

Cicadas

I learned what cicadas were when I was ten years old. My aunt Ro, my mother's older sister, decided it was time to drag me into the mountains and teach me about the things my mother wouldn't. Ro told my mom that she would buy the plane ticket, so I packed a carry-on full of t-shirts and swim trunks and sat in the air next to a sleepy old woman until we landed in Virginia. It was early June and the Appalachian Mountain air was light and breezy, the sky a crisp, cloudless blue. Ro explained to me that we were going to the same spot on the New River where she and my mother went with their parents thirty years before. "It's actually the oldest river in North America," she told me, and her eyes sparkled like she was letting me in on some age-old secret.

Ro knew how to do everything. She taught me how to pitch a tent, sliding the sections of tent poles together until we had a sturdy frame. She let me stake down the fly, making sure I did it as tight as possible in case it rained. Once she was satisfied with our campsite, we rubbed sunscreen on our fronts and each other's backs and walked down to the river. The water was ice cold, and I squealed when it reached my thighs. It was the clearest water I'd ever seen. Ro showed me how to pick out smooth stones and throw them across the water so that they hopped like rabbits. When we climbed out of the water, I realized I had forgotten to bring a towel.

"You don't need one," Ro said, and we stretched out in the clearing by the riverbank and dried in the sun.

Back at our campsite, Ro started a fire using dryer lint. She showed me how to pick out dry sticks for kindling and blow on the coals to make them glow. We skewered hot dogs and roasted them. The smoke smelled like the air did at home during wildfire season, only sweeter.

When the trees first started humming, I felt my neck prickle and looked up, wide-eyed, expecting it to be the beginning of some kind of horrible storm. Ro saw my expression and grinned. “Do you know what cicadas are?” I shook my head. “Come with me,” she said.

It only took her a few minutes to find what she was looking for: a fragile brown shell stuck on the side of a tree. A bug, but not a bug. “This is a cicada’s exoskeleton,” she said, holding it out for me to touch. “They come out every summer, and the males make that sound to find their mate.” The exoskeleton’s legs were sharp, and they stuck to my fingers. I played with it for the next hour, sitting by our fire, listening to Ro tell stories about the camping trips she and my mom took together when they were younger, before my mom met my dad.

When the sky got dark and the forest around us transformed into a collection of looming silhouettes, Ro said, “There’s no moon tonight. Want to see something beautiful?”

As we approached the clearing, the trees thinned and I gasped. The sky was glowing. “We don’t have stars like that at home,” I said.

“Not just stars,” Ro said. “The biggest ones are planets. And that,” she pointed up at the brightest strip of sky, “is the Milky Way.”

We lay down in the grass and stared, saying nothing for a while. All we could hear were the bugs and the river, and in that moment I felt like the whole world, the grass and the trees and the smoke and the sky, was wrapping itself around me as tightly as it could.

“It feels like this is the only thing that exists,” I said, and I could feel Ro smiling through the inky darkness. She let out a sigh.

“Hold on tight to that feeling, kid,” she said. “It doesn’t come often.”

Ten years passed and I began to think that maybe that feeling would never come again. But then one night it did, when my roommate crept into my dark bedroom, crawled under my sheets, traced her fingers along the contours of my face, wrapped her legs around mine, and pressed her lips into my neck until I heard my heartbeat roaring in my ears like cicadas in the summertime.