

## The Winter Cicada

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One day in the middle of winter, a cicada appeared.

Snow was beginning to fall, and a large brown cicada came down towards the house in that typical clumsy flight, darting this way and that as if it was lost. Suddenly, it found its way to the window screen.

Before I could even think how impossible this was, a thrill ran through me.

You see, I like cicadas. Very, very much.

I mean, all cicadas: those harbingers of summer, the *nī nī zemi* or the Kaempfer cicada, so tiny and lovable like babies; the *higurashi*, the clear-toned cicada, with their ethereal calls that tug at your heart; and the *tsuku tsuku bōshi* or the Meimuna *opalifera*, lively and nimble, with adorable round eyes. Most of all, though, I like the *abura zemi*, the large brown cicada. True to their name, “oil cicada,” their calls sound as if they were spattering more oil onto the fiery heat of summer.

But it was just incredible to see one here, and now. In this biting cold, no less. It was so cold that I was wrapped up in a turtleneck angora sweater, even with the heater on.

“Hey there, little guy. How’d you get here?”

Sliding open the window, I leaned towards the mesh screen that had been left there since the summer. The frosty air rushed in, caressing my skin like the touch of a ghostly spirit.

My short-sighted eyes met the (supposedly) short-sighted eyes of the cicada, and we stared at each other for a little while.

It *was* a large brown cicada.

The taut stomach looked like it was covered in white powder. A male cicada. It seemed tense, as if it might break into its raucous call any minute—.

I nudged the screen open and, our eyes still locked, I gingerly stretched out my right hand.

*Gotcha!*

The cicada struggled against my closed palm. The wings buzzed furiously, like a fan powered by a small motor. Taking care not to damage his wings, I gently pinned him down. I could feel the frenzied twitches of their joints, pulsating against my fingers.

A rush of joy swept over me, as if I had seized some kind of purpose, snug in my hands—a sense of fulfillment.

“Hey look, it’s the weirdest thing,” I called out to my father, watching TV in the living room with his back to me. “A cicada’s here, in the dead of winter. See?” I regretted it as soon as the words left my mouth.

“Still catching cicadas, are you? When are you going to grow out of stuff like that?”

“I like what I like. Leave me alone!” I pouted and raised my voice indignantly. Anything could set us off.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

Still prickly, I turned away from my father, who murmured, as if a memory suddenly returned to him, “Come to think of it, I used to call you cicada girl when you were little.”

A friend of my mother’s, Mrs. Uehara, was standing in the doorway with my mother’s umbrella.

“How’s your mother doing? I brought you something....”

As she spoke, she placed a bag of mandarins from the local grocery store onto the wooden ledge by the entrance.

“I was just passing by, so thought I’d pop in.”

“Oh, thank you so much. She’s—”

“I kept thinking to myself I should return her umbrella soon, but—”

The cicada struggled fiercely for a moment and almost squeezed itself out through my fingers, so I hemmed it back in, cupping both hands into a cage. His legs scratched around my palms, and the half itchy, half painful sensation was like a secret pleasure inside my hands.

“Ah, there was no rush at all.... She’s going to be in the hospital for a long time.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry. It must be tough.”

The cicada revved up its mini motor—his wings flapped wildly, tickling the skin of my palms.

“Look, Mrs. Uehara. A cicada came in the middle of winter. Isn’t it odd?”

“Oh, really? Is it in there? But I’m squeamish about insects, so—”

She eyed my cupped hands apprehensively and said, “Well, anyway, I just wanted to pop by. Send my best wishes to your mom.” Then off she went.

I felt an urge to talk to someone about this cicada. The strangeness of how it was still alive in this frosty weather. If it was a flower, you’d call it a mad flower, blooming out of season. Have cicadas evolved to survive longer? They do say winters are getting warmer than they used to be, and more insects are outliving their season. Did the abnormal climate trigger some kind of mutation in this creature? Or perhaps, in some twist of fate, did it somehow shoulder the hot summer all by itself—in its tiny body—and wander over to the other side, to *this side* of time?

Sawachi came to my mind, and I decided to talk to him.

A long time ago, we went out for a drink with some friends. Sawachi said, drinking up a glass of whiskey and water, “Yep, those large brown cicadas. They’re good guys. Pretty good guys. They’ve got some ambition, you know.” I liked the way he said it, and it made me like him a little, too.

Gently slipping the cicada under my sleeve, I flipped open my phone. I looked through my contacts list and found Sawachi’s name, still there.

The dial tone rang for a moment, then Sawachi picked up.

“...Hello?”

I tried to act calm and said, nonchalantly, “Hi, it’s been a while. Sorry for calling you up out of the blue—”

“Oh... is it really you? Wow, it’s been a long time.”

He seemed quick to recognize my voice, to my relief.

“Well, I’ll cut to the chase—there’s a cicada here. In winter. How about that?”

“A... a cicada? What, now? A cicada? Er, isn’t it just a roach?”

*Ew—spare me, Sawachi.*

“No way! It’s a cicada, a large brown cicada. Strange, isn’t it? So, what do you think? I thought you’d be the one to know about this sort of thing—”

On the other side of the line, there was an unrelenting, irrevocable stretch of profound silence, which felt as if it was slowly suffusing the air around me.

Sawachi dropped his voice to a murmur and said, “...There are lots of strange things out there.”

“...Huh?”

“Strange things—the world is full of them. The fact that you just gave me a call, too....”

“That’s not much of an answer,” I remarked, perhaps to hide my embarrassment.

“An answer... huh. I wouldn’t know such a thing. I wonder if it even exists. But, you know, strange things can be a saving grace. For us, and probably for the world, too—”

The cicada popped out its head from under my sleeve.

It would be time to let it out soon. If held too long in human hands, a cicada would grow weak. Whether it was better off in the warm room or the snowy cold outside, though, I couldn’t say.

I exchanged a promise with Sawachi to go for a drink again sometime and hung up.

Stepping out of the house, I headed to the persimmon tree in the garden. The tree was all bare—leaves shaken off, boney limbs stretching out wide to grasp the grey skies. I softly placed the cicada on the bark, its surface lined with furrows and wrinkles. He stayed still for a moment, then began to inch up the trunk, pausing every now and then as if he was mulling over a question.

When I lifted my gaze, the snow was falling from what seemed to be limitless heights. It gradually thickened, and icy crystals fell on my face, melting away as soon as they touched my skin, streaming down and leaving numerous thin streaks.

Before I knew it, the cicada’s form had disappeared among the branches of the persimmon tree, lost in its silhouette of lines etched into the sky like a frozen labyrinth.

My body was chilled to the bone—but the hands that had held the cicada remained hot, sweating like summer. Suddenly, it struck me that even though it was a male cicada, it hadn’t made a sound at all....

When I went back inside, my mother’s umbrella and the bag of mandarins were sitting there by the entrance. In the living room, the TV was still on, but my father was

nowhere to be seen. I switched off the TV and carried the bag of mandarins over to the kitchen table, as I always do.

My father has been dead for a long time now, and Mrs. Uehara had passed away two years ago. And Sawachi, too....

On my phone, Sawachi's name was still in the list of recent calls. But I couldn't muster up the courage to call his number again.

Perhaps the snow had begun to stick—the empty house was gradually consumed by an almost suffocating silence.

The silence reached such a pitch that I began to hear a ringing in my ears.

It was as if, from a summer day long, long ago, there came the call of a cicada.