

CICADAS ON THE PRARIE

BY ANJEL GARCIA

MY friend and I used to head to this big field over the hills at the end of our neighborhood. He found it when we were in middle school, and not long after, he showed me. He forced me to close my eyes as we walked through the path he haphazardly made; he kept it as a surprise for my birthday. We had this kind of unspoken oath that we would never bring anyone else but ourselves here. I love those types of things; shared moments that could only be cherished by your eyes and mine. It gave a certain warmth in my heart like no other memory could.

We went to this spot near a grand tree and would often camp near it when we wanted to be together. My friend, he would bring all sorts of different games and materials for us to mess around with. He brought wooden planks, nails, and a hammer with some rope, and we managed to build two swings on both sides of the tree. He had this huge plan for a treehouse overlooking the prairie, and always told me about how cool it would be to have a spot of our own. I loved every one of his

ideas. More often than not we just laid down in the sun, playing board games or talking to each other about whatever was on our minds while he smoked his cigarettes. Eventually we had a whole ensemble of random things: a guitar lying on the easel with an endearingly poor landscape painting, planks and rope scattered around, and a campfire with a pan on it and plates with half eaten chicken and crumbs of rice on it.

Around halfway into the summer after our senior year of high school, we realized that cicadas had completely taken over the prairie. We would see them flock over everything we left, and when I got rid of them, they would appear the next day, taking up more space than before. I was deathly afraid of bugs, you see; I would bring a broom so I could brush them away from all my stuff. My friend never liked how I did this. He didn't say anything, of course, but he always made a sort of uncomfortable face when he saw me carelessly knock all the cicadas off the guitar. I remember how he would let each cicada on to his hand, lowering them from the swing set one by one without a care of how inefficient it was. I would watch him do this while sitting on my swing—which was cicada-free already—and once he was finished he would see me and turn a little red. Then he'd smoke another cigarette.

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One day we were cooking food in the middle of the night on the pan we stole from his parents. I can't really remember why, but I was in such an irritated mood that day. I think it was one of those days where nothing goes your way. But what had happened was that a cicada had unknowingly gotten one pace too close to our food. I, out of some anger and desperation to have control of anything that day, stepped on the cicada with my worn-out boot. As if my lust for power wasn't already apparent, I decided to twist my boot left and right so that this cicada knew its place in the world. I don't think I've ever seen my friend as angry as he was that day. He stood up and asked me, "What the fuck was that for?"

What little empathy I had for the cicada at the time went away as he asked this, being steadily replaced by the growing animosity I had for my friend. I defended myself the best I could, but I lost sight of what I was arguing for. I ended up saying a lot more than I should have. After some back and forth, I stood up yelling, "I don't care about whatever this stupid fucking bug was actually trying to do, I'm not going to let it infect our food and I'm definitely not going to hold its gross

ass body like I'm some new generation saint who lets bugs walk over *our* fucking food you self-righteous bitch." I didn't mean any of that. I hope he trusted me enough to know that.

I don't remember what he told me after that. I never liked thinking about it, since I already knew that everything I was saying beforehand was bullshit. But to face myself and my own selfish, arrogant stupidity, is a hard thing to do. At one point, he threw his half-smoked cigarette on the floor and stomped the glowing light down exactly like I had. That uneasy feeling in my stomach turned into a violent frenzy; my vision shook and I had to look away from his beet red face so I could compose myself. But to be honest, I had begun feeling so detached from it all, detached from his words and the world around me, and before I knew it I was on my own planet. At that moment I was in an odd sanctuary of peace, one I felt that was fortified against any form of deterrence or unnecessary distraction from the world which I once was a part of. I saw the world as if I were in space; I was not there, and I could not be touched.

It was probably the third or fourth cough that pulled me away from this unreal detachment I had felt. Once I looked

back at him, I saw him on his knees unable to stand up, and I immediately went to help him. He shook uncontrollably, and had violent muscle spasms every time he coughed. I offered him my support, letting him hold my shoulders as he coughed in my chest. Once it was over, he slowly lifted his head from my bloodied shirt and locked his eyes on me. His lips were red, and so were his eyes. Both parts of him quivered with a unique fear that I had never felt in him.

I hiccupped. Then I vomited.

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My friend told me about what had happened after I left him in the hospital a week after everything had happened. I actually visited him during that week, but he only told me that he was doing well, and that I didn't need to worry. I knew he didn't want to talk yet, so I gave him space. Although, I have to admit that I was worried sick about him for those few weeks. I was haunted by recurring nightmares every day. I was there in the gothic chambers of a dead silent cathedral, disturbed by the tumultuous rings of an ancient bell that sounded in the same pace of those coughs I heard that night. Even after I woke, I still

felt the vibrations from the ringing bells, causing me to feel just that more anxious

After that, he invited me to the prairie again, and told me about it there. He seemed like himself, but just a bit more fragile than usual. A little pale too. I told him that I had thought it was something to do with his smoking habits. He laughed a little weary laugh, and said, "Yeah, that's a good part of it." He sort of looked away from me for a second as if his attention was taken by the beautiful day that it was. And it *was* a beautiful day; the sky was as blue as his eyes were, and the clouds made vine shaped patterns across the sky that wrapped around our bright yellow star.

He lookeazd back at my eyes again.

"I've got cancer. In the lungs."

I hiccupped again. He laughed a little, held me and said, "Okay dude, don't vomit like last time." I laughed a little too, and I hugged him. I felt his eyes bury into mine, and soon enough I felt tears seep into my brown striped t-shirt. I started saying, "Look, I'm sorry for everything... for—" but he cut me

off, said “I know. It’s okay.” He kept on wilting. I stared at the cicadas on the tall grass, but I could not hear their sound. I could not hear anything in fact, except for the slight buzz that the wind brought. I wasn’t even focused on the cicadas. I was simply just not there.

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After that day we hung out like we always had, just more than normal. We began to seriously work on that treehouse we had always wanted to build - it was on his bucket list - and the cancer was never really brought up. He had quit cigarettes, which made him very restless, so he felt more than happy to work on it all day. More often than not we slept at the prairie, and every night we did we would stargaze for an hour or two, talking about our parents, my plans for college, and other things on our minds at the time. He told me it helped him sleep better, since he was having trouble with it at home. We were able to see Jupiter one night, and I pointed it out to him softly and guided his pale finger over to where it was. He said, “That’s where you go to get stupider,” giggling from his own joke. I laughed a warm, blissful laugh. A cicada touched my arm, and I reactively put it around his waist. It stayed there. He stopped

shaking his legs after a bit, and his breath matched my own comfortable pace. I was happy.

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Eventually, his condition worsened to the point where it was beginning to get difficult going over to the prairie. His body was growing weary, and he was now unable to walk long distances on his own; he needed a wheelchair. I cleared the pathway that he created for my birthday so long ago, and made it smooth enough that his wheelchair could safely cross it, with a few arduous moments along the way. He still always wanted to go, and he still had that same laid-back personality that I loved so much, but I could see that life was taking its toll on him. He looked a lot paler, and the coldness of the winter gave him this frightening shiver. We started going less and less, and the world grew a cold, winter’s blue tint. My days started blending in with each other.

On the last day that we went to the prairie together, he wore this light blue crewneck sweater and the crochet hat I made for him (I learnt how to crochet just for that). I asked him if he didn’t want to wear anything warmer, but he insisted that

this was just fine. Throughout the trip towards our usual spot at the prairie, he was awfully quiet. He would nod and respond shortly to whatever I was talking about, but it seemed there was something on his mind that he couldn't shake. I was going to ask about it when we got to the prairie, but we only got halfway through the grass field when he told me to stop pushing his wheelchair in an exasperated tone. I stopped. I asked, "What's wrong?". He just stared off into the distance. I looked around to see anything that was different. The world still had that same winter tint, and I started paying attention to the way my breath was visible. This reminded me of how cold my friend must have been. "Hey, do you really not want my scarf or something—"

There was nobody in the wheelchair.

I looked around in a panic and saw him stumbling through the middle of the prairie, looking frantically with those azurite blue eyes. His walk was unsteady and haphazard, but he kept on moving faster and faster with quickening breaths as if he were a baby taking their first steps. I yelled his name and started chasing him. He did not notice me. He kept on moving faster. Eventually he grew a pace too quick for his poor body, and he stumbled and yelped while falling to the grass bed. I was

quick enough to catch him so that he didn't fall face first into the ground, and I asked him, "What the *fuck* are you doing?" He was breathless and hyperventilating, and the cold crisp of the winter air tore through his fragile lungs like daggers. I cringed at the pain he felt, but he didn't seem to care.

He said through harsh breaths, "Where are they?" I didn't understand.

"What? Who?"

Through even harsher breaths,

"The cicadas...The cicadas..."

I thought to myself, *was this really what he was running around for?* I responded, "You're hurting your whole body just to see some cicadas?" But he did not listen to me. He just kept on asking where they were, where they had gone, where their song was, if they hid from him specifically, if they're gone forever. I did not understand him at all. But I knew this was more than what I thought it was.

"They're gone for the winter," I began. "They...They kind of do that. It gets too cold for them to be able to chirp or fertilize or live. I think. But I do know that they'll be back next summer. And you'll hear their chirps, and you'll see them everywhere in the treehouse that we'll have finished by then. You'll be able to place them gently down to their grassy homes, and they'll repay the favor by singing their song. You'll see them everywhere, and they'll see you in everything, because they love you the way you love them. They want to repay that love you gave them all that time. The cicadas will come back, my friend. They always come back.

His breath began to match my own not so comfortable pace. I was happy.

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I had not been to the prairie since that day for roughly two years. For the longest time I had this idea that if I went back there, I'd regret it for some reason. Those two years were completely and utterly barren. I went to the funeral that happened a month or two later that day. I visit his grave every month and give it a new batch of lilies, which were his

favorite. I frequently talked to people who knew him, who told of his stories with them and of his charming personality that I knew all too well. I never harbored any emotions during those moments other than a dull buzz in my mind. This translated to my friendships with others as well. I was going out to parties and events and hanging out with family, but my mind was sparse and elsewhere at all times. I was never really there. I was never really anywhere. Of course I acted like I was present for everybody to see; I actually thought this was how people did it. Eventually, I thought to myself, I would believe that I was happy and fine. This was how people did it.

Eventually, when I visited my family for the summer, I found myself passing the pathway that me and my friend used two years ago. There was nothing particular about this day. It was pretty much the same as all the other days before this. But there are feelings that cannot be explained. There are feelings that I could not begin to explain to you nor understand why they are. Our minds are an enigma, my mother would often say, and sometimes our feelings have no reason; they just feel right, and that's good enough. Today I felt like going back to the prairie.

I followed the path.

It was overgrown, returned to its former glory before my friend discovered the prairie. I, of course, remembered the way back to our spot. It looked the same as it once had before, just that one of the swings had fallen off the rope, leaving the board lopsided. Must have been the wind, I thought to myself. There were no cicadas. I carried on.

I kept on walking through the prairie. I was subconsciously looking for the cicadas, yet I had not fully realized it yet until I broke out into the very same run that my friend had. I ran around the field until I ran out of breath completely. I let myself fall, then stared into the sky of blue. There was just some unspeakable urge holding me through all of that, guiding my actions and leading me to this very spot. I grew scared, and I honestly thought I was going to lose it here.

But then they came.

I felt a cicada on my arm, and despite every sign my body gave, I kept it still. Then the cicadas came onto my legs, my wool sweater, and my hands, eventually covering my whole

body. Then, one by one, each cicada began singing. They began as a cacophony of sounds, reverberating around the world as if it were all crashing, and I cowered in fear, scrunching my face by the utter tragedy and terror these cicadas were conveying through their blessed bodies. The cicadas songs and clashing rhythms pitted against one another, fighting and arguing and biting and choking until they compromised, understood, accepted and then loved, and I realized then that what was once an undeterred siren of wails and sounds had become this harmonious symphony of cries from the old violin that your mother would play to you, that resonant song that would remind you of the unbearably beautiful pain of loving someone too much. I cried then for the first time I had cried in years while listening to the cicadas beautiful hymn of life and solitude, love and hatred, a tale as ancient as they had lived, and I find myself wailing as loud as I possibly could, crying that ugly cry I always hated crying, trying to drown out the cicada's beautiful melodies to no avail as their melody goes past my cries into my soul. At this point I am here, I am really here on this Earth, and I think that this is where my friend is, this is what my friend saw, and I think about how I can't recognize the man I had been for the past two years. I will never live another day like the man I once was, cowering under the false oasis of

the other planet that held me in such solitude from my own emotions.

I am truly, undeniably alive, my friend.