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The Cicada in Winter  
By: Azuchi Moe

Despite it being the dead of winter, a large brown cicada flew by.

Amongst the fluttering of the snow, the cicada flew in its awkward manner as if lost. It flew here and there, changing directions as it went, before stopping right on the screen door.

Before I even had the chance to think 'impossible,' I felt very happy.

I like cicadas. I really really like cicadas.

I like the Kempfer cicada, with its appearance akin to that of an adorable toddler, informing us of summer's arrival; the evening cicada, elegant to the point of tears; the fast and cheery last-summer cicada, with its droopy eyes. However, my favourite is still the large brown cicada, whose cry enhances the summer heat like a splash of hot oil.

But, right now, I can really only think 'impossible.'

It's freezing.

I'm even wearing an angora turtleneck, with my heater turned on...

"Hey, there. Who are you?"

I opened the glass door and moved my face close to the screen door, which had never been touched since summer. The cold air, like the skin of the yuki-onna snow demon, hit my face.

With my near-sighted eyes, I gazed into the (probably) near-sighted eyes of the cicada for a little while.

It really is a large brown cicada.

It's a male cicada - apparent from the white specks dusting its tight stomach like powder. A cicada that looks seconds away from crying out at max volume...

I opened the screen door slightly, my eyes still meeting the cicada's, and reached out slowly with my right hand.

Caught it!

The cicada started to struggle in my hand. Its wings buzzed like the movement of an electric fan, as if powered by a small motor. I carefully placed my fingers at the base of the wings so as not to injure them, and felt beneath my skin its powerful twitching.

I was jubilant.

I felt a sense of completion, as if I held in my hands a goal of some kind.

"Hey, it's so strange. There's a cicada, even though it's winter. Look."

Without thinking, I spoke to the back of my father's head, while he was in the middle of watching television in the living room. But I regretted it.

"You're still catching cicadas at your age?"

"I like the things that I like, and there's nothing wrong with that!"

My tone became sharp with my anger.

This always happened between my father and I.

At that moment, I heard the doorbell ring.

I angrily walked towards the foyer, hearing my father reminisce behind me, "Now that I think about it, I used to call you cicada girl, didn't I?"

My mother's friend Uehara-san was standing at the door, holding my mother's umbrella.

"How's your mom doing? Here," Uehara-san placed a bag full of oranges from the nearby supermarket on the entranceway, "I was in the neighborhood."

"Oh, thank you very much. My mother is -"

"I thought, I have to hurry up and return the umbrella."

The cicada struggled in my hand, almost escaping from between my fingers, so I used my two hands to cage it in. The legs of the cicada moved, brushing against my skin, and the ticklish pain felt like a secret pleasure.

"Ah, you really could've returned it at any time. My mother's in long-term care at the hospital."

"Oh really? It must be hard."

The cicada started up its miniature motor, and the frantic fluttering of the wings tickled my hands.

"Uehara-san, I found a cicada even though it's winter. Isn't it strange?"

"Oh, is that so? Really? But I'm not particularly a fan of insects..." Uehara-san looked nervously at the cage of my hands. "Well then, I was just dropping by. Please give your mother my regards." And with that, she left.

I wanted to talk to someone about the cicada. The absurd oddness of it living in the midst of such a cold season. If it were a flower, we could say that it bloomed out of season. Perhaps it's a result of evolution, increasing the cicada's vitality. In these times of global warming, with the Earth's climate shifting ever warmer compared to previous generations, there've been stories of more insects passing the winter. Has something like mutation occurred because of the odd climate? Or could it be, by mere chance, the cicada's small body received that hot summer heat and lost its way, wandering into the opposite side? The side of "this" season?

I decided to talk about it with Sawachi-kun. A long time ago, while we were drinking together, Sawachi-kun said, "Ah, the large brown cicada. That's a good guy. A pretty good guy. They have ambition," while emptying his glass of whiskey and water. I liked the way he talked about the cicada, and in turn, I kind of liked Sawachi-kun.

After carefully putting the cicada into the sleeve of my sweater, I opened my cellphone. I still had Sawachi-kun's name in my contact list.

The ringtone sounded and Sawachi-kun picked up. "...Hello?"

I calmed down my beating heart and as casually as I could, said, "Long time no talk. Sorry about the sudden phone call."

"Oh, is that you? Yeah, it's been a while."

He seemed to have immediately known it was me.

"Sorry to cut to the chase, but guess what? I found a cicada. Even though it's winter. Isn't it strange?"

"Huh? A cicada? At this time of year? A cicada, of all things? Are you sure it's not a cockroach?"

Oh, stop joking around, Sawachi-kun.

“It’s not a cockroach! It’s a cicada. A large brown cicada, to be precise. Isn’t it odd? Hey, what do you think? I thought you’re pretty familiar with these types of things.”

On the other side of the cellphone, I could hear a deep and irretrievable silence, which seemed to stretch on for a long time.

In a soft murmur, Sawachi-kun said, “There are a lot of odd things in the world.”

“Hm?”

“Oddities aren’t as rare as you think in this world. Even the fact that you’re talking to me over the phone right now...”

“That’s not an answer.”

I said it as if trying to hide my embarrassment.

“An answer, huh. I don’t know it. If there even is one. But you know, odd things can be a salvation. For us, and probably, for the world.”

The cicada poked its head out from my sleeve.

I had to let it go soon. Cicadas become weaker the longer they stay in a person’s hand. Though, between keeping it in the warm interior of the house and releasing it back into the snowy outdoors, there was no telling which one is better for the cicada.

After promising Sawachi-kun that we would go drinking again one day, I hung up the phone.

Leaving the foyer, I went to the persimmon tree in the yard.

The persimmon tree’s leaves have all fallen, its boney branches grasping the grey sky. I gently let the cicada down on the trunk of the tree, which was covered by deep grooves of veins and sinew. As if deep in thought, the cicada slowly climbed up the trunk, pausing occasionally as if in hesitation.

As I looked up at the cicada, the snow continued to fall, seemingly from a limitless height. The longer I stood, the stronger it fell, the icy crystals hitting my face and melting, flowing down in rivulets.

Before I knew it, the cicada disappeared somewhere into maze-like silhouette of the persimmon tree’s treetop.

My body was freezing cold, and yet, my hands that held the cicada remained hot and sweaty, as if it were summer. Now that I think about it, the cicada didn’t cry once, even though it was a male.

I returned to the foyer and saw my mother’s umbrella and the bag of oranges still there. The television in the living room was still on, but my father was already gone.

I turned off the television and placed the bag of oranges in its usual spot on the kitchen table.

It’s been a long time since my father passed, and Uehara-san was supposed to have passed two years ago as well. And Sawachi-kun’s also...

My call to Sawachi-kun was still in my call history. But I didn’t have the courage to try calling that number again...

Perhaps due to the accumulation of the snow, the empty house was filled with a silence that seemed to tighten around me.

The quiet was so piercing that I could hear a buzzing in my ear.

A buzzing reminiscent of the cry of the cicada, on that far away summer day.