

MAGICICADA

Diane Fisher issued from whatever celestial clamshell the same summer the soil spilled the racket of a million cicadas. When she walked up, Matthew and I quit the trampoline. We waited while she stood at the edge of the lawn like she belonged there; even the cicadas tensed.

Even time stiffened to attention for her lush bottom lip, her queenly elbows, the favor of her gaze, and when she finally spoke it was like a decree: “So well I just moved in and we saw you guys jumping? and—oh, this is Sarah.”

Sarah lifted a plump hand, completely eclipsed. I opened my mouth assuming some kind of wit would come out, but none came. I couldn’t seem to catch my breath.

Diane then deigned to clamber up, not that we minded, her arms braceleted and bare and disarrayed, and when her white sock slipped on the tramp’s slick skin I might have mistaken her for just some awkward kid. Then she erected and tossed her glossy hair—I don’t want to say she was godlike, but she was. She jumped.

Venus of the trampoline. Cicadas spangled around her, and gravity jumbled—the fall and launch and vault of the trampoline—and nobody spoke until days or maybe minutes later, we rested. Cicada guts smeared the membrane, all crackle and scum. Diane gagged. “Gross.”

“That always happens,” Matthew said.

“Nutty,” Sarah said.

“It’s actually their survival strategy.” My mother had discovered us a few weeks prior slicing one open with Matthew’s sharp knife—I had the legs pinned while Matthew plucked out guts. My mother was horrified. The next day I found a book on my bed—*Magicicada: The Miracle of Masses*. Calling it science lessened the blow, I guess. “They only come every thirteen years, so it’s like the birds eat them but there’s so many the birds can’t eat them all.”

I looked to Diane for approval, but she wasn’t looking. “Predator satiation,” I added, “is the term.”

Sarah nodded. “Huh.” Behind her Matthew stared at me like I’d pissed my pants.

Diane poked a half-crushed cicada with her toe. Another cicada started eating it. “We should go.” She hopped off and started down the drive.

I called after: “Do you guys want something to drink?”

“No,” she said, not turning. “Thanks.”

We watched them go.

“You got any Kool-Aid?” Matthew said.

#

In the kitchen we cooked pizza rolls. I considered what we’d seen and came to a conclusion: “Diane, wow.”

Matthew agreed. “I’d do her.”

“No way, asswipe. She lives by me.”

“So?”

Our thirteenth year had bestowed Matthew a broad height and a proud shrub of pubic hair, leaving me on the wrong side of the line of manhood. “I’ll kick your ass,” I said, but it sounded hollow even to me.

He sipped Kool-Aid.

#

We devised cicada genocide. We scooped handfuls into the microwave, watched them mill and succumb; a few emerged, uneasily—maybe, we hoped, radioactive. We freed them to breed their mutant spawn. Others we stuffed in pop bottles and incinerated. They shrieked like living teakettles.

We came of the same season. While I grew they’d lurked in the earth, plumping, suckling juice from the roots of the tree they were born in. Now they felt the soil leaven, sensed the hour and rose. I yanked out their wings: she loves me, she loves me not.

#

A train track cut through a gulch of woods by the high school, at one point under a road—me and Matthew staked in that underpass our sole claim. I pilfered a can of black spray paint from the garage, and we painted the world’s biggest 8-ball on the concrete incline and waited for something to happen. A train eventually came.

“Slow one.” Matthew pinned a stray cicada between finger and thumb in a slow crush. The engines, a mile off, danced in the heat like a pale mirage.

“You want to go?”

“Yeah.”

Soon the big engines bellowed through, earsplitting, and dimmed to the boxcars’ echo and smack. Matthew took off, caught a tanker by the ladder, and I swung onto the boxcar behind

and we rode a quarter mile, leapt into the ditch, and scrambled up the embankment to another gully, where we knew of a rain-pool and a smooth dry log. It smelled like dirt and damp.

Matthew dug a pack of cards from his pocket. “Check this out.” A soft-focus naked lady with a mass of perm reclined on a cushion—a wormish slit and a stain of pubes; her boobs hung limp, her lips sneered. It was the six of clubs.

“Shit, where’d you get these?”

He snatched them back. “I found them. In a parking lot.”

“Let’s see.”

“Nah.”

I was holding two crumpled cigarettes I’d filched from my mother. “I was saving these for later, but I guess I could trade.”

“Got a light?” He peeled three cards off the deck.

“No way. Half.”

I perched the cigarette between two fingers, as I’d seen my mother do. The four of hearts’ electric pink lips received a dick that was bent like an archer’s bow. I showed Matthew. “Dude’s dick looks like some kind of larva.”

He glanced at it. “Gross.”

The ten of spades cradled her boob in her hand. The queen of diamonds leered and showed her asshole.

Matthew was already at it. I moved away and followed suit, ha ha, while he wiped up and waited for me to get done.

#

I pitied their thirteen years of dark, their glimpse of summer, abrupt and doomed. I saw them mating, missionary-style, and I thought of love.

Twilights came bruise green and orange, kindled in cicadas' itchy rasp, and a ledge of roof outside my window beckoned me on nights I sweltered: I pressed the flat of my back against the siding, stared at Diane's low ranch beyond the fence, and wondered if she were awake, too, beneath the same hot moon.

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Matthew harvested cicadas in a Hills Bros. can and doused them. He tossed a match: the flap of ignition like a startled bird. They popcorned. Exoskeletons expanded, exploded. A few clawed, desperate, over the wall and fell, wings aflame, shriveled and petered out. Matthew watched it like it bored him. "You think she puts out?"

"What?"

"Diane, dipshit. I bet she fucks."

I saw her creamy boobs lifted, her ecstatic arch. My mouth went numb—it was Matthew I saw underneath, not me.

"It's not going to be you," I said. "It won't."

He spritzed lighter fluid. "We'll see."

#

Diane lounged with Sarah in the shade of her yard, at a plastic table in plastic chairs. She sipped a red drink. She wore sunglasses round as dark suns. Sarah waved.

I waved back from the tramp and waded through my mother's sunflowers, scaled the fence, folded my arms on the lattice. A cicada trolled over my hand. I flicked it. It shot toward

them in a dead arc, then snapped its parachute wings and buzzed lazily away. “What are you guys up to?”

Sarah spoke: “Do you have a crush?”

I almost fell off the fence. “What?”

She smirked. Her hair was parted exactly in the center. “You heard me.”

“Uh... what?”

“Do you have a crush?”

I squinted at her. She looked victorious, somehow, and I sensed that a victory needed a loser; still, the part of me that hoped insisted it was genuine, just a question, an invitation, even. *Yes! Yes! Diane!* Good Lord I should trumpet it to gods! But I hemmed and frittered anyway, pinned and wriggling—it was impossible to say just what I meant! It refused to be said.

Then I thought of a way, a way to make my feelings known—a secret code—which I and Diane would share, alone. I celebrated myself, how clever I was, and said it: “You know Washington, D.C.?”

Sarah’s eyebrow fell. “Okay.”

Diane’s cool shades betrayed nothing.

“Stands for District of Columbia, right?”

“Right.” Sarah drew the word out like a rubber band.

“They have the same thing in Mexico—Mexico, D.F., which stands for ‘distrito federal.’ Federal district.” I’d learned it in Spanish; it seemed like fate.

Diane’s lips released a hint of smile. Sarah showed a few teeth. “You going to answer the question or what?”

“I just did.”

“You are so weird.”

“I am not. Think about it.”

“So you have a crush on a Mexican girl?”

I rolled my eyes. “Distrito Federal. That’s who.” Diane’s sunglasses glinted like twin crystal balls. I lost my nerve and looked away.

“Whatever,” Sarah said. “You’re such a dork.”

In the sky, a few clouds rambled lonesomely, far apart.

“I know who,” said Diane.

My face seemed to increase in volume.

“Who?” Sarah said.

“Do you want me to say it?” She was asking me. I trembled. She cocked her neck like a bird of prey.

“It’s me.”

I almost whispered: “Do you like me?”

Her face tightened, a look that eluded me—a thin-lipped smile, the brow a knot. An unbearable silence. She shook her head, just slightly.

My gut clenched and I fell off the fence and collided with dirt. I gasped and lay there while cicadas gathered on my feet and hands. “Why not?” I finally said.

From behind the fence: “It’s nothing personal.”

“But why not?” I said, louder. I wanted to know. I demanded to know: I would make her say it.

“It’s just that—” Her face appeared above, a vision. “You’re not cool.”

“I’m not?”

She shook her head. “Sorry.” The look on her face—it hit me—was pity. The second flared: I hated her for it.

“But,” I said. But I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Friends?”

“I guess.”

She bared white teeth and dropped behind the fence. “Great. See you,” she said, from the other side.

#

I cried myself amoebic. After a while the pain got abstract and numb, and I lay in bed understanding, maybe for the first time, gravity’s unyielding clasp. Matthew just walked in and came upstairs. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Let’s do something.”

I rolled away. “I’m depressed.”

“What the fuck,” he wondered, “are you talking about?”

“Just life. I don’t feel like doing anything.”

He leaned into my field of vision. “If you don’t get up right now, I swear, I will punch the shit out of your balls, dude.”

I pulled in my knees from reflex. He laughed.

“Let’s go, asswipe.”

#

The sun hung brutal midway west. The cool woods loomed at the bottom of the hill, faded with exhaust and haze, and a train’s whistle sounded, forlorn. We rode to our spot.

Matthew dug in his backpack. “Check it out.” He pulled an aged *Hustler* from a nest of wires and stereo parts.

I sidled up. “Where do you get this shit?”

He flipped through the pages. A woman hid one boob with a plant, nude and slick with beaded water. My mouth opened. Matthew’s breath in my ear. He spoke: “I’ll blow you if you blow me.”

“What?”

“I’ll blow you if you blow me.”

“Blow?”

“Like a blow job.”

I killed a moment hoping the definition of ‘blow job’ would come to me. Finally, I had to admit it wouldn’t. “A blow job?”

“Jesus Christ. You don’t know what a blow job is?” He gripped his dick, seemingly disbelieving.

“No, turdlord. I don’t know.”

“Getting your dick sucked.”

“Oh.”

A cicada landed on the log between us, paused, and went on its way. We watched it. “So I’ll blow you if you blow me.”

“Suck your dick? No way. That’s nasty.”

“You ever had a blowjob?”

“Yes.”

He laughed. “Bull. You didn’t even know what one was until I told you.”

“Fine, I haven’t. But there’s no way I’m giving one to you.”

“It’s like sex. Come on, I’ll do you first.”

I ran my tongue around my mouth. *It was like sex.* Diane had smashed my hopes, but now here a sort of the same thing was, weirdly, in the form of Matthew. Vaguely gross, but here all the same, and availed. Life, it occurred to me, was funny that way.

Matthew performed it like a business transaction—simply squatted and stuck it in. I watched his head bob for a minute and then looked away, fearing what watching would say about me. I studied the blood-red light of my eyes closed. Red-dark. Womb-dark. Matthew’s mouth was a womb, a chamber of the sea, the all-embracing mother of everything. I fought the urge to thrust for fear of stabbing his throat. He smacked wetly and spat me out.

“Your turn,” he said.

Fair was fair. I kneeled.

“Ow,” he said, “Jesus, you’re doing it wrong. Stop a second.”

I looked up. It was a strange angle.

“Go like this.” He drew his lips in and made a circle of his mouth. “That way you don’t bite it with your teeth.”

I did as he showed me for duty—to go as long on him as he’d gone on me—but the initial revulsion softened: Matthew’s piss came out of this organ, true, and I couldn’t rule out it made us fags. My friends and mother, Diane and Sarah—what they’d say if they saw—the voices of their derision hovered, echoing, above a surface I’d sunken below, the surface of some more primal pool. The tang and odor, the slick of his skin, the fact of my blood and my lips and my tongue—then I felt his dick flex and I snapped to, spit spunk and stuttered: “the fuck!”

He was pulling his pants up. I watched his dick vanish.

“Wait—you gotta do me now.”

He laughed. “I already did.”

“But I didn’t—”

He buckled his belt. “Tough titty.”

Like his dick had been fruit from the tree of knowledge, I knew my nakedness and was ashamed: my saluting stiff, a dunce cap, a white flag hoisted. I held my hands in front of it as if it hid a damn thing.

“Here,” he said, offering me the *Hustler*. “Just give it back next time.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.” He pushed down the pedal and caught his balance, blinked through the trees and disappeared.

I finished it off. The choke of bitter climax collected in my groin, and I felt the same pressure collect in my throat, and cried.

I cried over the shame firing its kiln in my heart, firing my pliable fibers brittle. Shame that showed me its pitiless mirror: a sniveling kid flicking spunk to the leaves, wiping tears gingerly trying not to mix them with his worthless, unwanted seed. Shame set like a plaster cast. The cicadas droned their dying dirge, and, further off, the furtive chords of a high-school marching band, distant and dissonant, and even so soaring, bending the very air to their bungling will.