

# Cricket

## The First Impression

The sausages were starting to get old. If she kept them inside they would spoil before she had a chance to eat them. Cricket rolled off the mattress, rolled about three more revolutions before she reached the door, slid it open, and placed the sausages on the door step next to the shoes. The cold winds rushed in and Cricket's sister complained in her sleep.

The sausages had been given to her one morning by a handsome man wearing a business suit who had been driving east and had stopped his shiny black car next to the water pump where Cricket stood, alone, in the fields outside of her village. He had asked her for water. He thanked her and then gave her the pack of sausages because he had nothing else to give her. He either gave it to her or left it by accident. She would later forget which. The man had told her he was here to start a shoe repair business.

Just then, a truckload of young women drove past them. They were her relatives and her neighbors, heading for the bathhouse. It was easy to tell because they all had their towels and sandals. They waved at her.

"Aren't you going with them?" the man asked.

"No."

The man looked at her, puzzled. Cricket had stopped going to the bathhouse because of the women there. Every time she took off her clothes, they would stare admiringly.

"Oh my God, how big!"

"How could anyone have such a pretty pair of breasts!"

"I know, like two upturned bowls of rice!"

She would shrug and cover herself, feeling violated. For this reason, Cricket pumped her own water and bathed alone. It was an extra chore, and she ended up bathing far less often than the others.

Cricket realized that the man was still looking at her, puzzled. He was waiting for her large gray eyes to take on some kind of expression.

"I'd rather die in my own filth than let my merchandise hang out for all the public to see," she said.

Her sharp, bitter words sent the man into peals of laughter.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Nineteen."

"And your name?"

"Cricket."

"Cricket? Even for a country person, that's an awful name."

"It's because my real name is very hard to pronounce when you're talking fast," Cricket said. "They called me Locust, because it kind of sounds like my real name."

"And so you went from Locust to Cricket?"

"Yes. Locust was too unflattering, even for me."

The man smiled.

She didn't care that he smiled. She was self-deprecating, but her intention was to amuse herself, not to put herself down.

"Well then, how does the husband of Miss Cricket manage to tolerate her smell?"

"He doesn't. That's why he ran away. I haven't seen him since."

The man laughed again, leaning on the well to regain his balance. His legs were surprisingly unsteady.

Then he asked her if there was an outhouse nearby.

“There’s one in that direction,” she said, pointing towards the setting sun. “But be careful. There’s a ghost in there.” She looked at him, waiting to see if he was stupid enough to believe that she was stupid enough to believe this.

“A ghost won’t stop me from doing what I have to do,” he said. Then she imagined him defecating, which made her feel uncomfortable. And he smirked at her, because making her uncomfortable was his act of cruelty, she thought. But it was cruelty she forgave, because it seemed like he was trying to be honest and human with her.

“But she will. First, she’ll ask you what kind of toilet paper you want. She’ll ask if you want red, blue, or yellow paper.”

“What if I just want plain white?”

“It doesn’t matter, because no matter what you say, she’ll scream ‘RED!’ and then kill you.” Cricket actually screamed the word “red”, making the man jump. He laughed so hard, his hand almost slipped from the edge of the well.

He told her he’ll probably be seeing her again and then drove off. She didn’t notice the sausages resting on the side of the well, tightly packed in plastic, until the car was no longer visible on the horizon.

Cricket ignored the sausages for the time being and continued pumping water. She closed her eyes and shivered with delight as she let the cold prairie wind strike at her pores. She smelled the cold, sharply faint, golden smell of barley, soil, and wind. And then she imagined the man driving off to see her father, asking him if he could take his daughter with him to be his wife. At first,

her father would refuse. And then the man would offer some unspeakably large sum of money. In real life, her father would still refuse but for the sake of the fantasy, he gives in. The man would take her to his house and they would wander around the house awkwardly, not knowing what to do with each other. And then one day she would gingerly start taking off her clothes, pretending not to know he was watching her, and then he would be unable to contain himself after all this time. The rest, of course, would follow the laws of nature.

Cricket opened her eyes. Everything around her was black and yellow, the parched grass interspersed with wet tree branches that had fallen on the ground, the fast-moving clouds overhead. Fantasies were enough for her. If these fantasies ended up being true, she'd be frightened. She didn't mind pumping water, planting rice, putting on dirty clothes, and tying her hair instead of washing it. There was nothing else for her to do, and there was nothing wicked about it. She was just waiting for time to go by, so that she could die, childless and therefore guiltless. Then she could be reborn as something more convenient for annihilation. And then soon the world would disappear and the insignificant would become nonexistent. And then she thought of all the people who would accuse her of being an unhappy person, and then she rolled her eyes at them.

Cricket put the sausages behind her shoes to show that they were hers. She slid the door closed, rolled back to the mattress, and nestled against her sister for warmth.

### **Lighter Than a Corpse**

Cricket watched glumly one morning as her sister, Myo, wrapped all of her belongings in a single wool blanket and tied the ends into a knot, using the

knot as a makeshift handle. It had already been decided the night before, the arrangement. Cricket's father, a widower, had arranged to send two of his children – Sovan, because he was the youngest and the cutest, and Myo, because she was the second youngest as well as the best cook in the family – to his brother's house where he could raise them with his wife.

This woman, married for three years and unable to produce a child, was an embittered and hopeless woman who was always in the same state of being every winter whenever Cricket and her siblings passed by their uncle's thatched-roofed house on their weekly five-mile walk to the market: always with her forehead, nose and mouth covered with pieces of cloth to shield against the cold, her body stiff and thick-looking from layers of brightly colored jackets. She would squint at Cricket and her siblings from behind the wooden fence, the skin around her eyes dry and angry-looking. Cricket and her siblings had decided that underneath all those layers of cotton, the woman had turned into nothing else but knotted wood during the winter, that the eyes became part of a mask.

The two children's exodus would reestablish a much-needed balance within the family: Cricket's father was wifeless but saddled with five children with enormous appetites; his brother had a wife but no children. Cricket and her two other brothers watched from the wooden veranda as their sister and baby brother faded into the cold distance with bundles hanging from their mittened hands. Then the three of them went back in, Cricket closing the screen behind them with a single fluid movement of the arm.

Nobody visited Myo and Sovan for a month. Cricket's father said it would be offensive to his brother if they visited too soon, because it would imply that the husband and wife were doing a bad job. Cricket and the rest of the siblings

were far too afraid of the woolen woman anyway. So when Cricket next saw her brother and sister, it was when she was walking along the gravel path to the market, carrying a bundle of embroidered dishcloths. Not that she nor anyone in her family could possibly benefit from selling such a useless item, but there were so few things to do during winter and now that there were fewer mouths to feed. Depressedly, Cricket had sat by the low wooden dining table for weeks and sewn twenty of them by candlelight, throwing them aside with disgust after her fingers began to stiffen. Rest was a curse, because laziness was a result from it and laziness was like a disease. It immobilized the body, made the mind rabid with useless thoughts, and created unnatural cravings for more and more rest time, more hours to the day.

She heard the swallows chirping up in the bare branches and allowed the cold breeze, the last of the season, to sweep over her pores, remove the feeling of dirtiness that came from yesterday's dust, and cleanse her lungs. She passed by her uncle's yard and this time, the woolen woman was not there. Seized with an opportunism that only comes to those contaminated with the germ of overactive lethargy, she entered the yard and walked across it. The seams of her dignity and efficiency had been slowly undoing themselves throughout the past two months, and it all mounted up to this: she stepped onto the porch and, suddenly fearing that the wrapped woman would appear, she decided to walk around the house to the back.

Her sandals made tapping sounds against the closely packed soil as she walked through the narrow opening between the house and the fence, a few chickens surrounding her and creating a halo of noises around her moving feet. The clouds overhead were sparse and looked like white paint scraped against the

sky with a knife. And then she saw a thin stream of smoke emerging from somewhere in the back porch. Something smelled strange, something too unfamiliar to be foul. As she rounded the corner, she saw that the string of smoke came from a tiny bonfire, just outside the threshold of a sliding door, which was opened just a crack. Out of the crack poked out a tiny pale hand, which held a tiny lizard pierced by a tiny stick, held over the flames. All four objects – the flame, the lizard’s carcass, the hand, and the stick – all amounted to something that closely resembled a photographed moment but suddenly, as if the hand had somehow detected Cricket’s presence, it withdrew and a number of high-pitched murmurings ensued from the narrow opening of the door.

“Myo! Sovan!” Cricket shouted as she rammed in through the door like an angry animal. There, sitting in a small square room with no furnishing except for the straw mats on the floor, were her sister, hugging her knees together in a corner, and her little brother, his former plumpness already gone. It was he who was roasting the lizard.

Later on, they would try to console her, telling her that she had caught them at a bad moment, that Uncle had in reality been giving them handfuls of rice, but it was inevitable that Cricket’s family should fly into an uproar the likes of which they had not seen since the death of Cricket’s mother. The weight of the incident deserved it. The uproar lasted for a month, even after the two siblings were regained, fed, and nursed back to health. It was discovered that the wooden aunt was simply ill in the head. According to the two siblings, she would beat them with a broom, but that was the least fearful thing about her. When she beat them, they noticed an absence of anger, of any emotion in fact, on her face. But to Cricket’s father, it hardly mattered what her motives were. He dragged the

woman out by the hair while the neighbors looked at her and jeered, once they knew why she deserved it. Even after everyone calmed down and went on with their lives, she walked to Cricket's house, knelt in front of the porch, and begged for forgiveness, knotted hair streaming down both sides of her pale face, strange to see because she was wearing nothing but a white slip. It was strange to see her without all her layers of wool in this kind of weather, her appearance thin and raw. No one felt sorry for her. The woman's voluntary penance was what confused Cricket the most.

Although her husband claimed to have taken no part in abusing his niece and nephew, he received a good beating from Cricket's father and never heard from him again. Cricket's father had a reputation for valuing his family. After his wife died, he refused to take another wife, stubbornly certain that any stepmother would abuse his children. Anyone could be wrong in the head these days, which the rest of the village was just starting to realize. Instead, he would spend several days out of town, occasionally bringing home a mistress and kicking her out in the morning before she had a chance to see his children. For this reason, Cricket equated his promiscuity with virtue and fatherly love.

As for the dishonored uncle, he soon died a few months later when his heart stopped beating. They said that his body was found on the floor of that same back room where his niece and nephew had been cooped up for month. They also said that when they carried his body out of the house to be cremated, his corpse was surprisingly light, and could be easily carried with one arm. That was because when he died and lost his warmth, all the fleas in his hair ran away, leaving him empty. In death, not even the fleas wanted to be near him. Cricket

considered herself too smart to believe half of what the villagers said, but she didn't forget any of it.

### **Baby**

Many years later, Cricket put both her daughters to sleep and then massaged her husband's shoulders while he sat on the bed. Through her fingertips, she could feel the humidity on her husband's shirt, hovering somewhere between the realms of dry and sweaty. The bed felt that way too. It was a cheap bed, the post unattached to the rest and made of plastic that was supposed to imitate the appearance of pink marble. The tiles on the floor were not real tiles, but one enormous sheet of vinyl with tiles painted on it, tiles of red, blue, and peach. Behind the lace curtains were iron bars attached to the window frames to keep the robbers out. The iron bars joined to form a grid of diamonds and squares, creating a pattern that was so beautiful that Cricket had to draw it on a sheet of toilet paper, which she would take it to America. Along with the blue night breeze came the sounds of life – cars and mopeds honking, the electric wires sizzling, the murmuring of millions of quiet sounds combined.

It was the third week of July, the hottest time of the year. While her husband put the babies down for a nap, Cricket packed all the eating utensils, bowls, and cups inside a box which they planned to give to a neighbor. She paused and looked out at her garden. Baby was running around on the cobblestones. As he ran, the leash, which was clipped to his collar, was dragging behind him. When he saw Cricket, he stopped, breathless, and walked over to the glass door, licking it and pawing at the latch. His brownish-gold fur bristled with health and his eyebrows stuck out, oddly and endearingly, above his round black eyes.

Her husband sat down next to her and lit a cigarette. It was a habit that he had recently picked up, a habit which Cricket found distasteful.

“My brother should be here with his truck any minute,” she said to him.

“What? Why did you call your brother? It’s not safe for him to be in the city.”

“To pick up Baby.”

She never felt the full force of the idea until she saw the tears in her husband’s eyes. Of course Baby couldn’t go with them. No one would allow a dog on a boat full of refugees. There was barely enough room for human passengers. Cricket knew that if she opened the door, Baby would jump all over her and then she would start crying at the idea of leaving him here. And then Baby would know something was wrong. But if she didn’t open it and turned away, Baby would be confused by her sudden coldness. She reached for the latch.

“No, don’t open it,” her husband said. “He’ll know something’s wrong.”

“I don’t believe in deception. Not even when it comes to deceiving an animal,” she said, unhooking the latch and sliding the door open.

Later, when her brother Sovan picked up the leash to take Baby away, the entire neighborhood could hear Baby’s wails and growls. He writhed violently when Sovan tried to hold him, as if he wept with his whole body. Grief made him utterly unrecognizable. So Cricket got into the back of the truck and waited for him. At the sight of her, Baby grew silent, tears in his eyes. He seemed to understand the trick and refused to move. Her husband climbed onto the truck with her. Perhaps Baby was almost convinced, but not fully. Sovan climbed into the driver’s seat and began to drive the truck away, slowly. Finally, Baby relented and, with a big bound, jumped into the truck, after which Cricket

immediately grabbed the end of the leash and tied it to one of the bars that protected the rear window of the truck. Sovan stopped the car so that Cricket and her husband could jump back out. Baby started to follow them, but when he saw that he was tied down at last, he began to howl a song that seemed to encompass all the sorrows of life, so much so that even the neighbors, who had gathered outside to complain, began to listen. Cricket jumped back on the truck and cried into the fur of his neck.

Sovan shrugged. He was a teenager now, but his face retained its radiant charm, like the baby Buddha statues that people placed in their gardens. "What a scene," he said, although it looked like he wanted to cry too.

Baby kept on howling. Later on, Cricket would reflect that Baby was perfectly capable of tearing the leash with his teeth and escaping his captor. Yet something kept him obedient to the will of his masters.

Cricket and her husband stood and watched as Baby's figure slowly got smaller and smaller, until his voice became a soft, resounding echo, Cricket said to her husband, "I bet when that dog dies, he's going to be reincarnated as a king."

The next day, Cricket, her husband, and the twins rode a boat to Batanes Island in the Philippines, and from there they flew on a plane to America. They paid for the trip with the money her husband had earned, with loans from family members. Also, they had sold the shoe repair store, the gold bars which had been part of her husband's dower, as well as the land Cricket had inherited from her father and childless uncle.

Cricket's husband, out of a desire to keep his wife from getting depressed, treated her even better than before, doing most of the packing and carrying;

when they were on the boat and the plane and ultimately for the rest of his life, he fussed over Cricket even more than he did over his own children. But Cricket was stone-faced about the whole affair. “We must save our tears for humanity,” she said.

Soon after arriving in the States, Cricket discovered, in a tearful conversation with Sovan over the phone, that Baby had grown violent and refused to eat. Because Baby had already bitten several people, and because the family could not afford to waste food on a dog that didn’t eat, he had sold Baby to a man who raised dogs for slaughter and consumption.

For many, many years, even by the time they were fully settled into Los Angeles, by the time they had their own place to live and slept in normal American beds, Cricket would sometimes wake up, gasping, in the middle of the night.

“What is it?” her husband would ask, jumping up in fear.

“I heard Baby!”

“What? What are you talking about? Baby died a long time ago!”

“But I heard him howling just outside...”

“Don’t be silly. It’s probably just some next-door dog.”

Cricket vowed that she would never give her heart to a dog again. Every time she saw a dog walking towards her along a sidewalk, she would wrinkle her nose in disgust and step out of the way, just to avoid it. Many more years later, when her grandsons brought home an old dog from the pound, she wouldn’t even go near it. “You’re setting them up for heartbreak, you know that?” she would tell her daughter. “And the smell – you and your kids will smell like dog and you won’t even know it.” Sometimes, her favorite grandson

would tease her, saying, “Grandma, do you like her new perm? We spent over \$50,” referring to the dog. “A dog is a dog! What’s the use?” she would say. That statement – “A dog is a dog!” became a family favorite. Her relatives would use it as a sort of aphorism whenever somebody spent an absurd amount of money on something insignificant. “You paid to get dry cleaning and alterations on that cheap blouse? A dog is a dog!”

### **The Only Paradise is Paradise Lost**

These are all the things that Cricket had wished for, back when she was nineteen years old and crude and worldly enough to wish for things.

First of all, she wished that the well-dressed man would come again. He would set up his shoe repair store in the middle of Cricket’s village, which would offer affordable services to all the villagers – as a result, the local shoemaker would go out of business and everyone in Cricket’s family would be able to afford shoes made out of imported leather, rubber, and synthetic textiles. The shoes would get worn out quickly because the children liked to play soccer near the beach, and Cricket would have to take the shoes to the repair shop. Cricket would play with her siblings more often, to wear her shoes out faster. The well-dressed man wouldn’t always be around because he owned other stores along the coast but whenever he was in town, he always smoked his cigarettes at the same spot, behind a large moss-covered rock facing the ocean. In the mornings, after the kids ran off to do their chores, Cricket would catch him leaning there. He would say that the smoke made him feel like there was a mask enveloping his face.

Their courtship had to happen very quickly because she remembered how one of her friends got beaten by her mother for sneaking out every day to talk to a boy. According to the friend, the two of them never even held each other's hands. Cricket knew her father would never beat her but she was afraid he would beat the well-dressed man or at least chase him out of town. A well-dressed man should never be beaten, at least not in public.

So the marriage would happen very quickly, and after a while, when they saved enough money, they would move to some rich country like America. Of course, they would be poor compared to everybody else living there, but they would make do. The two of them, along with their children, would drive around the city, cleaning rich people's houses. The work would be hard, but they would do it as a family. She would have a son named Arun, which meant "morning sun," and a daughter named Maya, named after the Satya Buddha's mother.

Also, by this time, nobody would call her Cricket anymore. They wouldn't call her by her real name either, because it was sacred. She would have to come up with a new name by that point. Cricket was frustrated that she couldn't think of a good one yet, to fit in with her fantasy.

As for home, she would hardly miss it, except for one thing: sewing clothes and blankets while sitting around a fire at the beach in the middle of the night with the other unmarried women, telling stories. When the wind was high, they would play a game where the women would hold a large piece of cloth by the edges; then they would flap it as violently as they could. The winners were whoever held onto it longest with both hands.

After many years, the well-dressed man would die, leaving a small sum of money behind. Cricket would live the rest of her life keeping a garden, giving alms, and buying nice dinners for people she cared about.

At the same time, Cricket wished that none of the above would actually happen.