rhonda gets in the car, she asks how I’m feeling. I tell her I’m fine, and we make the slow crawl through rush-hour traffic in silence.

The snow is just starting to come down hard as we enter our neighborhood. I pull the car into the driveway and push through the pain again to slowly ease out of the car. When my feet are steady, I notice Rhonda standing next to the driver's side door with her car keys in her hand.

"Head on upstairs, and I'll see you in a few," she says.

"Where are you going? It's snowing."

"I know, Lee. I'll be alright."

"But where are you going?"

Rhonda shakes her head. "Just go in the house and get yourself in a warm bath. Please?"

I go inside, run the bath, and try not to worry. Our tub is the clawfoot kind, the kind we'd had in my house growing up. Rhonda thinks I chose this house because of the tub, and she might be right. There were houses in better shape and in better neighborhoods than this one, but only this one had a clawfoot tub. I sink down, letting the water cover my back and shoulders, letting my eyelids close.

I guess this is how Rhonda felt the night of the first snow. I was out in it, driving, and she was at home, worried. She had stayed home from work that day to wait for the electrician to come and replace some outlets in the house. Traffic was awful because of the snow and an accident, so by the time I got home, it had been dark for a while. Rhonda had been torn between staying on the phone with me to know that I was safe and hanging up so that I wouldn't be distracted. Then my phone died and that dilemma was solved.

Now my fully charged phone rests on the floor next to the tub.

I distract myself with a childhood game: I soap up my hands and blow bubbles using my fingers in the "okay" sign position as a makeshift wand. The pain in my back and shoulders begins to subside. I imagine it disappearing into the water mixed in with the soap residue.

Eventually, I doze off. I wake up off and on to add hot water and check my phone. At one point, there's a text from Rhonda: *On my way*. I text back *Love you*. No reply.

When I wake up again, Rhonda is standing next to the tub holding one of the oversized t-shirts I sleep in.

"Your back looks like you've been in a fight with a bear...and lost. Come on," she says. "I have something for you downstairs." She's changed out of her work clothes and into a strapless sundress I haven't seen since before we moved here. I dry off and follow her downstairs.

I smell it before I see it. The pepper hits my nose first, and then the full array of aromas: onions, peppers, Old Bay, Zatarain's crab boil seasoning.

Grocery store bags littered the floor and counters. The kitchen table is covered in newspapers that Rhonda must've bought at the store. My mother always saved old newspapers to cover the picnic table in the backyard. And just like on my mother's table, there are little bowls of melted butter, a bottle of Louisiana hot sauce, and a pitcher of sweet tea.

On the stove, the stockpot is full of roiling, bright red water, a tiny, furious ocean full of snow crab legs, potatoes, and ears of corn.

We've tried before to get live blue crabs at Wholey's, the fresh seafood place everyone recommends, but their shipment comes in early Monday mornings and they sell out within minutes.

I turn to Rhonda. She smiles and throws her arms out wide. "They're frozen, but the best cure we got for the winter blues."

Just then, I caught on to the song playing on Rhonda's iPod: "Summertime" by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince. I two-step my way into Rhonda's arms, and we swing each other around and around the kitchen until the crabs are ready and our faces are damp from the moist, salty air.

Rhonda fills an aluminum pan with crabs and sets it in the middle of the table. I pour us some tea.

"Not that you need my permission," Rhonda says as she joins me at the table, "but it's okay with me if you want to call your mother. I mean, don't let me be the reason you don't call her. And maybe you want to go see her. Spend some time with her. She calls, not much, but that means she's leaving space for you in her life."

I try to detect any trace of resignation or martyrdom beneath her words, but as is always the case, what Rhonda says is exactly what she means.

"Babe," I say, "the space my mother has left for me isn't big enough for two."

Rhonda nods, and we dig in.

Outside, snow blankets our deck. It will fall all night, and tomorrow, we'll again do its bidding.

"A couple of years ago, I was invited by a friend to read my work as the opening act for her book launch event. I would be reading in the company of two international writers who wrote about things like displacement and exile. I write about Southern Black women, sex, and the Black church—weighty topics, to be sure, but I wanted to read something in keeping with the

event. So over the course of a miserable, freezing winter weekend, I wrote about two Black women from the South who are trying to make a cold city—and each other—their new home. Around the same time, a multi-media artist friend asked me to read at the exhibition opening for her latest work. So *Snowfall* did double duty, and I dedicated this story to these two phenomenal women artists, Vanessa German and Abeer Hoque. ”