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Summer of the Cicadas

My father wakes early, sunrise, but I've already breakfasted and left the house. I leave him to his newspaper and coffee. I've pulled my hair back into a ponytail because beneath the layer of evening cool, humidity draws beads of sweat from my skin.

My hair is kinked from its recent perm and streaked with highlights from using lemon juice in the sun. It's a strange color, neither blond nor brown but with hints of both, and now the lemon juice has left it streaked with orange. It's thick as a lion's mane. I think that someday, when the perm grows out and the color stabilizes, I will have a good set of hair. It will be my crowning glory.

I have recently begun thinking of myself as something other than plain. Something other than a girl with glasses and hacked-off greasy hair. I traded in the glasses for contacts. I let my hair grow. The perm was on a whim, regretted after it was done; but every day the kinks soften more into frizzy waves.

I coast down the hill in the dark, relishing the feel of wind in my face. I cruise around the corner and switch gears to pedal uphill. The cicadas are quiet. In daylight they are thick as leaves in an autumnal forest, and I have to dodge them as I ride. They are slow and cumbersome. They look as if they can barely stay afloat, wings working furiously to hold up the blimps of their bodies.

This is the summer of their awakening. For seventeen years they've hunkered in the dark,

burrowing down as larvae the same year I was born. The years I have been living in sunlight, they have been buried in darkness. We are equals for the span of one summer. Same age and it seems the same purpose.

My best friend, Dana, cheers for them, urging them on to revelry. "Live," she cries, driving with her windows up and the air-conditioning turned on full-blast. "Enjoy yourselves while you can!" Most of her exhortations fail as the ones she favors end up dead on her windscreen.

I cycle past my mom's house. She rents a room from a schoolteacher, an old maid who was engaged once and never dated since. She and my mother are the same age, but you can't be an old maid if you've been married and had kids. My mom will ride her bike to the club mid-morning to bring me a sandwich for lunch. James teases me about this. His parents are the owners of the club. "At least my mom knows what goes in a sandwich," I retort, but never too loudly, in case his mother has come in to manage her accessories shop.

Crossing the highway is easy with no traffic. The pink rim of dawn tinges the horizon. My shirt clings to me slightly but not as it will when I return home in the afternoon. I park my bike and unlock the club's heavy oak doors. I have twenty seconds to punch in the security code before the alarm sounds. Inside the club, I move through the quiet, dark spaces, turning on lights and air conditioning. I start a load of laundry--towels--and update the tennis calendar. I relish these hours. I work alone until nine o'clock, when the second shift starts.

The first members to arrive are women who work out in the fitness center. These are all wealthy middle-aged women, half of them overweight, half verging on anorexia. Right on cue enters the rail-thin bleached blond germ-phobic who always uses her shirt sleeve to hold the pen. I know the order in which they arrive, type in their ID's before they finish signing the book. Tennis players arrive next, older men in their sixties who refuse to sign. Most of them stride past the desk without a glance in my direction. I know their ID's too, after agonizing weeks spent calling after them, begging to know if they

were valid members.

James arrives. James is kind of cute, but not really. He has his father's long back and short bow legs. He has his mother's weak chin. He's funny though. I can't tell if he likes me or not. Not as much as the tall blond guy with a mustache who ogles me when he comes to play tennis with his dad. I think James likes me a little. He jokes around with everyone, but he's nice to me in small ways. If I ask him to turn on the tennis court lights, he will. He groans when I ask him to go into the men's room and collect towels. "It's not my job," he says. "I'm not a lowly desk clerk."

"At least I get paid," I remind him.

After all the complaining, he not only collects the towels but starts a load of wash and brings folded towels to the front desk.

I told Dana about James and the blond guy. She's impatient for me to get a boyfriend. Unfortunately, really cute boys don't have anything to say to me, and I can't think of anything to say to them. I will never date that blond guy though. I will die a withered-up spinster first.

My mom brings me a sandwich at eleven. I'm starving. I hide behind the cabinets, wolfing down bite after bite.

"What did Mommy bring us for lunch today?" James asks.

"I'm guessing that *your* mother didn't pack you anything." Jackie's not known for her maternal instincts.

He winces. "Yeah. At least she's not the one shipping me off to military school."

I raise my eyebrows.

"My dad," he confirms. "He's hoping it will teach me to be a man. And get rid of my ponytail."

"I didn't realize your dad was so anti-liberal. He must lack your artistic temperament."

James likes to draw. He posts his cartoons up around the back walls. Most of them make fun of irate members.

“There's a lot of stuff lacking in my father's life.”

I don't reply because I'm pretty sure that if we started the whole whose-life-sucks-more war, I would win, but only at considerable loss to my self-esteem. At least your parents have money, I could say. You live in a nice house. You have a car. Money isn't everything, he would reply. Maybe it's better to live as I do, free to come and go. No one tells me what to do.

My shift ends at one. Cicadas are more active in the afternoon, during the heat of the day, and I have to pedal slowly to avoid a head-on collision. The air is full of them. They look like aliens, red eyes bulging from those grotesque black bodies. If I got one in my hair, I would freak, Dana be damned.

When I get home, I'm sticky with sweat. I hop into the shower. The cold water feels so good running down my back. I hear cicadas whirring through the open window. I wrap my hair in a towel and turn on the fan. I'm lying naked on the bed when the phone rings. It's Dana. “We're meeting up later at Troy's house. I'll pick you up at nine.”

There's a fire going in the outdoor pit when we get to Troy's house. It's a lot bigger than most of the houses we hang out at. Mine is strictly off limits. The lawn here is manicured; the patio clean and intact. I peek through French doors into the kitchen. An enormous granite-covered island sprawls like the sunken Titanic.

I feel out of place in my tank top and shorts. My frizzy hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and I have no makeup on.

“Why didn't you tell me all these people would be here?” I hiss to Dana.

“You look fine,” she says. “Put some lipstick on.” She digs a tube of lipstick from her purse. It's red. Red is not my color. It makes my teeth look yellow.

I dab lipstick on my teeth and pull the rubber band from my hair. I shake my head to fluff the

kinks out around my face.

I notice some guy staring at me from the other side of the fire. It doesn't look like the kind of guy who ever paid me any attention in high school; this guy, though short and somewhat stocky, looks like someone from the in-crowd.

The girl next to him narrows her eyes at me. "Honestly, these bugs are creeping me out," she says. "I can feel them watching me. Let's just go inside."

Cicadas are clicking lazily from the trees. Now and then one of them flies past in a daze, wavering like a drunk teenager.

"I don't even know all these people," some guy, most likely Troy, says. "I'm not letting them in my home."

"Hey." Dana sidles up to me. "That guy's checking you out."

I take a closer look. Dana notices my face. "What?"

"Oh my god. That's the guy who humiliated me in junior high. Jack Stanton. He pretended to ask me out right in front of his girlfriend. I felt like pond scum."

"Oh." Dana dismisses this, but I'm back in the gym, studying my pale reflection in the smooth lacquered floor while he very seriously asks why I won't go out with him. His girlfriend, a girl I had known since elementary school, rested on her haunches, eyes crinkled with laughter. Why me, I remember thinking, knowing full well the enormous glasses and mousy hair were the reasons, but wanting to believe in a kernel of beauty.

The girl next to Jack hooks an arm through his and drags him away. Just before he turns, he shoots me a smile and a wink. The boy who humiliated me four years ago is flirting with me. This must be what is called karma, the universe righting itself. I should be basking in my moment of glory, but I carry deep the reflection from the gym floor. Is it possible to change so much?

I swish my hair back around my shoulders and grin at Dana. It's all her. She's the reason I'm

here tonight, the reason I have any kind of a social life. She's my chauffeur and my posse, dragging me from the house on nights I would choose to burrow in bed. In September, we leave for different schools. Never again will she stow sweaters in her purse for me, tossing aside my ratty thrift-shop sweatshirts. I'll need to begin again.

“If it isn't Miss Bright-Eyed and Bushy-Tailed,” James greets me the next morning. I'm yawning so wide I could swallow a tennis ball.

“Shut up.”

“Up past our bedtime?”

“What's with the royal 'we'?” I grumble. “You sound like a British nanny.”

He laughs. “What'd you do last night?”

“Hung out at a friend's house.”

James eyes me curiously. “Friend as in friend or friend as in boyfriend?”

“Friend.” I feel myself redden.

“But it was a boy?”

“Yes, but he's not really my friend.” I laugh at how ridiculous that sounds. “It was a friend of a friend. I don't really know him. What did you do?”

“Listen to my parents argue about whether or not I should go to military school.”

“Jackie's on your side?”

“She likes to oppose my dad whenever she can. The two of them went head to head for three hours.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Yeah, come over sometime.”

He strolls off. I'm wondering how serious he was. Was that an invitation?

I call Dana after work. “He's definitely into you. Would you go out with him?”

“I'm not sure.”

“You can't hold out for the perfect guy, you know. He doesn't exist.”

“But a ponytail? It's so stringy.”

She laughs and we hang up. I remember when Dana and I used to dress up in junior high and strut around the park. She would ride her bike over to my house and we'd raid my closet, trying on mini-skirts and tank tops. I kept a tray of expensive makeup acquired piece by piece from trips to the Jewel with my dad. We took turns painting each other with blue eyeliner and smoky topaz eye shadow, mascara and lipstick. We cut a wide eclipse around the duck pond and along the sidewalk to the main street. Sashayed past the house where we knew a couple of high school boys lived.

Heels clicking and bangles clunking, the most we got was a honk or two. In the years since, Dana has had two real boyfriends. I've seen her and Rick in the car together. Once they zipped into the same jacket, goofing around, laughing so hard they finally collapsed onto the snow.

My mom has invited me over for lunch since I'm not working today. It's too hot to ride but I have to be gracious because my mom's paying a portion of my tuition. I feel like I'm on a cliff, about to let myself go into a strong wind. I'm hoping the wind will set me down somewhere pleasant, but look at my mom. This wasn't how she imagined her forties—no career, no husband, no house.

I used to think of this road between our two houses as no man's land, back in junior high when my parents first separated. Riding to visit my mom after school was the favorite part of my day. But it usually ended badly, after fighting with my mom or Bea. I'd storm out and pedal furiously back to my father's house where I had the comfort of silence.

My mom's standing at the kitchen counter in her club shirt whisking salad dressing.

“Did you work today?” I ask.

She nods. “Your shift. Don't you love being home by one? Done with work and the rest of the day still to come.” She breaks lettuce apart into a bowl. The dressing is her trademark creation: vinegar, lemon juice, mustard and garlic. Salmon patties are frying in a skillet.

“What are your plans for the summer?” Bea asks, smacking her lips on a broccoli spear. Bits of green are stuck between her teeth.

“Work,” I mumble.

Bea's eyeing me in that way of hers. “You'll need money for school,” she says. My heart leaps. “Have you thought about taking another job?” she asks.

Another job? I'm already spending half my days at work. My mom's looking down at her plate, and I realize she's in on this. No doubt she doesn't want to be sucked into every expense I have.

I shrug.

My mom makes her special coffee after lunch. She drips water through individual bags of grounds directly into our cups. The flavor is more intense. Sunlight drifts through the bay window. I look around at the accents of the life my mother has cobbled together for herself: my grandmother's table and chairs, crystal goblets, a china tea set. The grandfather clock in the hall. Touches of a life my mother once had or could have had; a life that exists now as sunlight on wood. It's all she can cling to.

I push off the long black driveway into the click of cicadas. I wake at four in the thick of night and rinse my face. I pour cereal and hope that my mom will bring me a sandwich for lunch. I pull my hair back into a ponytail and mount my bike. The cicadas are quiet. The streets are black, the houses black. My wheels swish downhill.

At eleven-thirty, my mom still hasn't shown up. James hears my stomach growl. He draws a cartoon of my mom biking through a hailstorm with my sandwich strapped to her back.

“Very funny.”

He draws an emaciated me fainting away at the front desk.

“Ditto.”

“You know, you could try one of these fabulous new inventions lining the street. They're called restaurants.”

“On my bike,” I sneer. “Down Route 55? Besides, I don't get a lunch break. That's why I stuff my face behind the cabinets. She'll show. She knows I work today.”

He checks his watch. “It's not looking good.”

“She'll show.”

“Bet you she doesn't,” he sings.

“It's a bet.” I slam down the next page on the tennis calendar.

“Okay. What are we betting?”

I shrug.

“How about lunch? Loser buys.”

“Since I'll be getting a sandwich today, you'll have to take me out tomorrow.”

He grins.

At 12:30, my mom strides through the oak doors, wearing a T-shirt and shorts. She's red-faced and sweaty and carrying a paper bag. I make a big show of waving the bag in James' face. I unwrap a humongous sandwich loaded with turkey, lettuce, onions, tomatoes and extra-sharp cheddar cheese.

“You know, Allison,” James whispers as I'm taking a bite, “one of these days you're going to have to grow up and make your own sandwich.”

“Make my own sandwich?” I almost choke; I'm so mad. “How about every day of high school?” I spit out. “Does that count?”

He gives me a quizzical look.

“I made myself PB on rye four years straight. I think she owes me.”

He shrugs. “I've been making my own lunches for years. As you've pointed out, Jackie's not

much of a cook.”

“She bought food for you. She kept the fridge stocked.”

“Your dad doesn't buy food?”

“He does. But not the same kind my mom buys.”

“You couldn't go with him and pick things out?”

I'm silent, thinking of trips to the Jewel spent in the makeup aisle, the possibilities of a new self shining out at me from the displays of glossy color.

“You don't understand. My mom makes the best sandwiches. And she left me. She wasn't there. So I had to eat peanut butter.”

James actually laughs.

“My parents scream at each other nightly. My sister's been in and out of hospital with anorexia. I'm being shipped off to military school in September, a place that will most likely be the death of whatever I consider my soul. But you're right; it sucks to make your own sandwiches.”

The turkey sticks in my throat. I can't even eat this anymore. I throw the remains into the trashcan where they land with a thump.

Just what I needed: the blond guy checks in to play tennis. His mustache looks like a squished up caterpillar crawling over his lips. He keeps his eyes on me as he talks.

... tomorrow?” he's saying.

“What?”

“Do you work tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Do you have any plans?”

“My boyfriend's taking me out to lunch.” That shuts him up. Then I turn and see James reflected in the huge glass windows of the tennis courts. Did he hear that I just called him my boyfriend? Oh,

please God, don't let him have heard, I pray silently. Please don't let him have heard me.

He walks by whistling. I keep my head down, pretending to check the tennis schedule. My shift is almost over. I can slip out the doors and never come back. Except that I need the money.

I'm unchaining my bike to ride home when I sense the heavy doors open behind me. I turn and James is there. "Do you want to meet here or should I pick you up at your house?" he asks.

I feel myself stare.

"I lost the bet, remember?"

I picture him clunking up the rutted driveway at my dad's house, fighting the overgrown bushes to reach the screen door. I could have him pick me up at Bea's house, but it wouldn't be worth the amused looks she and my mom would exchange. "I'll meet you here. What time?"

"How about twelve-thirty?"

I cycle home, angry at myself for scoring another trip through cicada hell on my day off. I could be lying in bed naked. I don't think James and I really enjoy each other's company that much to make this whole lunch date worthwhile.

I call Dana but she's not home. I can't talk to my dad. My mom gets way too emotional for my taste. If I had James' number, I would call and cancel. I could leave a message at the club. Odds are he'd be there tomorrow anyway.

Two stacked cicadas land on the screen. Easy for them. That's all they're here for. I doubt they're even that picky. As soon as the female lays her eggs, she dies. I have to believe my life means something more.

But who am I kidding? What is there, really, without love? I cross to the window. The yard is filled with bodies bumbling in slow circles. Like fireflies, but without beauty, without grace. See that? That body is the representation of carnal lust. It's the awkwardness of two adolescents with bad teeth and stringy hair trying to make a match. To my dreams of romance, the raw blisters of a failed

marriage. Ugliness and awkwardness, hunkered in the dark. How, when they reach the light, do they grow wings?