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# Summer of the Cicada

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## Chapter One

First swing almost missed me. Fist came over his shoulder and I swayed back. Knuckles grazed the bridge of my nose and chin before digging into my chest. When I swayed again my foot didn't follow back the way I'd practised. I went off-balance. Lost focus when the second punch came. A left that landed like a brick on my right temple. A good shot that made a hollow sound inside my head. Sparks flashed behind my eyes. I went down, but not all the way. Something kept me up even while my mind told me to drop.

*Let yourself go, Joseph. He's gonna hit you again. Fall! What are you think . . .*

Third punch came down. A line of knuckles pushed into my scalp. Reflex brought my jaw closed. Somewhere in all of the flashes of light – colours that played on my eyelids like a movie reel – I sensed my mouth going wet. It went real hot. Before I could react the floor met my knee, then my shoulder. My chest pulsed hard. There was a sharp pain opening up under my arms. It moved between my ribs. It was growing. Then another pulse landed against my head with more pain.

*This is it, my boy. Should have gone down the first time. You've made him mad. Ain't nothing stoppin' him now.*

There was a moment when everything went still. I couldn't hear any sounds. The taste of pennies was soaking into my gums. The hot sensation had escaped from my mouth and started running down the side of my face. When I swallowed I felt a piece of something large and heavy move against my teeth. My eyes opened even though I tried to keep them shut. There was my old man standing over me, his stance telling me not to get up. His hands, clenching tighter and tighter, dared me to move. Just an inch's all he wanted.

I stared at his bare feet, wide apart. Just over shoulder width. He was rocking from side to side. It's how he learned to fight, first from his father and then in the navy. I learned from watching him swing at me. Behind him Mother held her chin in a steady hand. Her eyelids looked thick and pink. Her shoulders rose up on a slow wave. Then they fell. I think she was breathing deep. She may have been signalling me. She stood behind a haze – like she was on the opposite side of a hot, blacktop highway in summer. My eyelids tried to blink the haze away, but it wouldn't go.

Her mouth moved but I couldn't hear what she was trying to say.

*Stay on the ground, Joe. He'll hit you again. Stay still.*

'What the hell is wrong with you?' my father said. His voice was calm. He was barely out of breath.

I tried to talk, but could only manage a wet sound that spilled onto the wooden floor. I looked at my mother whose eyes widened. She disappeared into the kitchen. My old man pushed his foot against my shoulder and rolled me over. Mother was out of sight, shuffling through the keys on the rack near the back door. They rattled and fell and made crashing sounds each time another set hit the linoleum. The lump in my mouth was falling back into my throat. I tried to swallow it, but it wouldn't go. My throat filled up. I coughed. I had a fit of coughs and closed my eyes. The pain in my chest jumped tempo and started hammering away. When the fit was over I rolled to the side.

Father slid backwards. The hard soles of his feet skidded against the wooden floor. He was clearing out of the room – his

way of letting me know he'd finished. I opened my eyes and caught him standing in the doorway Mother had passed through. She kept dropping things. Father didn't look mad any more. His eyes were calm. His shirt now looked too small against his swollen muscles. I blinked and my right eye saw clear. His arm was speckled with dark drops. There was a coating of red around the soles of his feet.

'Help me get him in the car,' Mother said when she floated back into the room. She had on her long blue dress that made her look like a teenager. I felt dazed and disconnected. To keep from passing out I stared at her dress and tried to figure out if it was denim. She liked that and linen. She was always in the stuff.

'Put a towel on the back seat. Make sure he doesn't move too much.' Father's voice rocked me. I tried to turn my head to look at him, but a shot of pain jammed in my neck. I closed my eyes again and swallowed at the blood. It started filling up my mouth. When I opened my eyes my old man was out of the room.

Mother looked down at me for a minute. She just stood there sucking at her lower lip. It's like she was trying to figure out where to touch me. She gave me one of her sideways looks. It was a quick thing – just a glance. Eye to eye. Tender enough to forgive her for not stopping him. Then she straightened up. The pain came in like a strong wind but I got up on my own. I brought my arms in close to my sides to keep the pain from escaping. It worked to a degree, but then over the years I may have forgotten how much it didn't help. Mother passed through to the hallway and I followed as quick as I could. She reached into the closet and pulled out two of my winter coats. One she pushed roughly under my chin.

'Don't say anything until they fix that tongue. Hold it together if you need to,' she said. She kept the other coat tucked under her arm.

I got in the back of the car with one coat covering the side I was sitting on. I had the other coat covering my head. Mother

refused to open the garage door before I had nodded an agreement to keep out of sight till we were well away from Westchester Drive.

'Let's keep the neighbourhood out of this, huh?' she said. Her face twitched like she didn't know if she should smile a little.

She drove fast. Mother never drove like that. With the coat over my head I started to worry I was in bad shape. I had lost a lot of blood. From the way Mother looked at me I could tell I was real messed up – sitting in silence in a fast car with half a tongue. I felt around my mouth with sore fingers and found a couple teeth that were shaped different than before. They were sharper and smaller. But at that point I was still dazed. I had a light head. A medicine-head, Mother used to call it. Even with the music that was playing on the radio – Hughey Lewis and the News, I think. 'Back in Time' maybe – I started wondering if this was the beating that would do it. If this was the one that knocked me out for good.

I was still hoping for the worst when Mother slammed the car into a stop. The wheels skidded. I slid the coat off my head. Mother was looking at me in the rearview mirror. I turned to the window to find she had pulled over to a roadside parking space off State Road Nine. The picnic tables just past the trees were empty. The trash barrels overflowed from the weekend of visitors. They were under the trees. Just further down was Wild Lake. I waited for laughter. I waited for a dog to bark. Maritime never sounded so deserted.

'You got in a fight with some boys in the woods,' Mother said. She set her right elbow on the top of the bench seat and gestured with a closed fist. 'You don't know them. First time you'd ever seen them before. They chased you and were too fast. You gave up.'

I nodded my head and started to pull the coat over again. Mother let out a heavy breath.

'You always give up,' she said.

I nodded and pulled the coat tight against my head.

'They never attack the strong ones, Joseph.'

She turned the radio off and drove the rest of the way slowly. I heard cars honk as they flew past. She'd figured things out. Everything fell back into place. At the hospital she parked in a space far away from the entrance. She opened my door and pulled the coat away. While I got out she folded the coat and placed it on the floor mat. With her purse tucked under her arm she started walking. I followed her.

'What happened, Joseph?' she asked.

*My father just beat the living shit out of me. Are you fucking blind?*

I shrugged. She'd told me not to speak. It was a test.

'Did you get into a fight?'

I nodded.

'With who?'

Shook my head. She wasn't looking at me. A red BMW rolled by and slowed up when they got close. Mother stared at the couple in the car. The young couple were looking at me. I took advantage of the attention and spit a wad of blood. I'd been swallowing up to that point and my guts had filled with the stuff.

'Did you try to run? Did you even try to get away?' she continued, when we'd made it past the car.

I nodded again.

'You didn't try hard enough, Joseph. Not nearly hard enough.'

We were at the door. It opened when I stepped on the rubber mat and inside rushed a quiet calm. The women at reception were dressed in white cardigans over green vests. One of the women wore a white cap. The other had small, tight braids that, when she turned round, I saw reached to the centre of her back. They both stopped talking when Mother and me made our way to the desk. The one in the cap looked down and shuffled through a stack of papers. The other just stared, first at me, then at Mother. It made me feel uncomfortable so I looked away. Down a corridor I saw a metal gurney with a ruffled sheet on it. Beyond that there was an empty wheelchair, half-folded and pushed up against the wall.

'My son's been in a fight. He needs some stitches I think.' Mother could put on a soft and sweet voice when she needed to. She must have thought this was a good time for it.

‘Should we have an officer come in to take statements?’ the nurse with braids asked.

I kept my eyes away from her. The nurse was an attractive girl. Maybe mid-twenties. I always felt nervous around nice looking girls anyway, but with a face like a broken melon I became even more introverted.

‘We’ve already spoken to the police. Our neighbour brought him home. Her husband’s a policeman. He’d spoken to Joe right after the . . .’ Mother waved her hands in the air. ‘The thing. The fight. I think he even chased the boys who did it. God love him. I’ll be calling him when I get Joseph back home. See if he caught up with them.’

Mother had a gift for elaboration. The story had even convinced me. The boys who chased me began to materialize in my mind. One of them wore a New York Giants jersey and kept checking it to make sure it wasn’t marked with my blood. Another had taken his shirt off when he started punching me. He had muscles that looked too big for his age. The third kid hadn’t come up clear yet. Listening to Mother speak I figured she’d been right about the whole thing.

I hadn’t tried hard enough. I never tried hard enough.

Mother kept talking so I went and sat down. The waiting room was large with rows of chairs all lined up like they were there for an audience. I suppose they were. All of the chairs faced the reception desk so everyone could see the lame freaks that came in with busted bodies. I was thankful that the audience hadn’t showed up for the matinée. An old woman sat slumped on a seat in the back row. Her chest swelled and shrunk otherwise I may have thought she’d given up the ghost. On the far wall a young woman with a little boy huddled up to one another. The boy’s skin looked too yellow. When he pulled away from his mother he caught sight of me. Wasn’t but a minute before he buried his face in the woman’s side again. She smiled at me – not a happy smile, just one to apologize for either her son or my misfortune – and looked away. Other than those few people the place was empty.

*Are Tuesdays slow for trauma?*

Mother came over and sat down next to me with a clipboard the nurses handed out. She went back to being the silent woman who floated round our house. The room remained silent. The only sounds coming from the nurses tapping at their keyboards. Pages rustling as Mother read through the forms. Then her pen started clicking against the board under the sheets of paper. The sounds came like gunshots. My nerves were edgy.

It seemed a long wait. Mother finished filling in the forms. An old guy came in with his wife. He held his hand in a dish towel that looked stained with rust. They went up to the desk and got their own clipboard. Then they sat a few chairs away and ignored us. A black couple came in after them. The woman was heavily pregnant. She held the weight of her swollen stomach with one hand. She gripped the man’s shoulder with the other. The guy was frantic. Orderlies came and put the lady in a wheelchair and pushed her down the hall. I’d started to stiffen up when a nurse came and touched my shoulder – nice shot, one of the few places I didn’t hurt.

‘Come this way, Joseph.’ She didn’t have to call my name in a questioning way. Although there were others who came in I was the only one looking like I needed immediate attention – other than the old guy with the rusty towel. But he didn’t moan any. His wife touched his knee as they talked in whispers. Once up from my seat I found that I was the only one leaking on the linoleum. I looked at the small circle of red and wondered where it came from. Mother stood but the nurse shook her head.

‘You just sit tight and we’ll see to Joseph. If you’d like a coffee there’s a vending machine down the east corridor. Just over there.’ The nurse didn’t even motion to my mother as to which direction ‘over there’ really was. Instead she touched my shoulder with the delicate hand of a person who knew how much pain I was in. She knew how much people could take before they just gave up.

We went down the hall without talking. When we passed doors I tried to look in, but I couldn’t see anyone. The nurse

showed me into an examination room on the right. I took a seat on a bed that was just high enough to make me strain – even after she lowered the thing by pushing some fancy buttons. My ribs felt like they were coming apart and readying themselves to break out of my skin.

‘Well, soldier,’ the nurse said with her hands on her hips. ‘What in God’s name happened to you?’

I opened my mouth to speak. My guts turned like a cement mixer and rolled out a line of blood and saliva. It came in a steady stream that hit the floor and curled a good way up the wall. The nurse stepped aside. She must have heard the gurgled belch that came before the explosion. It wasn’t until I was telling Dean Gillespie what happened a few weeks later that I remembered the belch.

The nurse helped me lay on my side and gave me a kidney-shaped basin to hold on to. She left the room. I started feeling faint again so I closed my eyes. I think a few people came in and out of the room while I was in that phase – dropping out of wakefulness and into that heat-haze thing. There was a black man in an aqua-coloured uniform who came in. He had a mop and a smile that he used in equally skilled measure. I remember him because he spoke to me.

‘Y’all right, bud?’ he asked as he sloshed his mop around on my blood.

I nodded and felt my neck seizing up.

‘Have an ax’dent?’

I nodded again.

‘Car?’

I tried to shake my head, but couldn’t lift it well enough to make it happen.

‘Fight?’

I closed my eyes.

‘Musta been some big dude.’ He went quiet for a while. I listened to his mop slashing against the floor. Then he’d rinse it and start the process again. When he finished he dropped the mop in the bucket and went for the door. The rollers on his

mop squealed like a pack of hungry mice. He leaned in close and tapped the pillow my head lay on.

‘Hang in theya, kid,’ he almost sang to me. ‘It’s all good.’ Then he left. I listened to his whistling fade down the hall.

I kept my eyes shut and the door opened and closed a few more times. People came in and out. Some spoke. I heard papers being flipped when the door opened another time. But whoever came in to look at me didn’t stay for long. I had almost found sleep when the first nurse I saw came back in.

‘Here we go, Joseph.’ She had a tray that she wheeled in on a silver cart. The tray was covered with a towel the same aqua blue as the janitor’s uniform. It’s a hospital colour, a calm colour. The shapes under the sheet didn’t look friendly.

She helped me sit up. I tried to blink the tired feeling out of my eyes. She took my hand and placed two fingers on my wrist. She watched the clock on the wall and counted without making a sound. When her lips stopped moving she smiled at me. She rolled up my left sleeve and found the bruise from a few nights before. It had turned purple and yellow. She spent a few seconds just staring at it, checking it from different angles.

*Nice work, huh?* I wanted to say. Instead I closed my mouth up tight and felt the blood squeeze out of my split tongue.

She ended up taking my pressure from the other arm. When she uncovered the tray I saw an assortment of silver tools and some needles wrapped in plastic sleeves. She pulled two small bottles from her shirt pocket. She must have seen that I was wondering how much of the stuff she had intentions of using on me.

‘We’re going to make you good as new, hun,’ she said.

I smiled. It must have looked like an odd gesture. My left cheek had swollen into a nice lump. My lip on that side didn’t move on account of its own swelling. On the other side I couldn’t feel a thing. When I smiled the lip seemed to shoot up fast from the sensations in my cheek. I felt like I had to control it before it jumped off my face completely.

Before she could lift a needle the door opened and a doctor