

Cicada Dreams

I could say that Jake was my childhood boyfriend, but that wouldn't really be accurate. Jake was more like a cicada, turning up every three or four years without warning, making a lot of noise and then disappearing.

The last time Jake appeared it was a scalding summer day with overcast clouds threatening rain. I was making deep-dish pizzas at Caffé Florian's sauna of a kitchen. *Why do Chicagoans insist on eating doughy pizza when it's hot?* Beppi, the squat owner who wore white aprons artistically splattered with pizza sauce, came back with that look of his, brows bunched up over his dark eyes.

"There's a fellow out there who says he needs to see ya?" He stood crossing his arms over his Picasso drizzle.

"Yeah?"

"He's got a *gee-tar*," Beppi said, stretching his neck as far as he could to appear taller. Tufts of curly hair sprouted along his neckline.

"Uh-uh. Don't know anybody like that."

"What I told him. Says you went to school together. *High school.*"

When I pushed open the swinging door to the dark, cool, dining room, I thought of all those other dark, cool places we had been: the laundry closet at a party, the backseat of his car in the museum parking lot, the seedy hotels on 47th Street when he was passing through on a gig. I remembered sitting at dusk at the pond near Jackson Park, waiting for Jake's baseball games to end. Afterwards, he smelled of cut grass and talcum powder. Dirt had collected in the crevices of his elbows and in the creases under his eyes.

It had been three years since we had last seen each other. Since then, there'd been stray appearances around the holidays that people reported to me breathlessly. My mother once saw him at the Co-op picking up milk and bread for his mother. They spoke briefly. He told her to tell me hello. But I never saw him. Not once. Not in three years. Not even a phone call.

And yet, there he was—slouching against the dark, piney paneling, his guitar case at his feet. Seeing him reminded me of the image I'd been clinging to all those years: the Lake Michigan eyes, the twisted, teasing smile, the innocent freckles scattered on his nose like specks of dirt, making him look more like a child than a man.

But what stood before me was definitely a man, at least the shell of one.

I hugged him. He smelled of cheap cologne, something he'd splashed on his neck instead of showering. I directed him to a table. He pulled along an Army duffel and his guitar case.

“So what brings you to town?”

“Well, I wanted to see you.”

“Me? After all these years?” It felt strange to have his full attention, to have him looking at me across the table, waiting on me. I had always felt so ancillary in his life. I had been the one waiting on him, for the few moments he could spare, waiting for him to show up, waiting for years.

“Well you graduated, right?” he said.

“How'd you know that?”

“I keep up.”

“I'm waiting for my real life to materialize. I can't seem to find a job. What are *you* doing these days?”

He looked down at the table, turned up his lips and shook his head. “Not much.” He was thin and angular in that way that looks attractive only on musicians and his hands twitched like he’d drunk too much coffee. He rubbed his eyes, his skin slowly filling with color as if he were materializing into human form from the ghost-man of my past.

“When you done here?” he asked, barely moving his lips as he spoke.

“Soon. You got plans?”

“I was hoping I could hang with you.” He reached across the table and trickled his fingers on top of mine. “Maybe we could go to a bar? I really need a drink.”

We walked down the street, me in my kakis and sweaty T-shirt, and Jake in his jeans, cowboy boots and long-sleeved shirt with fringes, his guitar case strapped across his back. We’d stashed the duffel at the restaurant, but Jake wouldn’t part with his guitar. In the sunlight, I could see him better. His face was boney. The rims of his eyes were red. Around his neck, hung the charm of a clenched fist, its palm scooped to hold something tiny. *But what?*

He’d insisted on hitting a certain bar on Stony Island, a dive on its last legs where old blues players liked to go to riff. The temperature on the Hyde Park Bank sign read 98 degrees. Jake said he was craving a beer. But when we got there, he ordered a Coke. An Eric Clapton song came on the jukebox, and when I mumbled along, Jake gave me a hard look.

“Do you know what you’re singing?”

“Yeah. Sure. ‘Cocaine.’ ”

He ran his fingers through his dirty blond hair, stringy and past his shoulders. His eyes held a vacant look. The freckles had faded to mere specks. He fingered the fist around his neck and opened his lips to speak, then shook his head. Whatever it was, I knew it was bad. I wanted him not to say it. I swallowed hard, and looked away.

Jake and I first kissed at my best friend Emma's fourteenth birthday party. She'd invited kids from our ninth grade class along with her boyfriend, Jake, a junior. We were playing the Kissing Game in the basement while a boom box blasted in the corner, a heavy beat arousing our curiosity. In Emma's version of the game, "losers" didn't kiss each other if they rolled the lowest dice; instead, they spent five minutes in the laundry room, presumably where they could do much more than kiss.

I'd lucked out on several throws, but then I rolled a two and Jake's dice landed on a single dot. My throat swelled and my ears throbbed, as if someone had cranked up the music. The guys whooped, throwing their fists in the air. Emma pursed her lips and shot me a look, reminding me where my loyalties lay.

Jake and I slunk off to the laundry room; he shut the door tentatively. When he turned around, the thumping in my ears grew louder. We stood between baskets of clothes, the pungent smell of detergent hung in the air. Clean sheets, strung on a clothes line, cloaked us in darkness.

We were so close that I could smell the cologne behind his ears. His breath tickled my skin. I wondered if he felt the same ache that I had been hiding for months. He brushed aside a stray hair from my face and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close. His fingers tugged at the loops at the back of my jeans. I could hear the pounding from the speakers in the next room: The energy of the music, the rush of the moment, pulsated through me.

Jake's lower lip pressed against mine, like a tease—a promise of what was to come. And just as I was about to return his kiss, a bright light flooded our eyes. We quickly parted.

"What are you two doing in here?" Emma asked, pulling aside the sheets.

"Just talking," Jake said, his voice cracking.

She wrapped her arms around Jake's neck as if I didn't exist. They began kissing—big, sloppy kisses.

I watched, immovable, raw with envy.

Jake and I spent that next year staring at each other across crowded rooms, bumping into each other in hallways and at parties, as if by accident. I could tell by the way he looked at me—how his eyes remained a little longer than they should have—that he wondered, too: What would we have been like together?

The summer after he graduated, I spotted him at a movie in the park. He was hanging out with his friends on a blanket and waved for me to join them. I remember lying there, our hips and shoulders touching, feeling the heat of his body. In the middle of the movie, as his friends were laughing and the movie sound system screeched, he rolled over and kissed me. It was as if we were back in that laundry closet, in our own private darkness, fulfilling what Emma had interrupted. And some part of me knew that I had to pay attention, I had to remember the soft force of his lips and the way his chest felt pressed against mine.

Soon afterwards, Jake and I began meeting up after softball games in Jackson Park, making out in his car. I remember tasting the salt from the sweat on his skin, imagining how good it would feel to go “all the way,” but pulling back at the last moment, clinging to some vision of myself as “the good girl.” I sensed he was holding back, too, afraid to hurt me, knowing there was too much at stake with a girl barely fifteen.

After we left the dive bar, Jake and I went to my apartment. I was nervous about being alone with him, why I wasn't sure. He just didn't seem the same anymore. We sat on the couch

drinking beer. The air-conditioner was belching warm air. I was sweating but Jake seemed cold. He pulled me beside him and wrapped his arm around me. I'd forgotten how sensual he could be, touching my face lightly with his fingertips, whispering as his mouth hovered over my eyes, my cheeks. I smelled like dough and sausage from the Caffe and was aching to take a shower. But Jake insisted that I wait. He said he had something to tell me.

"Baby," he whispered. "Wouldn't it be great if we were always together?" He pressed his lips lazily against mine, not a kiss but a marriage of lips, and held them there gently. I started to pull away.

"Baby, don't you want me? Didn't you miss me? Weren't you pining for me?"

"I thought you'd moved on. You were over me."

He laughed. "How could I ever get over you? You were my first love."

"What about Emma?"

"Who?"

"My friend, *your girlfriend?*"

"She was no one. You, I thought of all the time." He stroked my hair, whispering. "God, I wanted you in the worst way. But I couldn't do that to you. You were too young."

I didn't know what to say. It was as if I had awakened from one of my dreams. But those were the dreams of a young girl. I felt a nagging. Something didn't quite make sense. I pushed it aside, wanting to live in that moment.

He got down on his knees, and held my hand. "I want us to get married. I want us to be together forever." It was a prophesy, not a proposal.

I was stunned. I started crying. He took that as a yes.

The next day, all he did was sleep, eventually waking in a sweat. I made him soup but he wasn't interested, just rolled over and pulled up the covers. The following morning he was more affectionate, pulling me onto the couch amid his cool sheets, pecking me with kisses, speaking in that low murmuring voice that wilted my reserve.

“We're going to be together,” he promised. “And we're going to have a family.”

All I could think about was the Jake I'd known long ago, the guy in high school whose teasing blue eyes could make my stomach flutter with a stray glance, whose trailing scent of musk I inhaled like an aphrodisiac. I'd memorized each facet of his face from our brief summer romance and could picture his sandy lashes, the recesses in his potato-colored skin, even the milky scar under his jaw. I had spent so many nights thinking of him as I lay in bed, kissing my pillow as if it were his lips.

And there he was, all mine, stretched out before me on the couch. I could have as much of him as I wanted. And he wanted me. Forever, he'd said. How could I not fall for that? How could I not give in? He still looked much the same. Cocaine had preserved his leanness. But there was something different about him, something elusive. And those eyes, once brimming with confidence, seemed vacuous, as if their essence had been drained.

He rolled on top of me, and I could feel his erection between my thighs. He held my hands above my head and pushed himself against me. My stomach quivered as he pulled off my nightgown. He laid me down like a fragile doll. His fingers gently caressed between my legs. All the while his lips traveled down my body, pulling my skin, leaving little hickey marks that I wouldn't see until I stood before the mirror the next morning—pink dots scattered along my collar bone, my breasts, my stomach, as if he'd meant to mark me as his own.

“Are you still a virgin?” he whispered.

I smiled. I wanted him to believe it.

His eyes tracked mine and if I tried to look away, he brought them back. He grasped my hands and held them at our sides while he moved in and out, slowly. It was like he was making love to my mind, more than my body. But my body felt it, trembled, shuddered. Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes. Jake panted and then collapsed on top of me, holding me tightly. I wondered if he was ever going to let go. For a minute I didn't hear him breathing and feared he was dead, as if cocaine had irreparably damaged his heart. But then he gasped and laughed and kissed me.

We lay there a long while, enthralled, and I wished then that it would never end. How I wanted him, and for a fleeting moment I would have moved anywhere, joined any roaming band of groupies just to share a fraction of his life. But when I tried to imagine what that life might look like, it was all a vast grayness, a fog of uncertainty.

On the third day, I cut Jake's long, tawny locks. I sat him on a chair in the kitchen like a little boy, draped him with a beach towel, then snipped his long strands, tapering his hairline to the back of his neck. The thin, fly-away hairs scattered about the floor in clumps and speckled my skin. Some stray strands floated in the air and clung to my damp skin, coating my body, as if I had rolled around with some gigantic shedding cat. Weeks later, I'd find stray hairs in the strangest places, caught in the clasp of a necklace, in the crevices between my toes.

After a week, Jake's hands stopped shaking, his eyes were clearer and his feet didn't constantly tap the floor. He'd been there before, he admitted, on the doorstep of sobriety, as he called it. But he'd always gone back. He was certain that with me, he wouldn't. We could have a life together, he said. He could form a band in Chicago. I wanted to believe him. But neither of us had considered how the ambition of a young woman trumps the lusts of a young girl. As much

as I wanted him, I didn't want my life to revolve around any man, particularly one so unstable. And I had a longing desire to experience life *out there*, beyond the confines of Hyde Park, as if life were some foreign country I had to visit.

We never argued about him leaving. Even parting we strove to keep our dream of each other pure. We didn't want to taint it with bickering. He said he knew I just wasn't ready, implying that someday I would be. I quietly cried and he held me. He was sober. I had given him that much. He picked up his big duffel and strapped his guitar across his chest and walked out of the apartment.

The desk clerk at the Central Arms Hotel found his body. The University police report I read years later questioned whether his death was a suicide. He'd camped out at the hotel immediately after leaving my apartment, using the money he'd saved for my engagement ring for one last binge. He partied for days with a slew of strangers in and out of his room. The coroner said he'd been dead for three days. Of course, I had thought about Jake during those three days. I had dreamt about him, these vivid dreams. And, now, like a cicada, every so often, he arrives in my sleep to continue our life together.