

The Last Cicadas

(word count: 2270)

Ledger steps out of the elevator and into a brightly lit hallway that smells of iodine and instant mashed potatoes. He knows his wife is in one of the identical rooms lining the corridor, unaware of the circus of beeps and dings from heart monitors and ventilators. Walking briskly past the open doors, he spots her shoes, placed underneath a visitor's chair, and enters her room. Earlier, before she slipped into the quiet, she had wretched and sworn as her own muscles betrayed her. And then, only the stillness was left—the inertia of an old woman's body, stripped of the softness of its wool cardigan, a neat burgundy bundle on the table beside the bed. He is disturbed by the smirk stretched rudely across her ballooned cheeks. Her eyes are open, tiny marbled mirrors, her hair a net of wire on the cold, creaseless white pillowcase.

Stamped letters flutter through the mail slot in their dozens, a plague of offerings and warnings. The coma is a meditation for Ledger—a stillness in the chaos of his desires. It is an unsettling type of peace. He shifts around the dozen half-empty cartons of Lo Mein in the fridge, scavenging without hunger, tempted instead by the mini forest of wire handles.

Ledger is a Caribbean man in his mid-sixties with the posture of a hat stand. No crow's feet, just liver spots. Only a handful of belly laughs in the latter years, but he has kept his deadpan cynicism towards life, and women. Very good friends do their best to ignore him when he is too sharp, while the rest

get bored and eventually leave. Having signed over the deed to the house, he has not felt the need to say much of anything—even to his kids, who have in any case avoided him since he returned from his second family in Florida. Squatting on the walkway in front of 175 Rensselaer Road, he uses both hands to part the yellowing grass. He has checked for dead patches every morning since the drought was announced two months ago. It is 6:28 am, and the August air in northern New Jersey is already thick with heat.

On each parched area of the lawn, he pours a small pitcher of water, careful not to exceed the daily limits proscribed by the county-wide ration. Large-scale water purchases are not legally prohibited, but recently, scowls at the local supermarket tills have prompted him to cross county lines for his water. Last week, he ended up all the way over in Parsippany. It does virtually nothing to help the grass, he knows. Only a hose will do any good. He still wears the button-ups he wore before retiring from the architectural firm.

Today, the instrument in his breast pocket is a pencil stub, yesterday it was a box cutter. A filling has fallen from his upper right molar, and his tongue tends to the space. Dew has formed this morning. In just a few hours, he will lose another valuable thing.

The saplings along the side of the house survived the snows, and after the early rains, they shot up taller than Ledger, himself a beanstalk. He rustles each shoot, gently. Brownie, an obese Chihuahua, loses interest in this ritual inspection of fauna and bobbles off into the backyard toward the graveyard of discarded bones, poking from the earth like rotting teeth. Tomato vines once grew here, from the throats of anthills. With his hooked nose pressed to a wisp of a trunk, he holds his breath and studies the soft new bark. Behind his

wire-rimmed glasses are dark planets, heavy with rings, fixed to register the infinitesimal daily growth of trees.

On most mornings, after his gardening inspection, he retreats into the basement, where the walls are crowded with his amateur photography—close shots of hummingbirds on flowers and other kitsch. He lets his eyes lose focus and swim around in the frames, feet propped up on the sofa's arm, his body remembering the curve of the hammock in Florida where his girlfriend lives with her two small boys. He has left them to wait while he tends to his house and its inhabitants. Velma and the boys will be there when he returns, the boys taller, plumper and more astute, their faces rescued from the humiliating formlessness of his poor recollection.

This year, the cicadas have emerged. They are the cracking of a thousand tiny helicopters, invisible save for a few exhibitionists. Their chatter accordions back and forth under the leafy suburban tunnel that envelops Rensselaer Road until night-time smothers them and the crickets take their place, with their gentle croaking. Most nights, Ledger lays on the sofa in front of the fish tank with a rum and Coke, in the company of two small groupers, and after his drink, he unwittingly imitates the fish, puckering and popping his lips until he falls asleep.

On this morning, as the dog un-buries the dead, Ledger spots several nymphs poking through the grass and inching toward the big oak tree. The last time they surfaced, his eldest son was at university, and this particular tree has since eaten a table-sized chunk of the road. Some of the cicadas have not made it up the trunk and have moulted instead on its thick roots. Others shed

their armour on the sidewalk before disappearing into the leaves to begin the symphonics. The march to the canopy only lasts a day, and after, hollow matchbox ghosts are left frozen in the hundreds, a mausoleum of cellophane on the bark, identical bulbs crunching on the pavement.

Standing at the oak moments later, he studies the shells that have not been picked off by gullible birds or shattered by local kids for the reward of an irresistible pop. He picks off three tiny sculptures, slowly, unhooking each spiny leg with his pencil. In the ample cage of his fingers, the shells travel to the kitchen, where he has laid out newspaper, a thin paintbrush and a tin of shellac. This is where he will painstakingly dust, seal and mount the creatures to a thick slab of scrap wood, polished and restored. The slab was meant for remounting the row of wooden elephants that travelled with him from Jamaica in a suitcase and now languishes in the foyer on a cracked driftwood boomerang. By the morning he will have installed three identically dark, shiny afterlives of blown glass in the bay window, overlooking the oak.

It was long ago that he began to shellac bugs. His daughter recollects. The scene she paints is one of silhouettes. From the top of the long street, she says, the ambulance driver sees the outline of the tall, lanky man, holding a limp bundle of arms and legs. He switches the siren off and emergency lights flower in the wake. Ledger strains beneath the weight of his teenage nephew, with the neatly packed Afro and the ear slick with blood, slung over his shoulder like a bag of mulch. Sparks crack against the chrome of the motorbike, crumpled nearby.

Those long, nimble fingers, a chunky ring floating above a stern knuckle, clasp into position. He is as still as a sorcerer, holding together Dayle's broken head, like the force of friction or whatever impossible physics was holding together the cracked terra cotta pots on doorsteps all along the block, pale roots licking through the fissures. Those elegant extensions of him, of them, a sculpture of hands around the soft stringy spill of brains, and like magic, not a trickle is lost to the street. He does not know how long he has stood there after the ambulance has driven off, in the sea of dry leaves, dozens of tiny red roads mapped onto his palm. He does not know why he stays. His daughter's voice drifts off.

His wife at the time of the motorcycle incident, a pianist among other things, loves Chopin and wears a maroon cardigan. Later, when a stroke splinters her mind, her wine-coloured uniform helps her recognise herself in mirrors and photos. Once a week, a small van pulls up beneath the oak tree, and a corpulent usher patiently helps her into the van and buckles her in. She returns a few hours later with a ceramic coffee mug or sugar bowl with her initials carved crudely into the base, and her shoulders and wrists are lighter. In this way, she relieves her longing for the keys. She covets her husband's long fingers, before and after her own crash, and as she folds the wet clay, a distant tune slips behind her ear and around her neck like a ribbon.

She still visits the house, from time to time. Once, she was seen, wearing a dressing gown, descending the stairs to the basement pantry. She may have wanted to cook something, her grandson thought as he held his breath, having kissed her forehead at the wake. Another time, she broke a door

hinge and pulled the curtains down from above the kitchen sink. She had never liked them—doors or curtains.

“Wait, I apologise, that can’t be right,” his daughter says. “He actually begins to preserve insects much earlier—cicadas, and beetles, too.” She says that Dayle is not the one he holds. Dayle dies, yes, but on another road, alone, not clasped in the architecture of his uncle’s fingers. This is a memory harvested and transplanted out of place, she thinks as she struggles to revise, flicking through scenes like pages from a familiar novel. There is a motorcycle crash. The lanky man, his wife and his four young children witness it while piled into a station wagon on their way from New Jersey to the 1967 Expo in Canada. Her memory is the lapping of a tidal river, the teasing, slow recovery of a dream. The rider slides off his bike and onto the motorway, and his helmet becomes unfastened. The lanky man clamps his skull together with those giant palms and fingers until paramedics arrive. She immediately forgets which memories these have displaced as she watches her father in the film she has scripted.

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Sometimes school children, to learn to fathom the passage of time, are asked to mock up an official looking document—say, a constitution—and soak it in a shallow pan of tea for thirty minutes, after which they must hang it to dry. The result is a yellow page with very little dexterity. All his children will crinkle and stain their memories, in spirits or strong black coffee tipped back in a blur of night shifts. In Kingston, in Kolkata, and in Harlem, like in Teaneck, the lanky man creeps in through the nostrils and lingers there, behind the eyes. He

inhabits his children, burned-out shells. It is that earthy haunt of freshly shorn grass and petrol, rising off the hot motorways. Sandalwood, lifted by the chemical citrus of shaving balm, curried goat sitting in the curtains, charred crust on the grilling grate, the warmth of liquor and skin and hair—they are all different notes of the same smell. He is in every garage, the greasy tins and human sweat, rusting nails, oil changes, worn baseball caps, and lawnmowers clogged with clumps of last year's grass. He is the wiry cherry tree in the backyard, that dark and putrid scaffolding; he is the musky bark of the oak, its brutal tentacles peeling up the asphalt like plywood.

In the dry heat of the drought, the bark of the oak flakes off in fat chunks. The trunk looks as though it has been decorated in the patchwork style of a quilt or installed as an expressionist design feature on this otherwise unremarkable street. These are Ledger's final few nights in the house. As a condition of the sale, the oak tree is to be cut down, as it constitutes a hazard, its roots determined by the building surveyor to be *freakishly aggressive*.

Ledger agreed to this condition, because he had no choice. He knows that when the giant thing is cut, and the road and sidewalk repaired, and the house painted, and the natural grass replaced with rolls of carpet turf, then all the colours will blur. His years as an architect, his wife and neighbours, his dog and the tomatoes, the bay windows will find no anchor in his mind, and what is left of his garden will perish.

"Why are you still watering the grass, dad, leave it. It's not your problem if it all dies," his son says, irritably, as he sweeps an armful of paper Chinese food cartons out of the fridge and into a trash bag. They had all loved one another

in this house. Ledger sucks his teeth as he carefully paints the final coat of varnish onto the shells.

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During the night, as the cicadas are drying and setting, he will moult. His children will not forget it. A bitter family row will leave the glass table shattered on its driftwood frame, sending one son to walk the streets in frustration and another to gather up the diamonds. He will speak, but his feigned British accent will break like a wave. His kids, in their thirties, will stop chewing and talking. He will sing about a lemon drop, his furrows will smooth, his brows will dance and his eyes will melt and wash down his face like ash. His elbows will turn and his neck release. Those who remain will watch him drink and sweat, the changeling, rounded notes floating like jaggery from behind his shoulder blades.