

The Hissing of Crickets

Every morning, the crickets.

They are reliable, chirping every day when Henry rises with the sun. He comes to love those crickets, and their tiny hectic songs that they sing for him. Some mornings, usually when he hasn't slept all night, Henry lies in bed and drums responding harmonies on his mattress, and pretends he is communicating with them.

This morning, they are absent.

Thinking that maybe he overslept, Henry leans over and feels the time on his clock. The raised letters underneath his fingertips confirm that it's six am, and he's right on schedule. Mentally shaking off his unease, he slides out of bed and sluggishly makes his way to his dresser to feel the textures of his t-shirts, searching for his favorite one.

After getting ready, he walks to the kitchen only to be greeted by the sound of a closing door.

"Mom?" he calls, turning to face the slam. When there is no response, he cocks his head toward the direction of the back window, and listens to the sound of the car starting up and sliding smoothly out of the garage.

Henry frowns and swipes his hand across the kitchen counter, searching for a note. Finding nothing, he rummages through the fridge, grabs his lunch, and shoves it in his backpack before he runs to the front door. He almost forgets his cane by the stairs as he bursts out the door and jogs toward the woods behind his house.

The world buzzes and thrums as Henry lets his cane hover in front of him, sweeping the ground in practiced, methodical motions. The closer he gets to the woods, the damper and thicker the air becomes. The birds flit from tree to tree and he can hear the gushing burble of a nearby creek. Leaves and twigs crunch underfoot as he trails his hand over tree bark and bushes, mentally cataloguing the textures and smells. Once he feels a gash in the smooth stripped bark of a tree, Henry grins. He follows the direction of the carved arrow to another tree with a similar arrow, pointing in a different direction.

Following the gouged trees Henry is led to an empty space where the wind was no longer funnelled through thick foliage, and was allowed to billow up Henry's t-shirt freely. He breathes in the familiar grassy air of the clearing and lets all of the breath whoosh out his lungs at once. Here was one of the only few places where he knew so completely that he didn't need his eyes. Even if he could see the clearing in its entirety, it wouldn't be more familiar to him.

Suddenly, Henry tenses. Something was different. He feels the heavy weight of eyes on his skin and his hair prickles on the back of his neck.

"Who's there?" Henry calls out, hovering at the edge of the clearing.

Almost as if in response, the sound of crickets creaking and chirping rebounds through woods and field.

A different, crackling creaking sounds from the middle of the clearing. Henry recognizes it as the controlled pressure of someone shifting their weight.

Leading with his cane, Henry confidently walks to the center of the field, stopping when his cane bumps against an object. Tapping around the structure, Henry notices that it has an unusual amount of give. The sound that reverberates through it when he raps it is a hollow one. It's a log, Henry confirms, gone spongy and decrepit with age.

"You're blind."

Henry stops his analysis abruptly and tenses in surprise before making himself relax his shoulders. It was a young woman's voice, coming from about two feet to the left of him.

"What gave it away, the white cane or the shitty fashion sense?" he asks, turning his face down toward where the woman must be sitting on the log.

"The horrific scarring across your eyes and cheekbones," she replied.

Henry shifts self-consciously and touches his scars as if trying to erase them with his fingertips. He has gleaned very little insight into how he looked for the last five years, but people always pointed out his scars first when they described him. Either that or they pointedly ignore it. Henry didn't know which response was worse.

"Oh no," the woman bemoans, "I've made you uncomfortable." She rises from her log and stands very close to Henry. He can feel her body heat pulsing off of her in waves, and can smell a light sweet perfume. Henry swallows thickly.

"I'm so sorry," the woman says softly, taking his hand off where it was still fingering the scarred skin of his face. Henry has the distinct feeling that she was looking directly into his eyes; something that people rarely did.

"It's been so long since I've talked to someone for any longer than this," she continues, "I must have forgotten my manners, my name is Meddy."

Henry attempts to shake off his awkwardness by clearing his throat.

"Meddy?" he asks, trying not to think about how she was still holding his hand, and willing his palms to stop sweating.

"Yes, it's a nickname," Meddy says, a grin in her voice. "No more peculiar than 'Henry,' really."

Henry didn't remember telling her his name, but Meddy was nice and her hands were soft, so he didn't really care. He sits down on the log next to her and both to his intense relief and dismay, she releases his hand.

Meddy continues to sit very close to him, and talks in a quiet, gentle tone. Later on, if you were to ask Henry what the topic of their conversation was, he really couldn't tell you. All he knows is that it was captivating; holding him in her presence, ankle deep in grass and weeds, until the sun was low enough to shine through the trees and cast bars over the clearing.

Henry's phone vibrates when it's seven o'clock and he jumps at the buzz in his pocket, knocking in to Meddy and almost falling off his seat. He quickly silences it with a swipe of his thumb.

"Are you okay?" Meddy asks, humor in her voice.

"Yeah," Henry quickly rights himself and settles back on the log. His face burns and he clears his throat a few times before explaining himself.

"It's never gone off randomly like that. It usually goes off at seven."

"Henry... it *is* seven." Meddy says after a beat of confused silence.

"*What.*"

Henry snatches up his backpack and slings it over his shoulder, noticing that it was still heavy with his uneaten lunch. Strange, he didn't feel hungry at all. Grabbing his cane as an afterthought, he runs to the edge of the clearing before awkwardly stopping and shuffling his feet at the tree line. He glances back.

"Same time tomorrow?" he calls across the field.

In response, the drone of crickets.

Over the next few weeks, Henry visits Meddy in the clearing every day for hours on end, each visit growing increasingly lengthier. The clearing became even more of a safe haven for

Henry; a place to rest but not fall into the endless black boredom that sits heavily on his eyelids. By the end of the month, he was staying well past sunset. If it were not for Meddy's gentle reminders that it was getting late and his mother might worry, Henry was almost convinced he would stay forever in the clearing with Meddy and his untouched lunch.

One day, on his last visit, Henry was mapping out the lines of Meddy's face, drawing a picture in his head. He lightly traces the slightly crooked slope of her nose to her broad, flat cheekbones. When he trails his hand up her forehead to her hairline, Meddy clamps her hand over his wrist in an iron grip.

"No," she says, her voice steel.

"Okay," Henry responds, and brings his hands down to his lap. He can hear Meddy sigh softly, and move closer to him.

"I apologize," she says, "it's just that...I don't have hair."

"...What do you mean?" Henry asks, confused. "Are you bald? That's no big deal."

"No, that wouldn't be a big deal, would it?"

Meddy is quiet for a minute, breathing steady breaths next to the blind boy as they sit together in a stagnant silence. She then grabs his hand once more. Henry breathes a sigh, relieved that Meddy isn't too mad at him, and continues his tenuous exploration of her features. Her fingers are cool and her grip is firm as she brings his hand up her forehead, and Henry stills their hands.

"But, I thought..." he trails off as Meddy rubs her thumb along his wrist reassuringly, bringing his hand to the crown of her head, where he feels a smooth mass.

Henry's hand jerks back violently when he feels the protrusion start to move.

The hissing of crickets that usually filters through the clearing as a steady drone becomes controlled and rhythmic.

"Do not be afraid," Meddy says, as she grasps his hand once more from where Henry had clutched it to his chest. She brings it to the writhing mass atop her scalp once more.

Meddy releases Henry's hand, but he continues to hold it to her head. He strokes the scaly thron and becomes transfixed by the slide and texture. The crickets' chirping is deafening and his fingertips start to throb.

"We heard your messages." Meddy says quietly as Henry weaves his hands deeper into the thrashing strands, "The ones you tapped out for us on your mattress."

Henry's spine is a live wire and his throat aches. He leans in closer, Meddy's perfume is heady and burns his nose slightly.

"I want to see you," he croaks hoarsely, "I want to see you so badly."

Meddy makes a sympathetic noise. The tendrils on her head wraps around his hands and wrists, constricting them possessively. Henry feels a smooth fog roll over his mind, smothering his thoughts and leaving a cloying taste on his tongue. The fog mutes his animalistic impulse to flee, but he is not petrified. Instead he is blissfully numb with the conviction that he couldn't leave, that he will never leave the clearing again.

"I think I'll stay here awhile longer," Henry says.

Henry doesn't see Meddy's face split into a wide, toothy grin. He doesn't see her slitted reptilian eyes blink slowly, analytically, before she runs a clawed hand through Henry's unkempt hair. He doesn't feel the small cut that she nicks behind his ear, as she watches his blood dew and well on his skin with a morbid fascination. And he definitely does not notice that atop her head, embedded into her thick fleshy scalp, is a sinewy, writhing nest of snakes whose croaking hisses were strangely reminiscent of a cricket's chirp.

Meddy watches the bead of Henry's blood trickle down his neck before she looks up to stare directly at the blind boy's horribly disfigured face.

"Of course you will." she replies.