

The Cicada's Cry

by David Lindsay

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*In the cicada's cry
No sign can foretell
How soon it must die*
Basho

"Hear the locusts?" The woman lifts the child's head. "Hear em, baby?" The child looks blankly in the general direction of the woods. She kisses him on his forehead. "I'm gonna run inside and start our taters, alright? You just set still. Granny'll be right back."

The woman walks into the house. She goes into the kitchen and pulls a pan from the cabinet. Fills the pan with water. Reaches into a bin and pulls out two potatoes. Takes a knife from a drawer and peels both of them. She washes them, then puts them in the pan and sets it on the stove. Turns the burner on high. She wipes her hands with a dishtowel and walks back out onto the porch.

She sits in a wicker rocker beside the child in his wheelchair. Drool runs down the child's chin. She pulls a tissue from the pocket of her jeans and wipes the drool away.

The sound of the cicadas begins to rise.

"There they go again. You hear em?" She reaches over to touch his arm. The child moans softly and half blinks his eyes. She rubs her hand gently over his blonde hair. "You sure are sweatin. Guess

we oughta go inside." She stands and takes the handles of the wheelchair and turns him towards the door of the house. She opens it and wheels him in and places him in front of the TV.

The sound of the cicadas begins to fall.

"You wanna watch you some cartoons?" She turns on the set. A giant robot flies through the air, shooting a laser beam at a city. The child's eyes loll and he moans. "Lemme go check on them taters." She smooths his wet hair back on his head. "Purty blue eyes," she says. She walks into the kitchen. The water is boiling. She turns the stove off and scoops the potatoes out with a ladle. She lays them both on a plate. She pulls a fork from the drawer and begins mashing them. She mashes until the potatoes are mush.

She carries the plate into the living room. She pulls a footstool in front of the wheelchair and sits down. "Now, let's try to eat us a bite." She looks at the child and sees his eyes wide, wider and bluer than she's seen them since he was born. She hears the cartoons and over that the sound of the cicadas, thousands of them screaming to God, but not the gurgling sound that usually comes from the child's chest. "Oh sweet Jesus. Jeremy?" She drops the plate and puts her ear to his slight chest and hears only the war of the robots and the cicada's.

Then the cicadas are silent.

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They bury him beneath a willow tree on the east side of the cemetery. The neighbors carry her home to the empty house. A few offer to stay with her. She says "No, I'll be alright." She doesn't sleep that night, nor several nights after. She lies on the couch staring at his wheelchair. Her brother offers to take it away. She says leave it.

She walks out to the mailbox one afternoon and finds among the junk mail and condolence cards the government check. She walks back to the house, takes a bath, makes up her face and heads for the city.

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Mandy Lamb has had a bad morning. She woke up late. The boys were already up. They said they didn't want to bother her. They had prepared their own breakfast. Juice and cereal and toast, even though they weren't allowed to use the toaster. Juice was spilled on the counter, ashes from burnt bread mixed into it. A trail of milk ran from the table to the refrigerator. She wanted to scream at them. She just sighed instead.

Then, her car wouldn't start. The same car she had just gotten out of the shop. The same car that has only thirty-three thousand miles on it and has been nothing but trouble from day one. She wanted the car. Her husband hadn't thought it was a good idea.

Her husband had already gone to work.

She called him and he drove back to get her and the boys. Gave them a ride in his truck. The boys love the truck. She hates the truck. It smells like grease. He smells like grease. Always. Once or twice a week he reaches out to her at night. She usually thinks to herself Please don't put your greasy hands on me. But he does. Mandy Lamb thinks a good wife should never deny her husband. So she never says No. But she thinks of sex with him as getting greased.

Mandy Lamb catches her panty hose on the door as she's getting out of the greasy truck. She rolls her eyes and sighs as she waves goodbye to her sons. She doesn't wave to her greasy husband, who is tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. Mandy Lamb knows he is thinking If you'd just listened to me. She'd rather he actually say something so they could fight and get it over with. But she knows he won't.

When she gets to the guard station in her building she realizes she's left her ID card on the kitchen counter. Now the same guard who sees her every day won't let her upstairs without calling her supervisor. Her supervisor has to come down and identify her. Mandy Lamb gives the guard a dirty look. Her supervisor gives both of them a dirty look.

Mandy Lamb has to work the front desk today. They -- she and the other girls, six of them; men never seem to work the front -- rotate.

One week at the front, one week on the phone. She hates working the front desk. She has received commendations for her excellent customer service, but she hates working the front desk. People mad because their check is late. It's not her fault. She just fills out forms. People mad because they're not getting as much money as they think they deserve. Not her fault. She just turns in the information. People sad because somebody died. Those are the worst. Some old guy sitting there crying because his wife died. It's sad, yeah, but after you've heard "What am I gonna do now?" followed by sobbing...well, you can only care so much.

Mandy Lamb gets a cup of coffee. It's 8:45 AM. The waiting room opened at 8:30. They don't start seeing people until 9:00. She looks through the one-way glass in the door that separates the waiting room from the back offices. She sighs heavily. "Shit." Megan the new girl is walking by.

"What? Already full?" Mandy Lamb hangs her head.

"Yes. Farmers and old people. I hate farmers and old people." Megan smiles.

"Well, that's what we're here for." Megan is young. Perky. Always cheerful. Mandy Lamb wants to hit her in the face.

Mandy Lamb sits down at the window at 9:00 AM sharp and slides the little glass door open. "May I help you?" She smiles. Idiots, she thinks.

It's routine. Mandy Lamb has answered these same questions thousands of times and she's sure she'll answer them a thousand more before she mercifully dies at some old age of whatever disease she's sure will kill her. Mandy Lamb is sure she'll live to be old. She is also sure she will outlive everyone she cares about and will suffer and die a long painful death alone in some nursing home surrounded by strangers. Mandy Lamb is not sure how she knows all this, but she is sure it will come to fruition.

Mandy Lamb answers questions from old people and people who are riding the system. People who really need help and people who, she's sure, were sent by God simply to torture her.

Then Mandy Lamb sees the woman walk in. Mandy Lamb does not want to deal with this woman. Sadness is on the woman like a bad dress. Mandy Lamb is sure this will be the one. There is always at least one every day. The one who tells you their entire life story, how they came to be in such a sorry state -- and it's never their fault, Mandy Lamb has noticed -- and why they really need government money and What's your name, dear, so I can be sure and talk to you every time I have a problem.

Oh shit, thinks Mandy Lamb.

The woman sits in a chair and waits. Mandy Lamb glances over at Brenda working the next window. Brenda looks back at her. They're both thinking the same thing. I don't want to wait on her. You wait on her. I always get stuck with these people. It's your turn.

Mandy Lamb is having a bad day. Brenda finishes with her customer first. The man sitting next to the woman goes to her window. Mandy Lamb finishes with the man at her window. It's like winning the lottery from Hell, Mandy Lamb thinks.

"May I help you?" Mandy Lamb may loathe her customers, but she is a professional.

The woman sits down in front of Mandy Lamb and holds out an envelope. Mandy Lamb knows immediately it's a check. The woman is returning it. Mandy Lamb also knows the woman will be indignant over having to return money that isn't rightfully hers because people always become indignant over having to return government money because they pay taxes, by God, and they deserve whatever piece of the pie they get, right or wrong.

This woman is stoic. Mandy Lamb hates these people too. Their resentment is in their silence. Their silence is their weapon. Like her husband. This is what Mandy Lamb thinks.

The woman holds out the envelope. Mandy Lamb takes it from her hand.

"Y'all sent this to me by mistake."

"Is it for someone else?"

"No ma'am. He died. My grandbaby. I don't need it no more." Here it comes, thinks Mandy Lamb. The woman says nothing.

Mandy Lamb goes through the process. Says she's sorry for the woman's loss. Asks the right questions. Types names and numbers in all the appropriate boxes. Hits Save. Mandy Lamb gets the woman her receipt.

"Thank you, ma'am." The woman doesn't move. Oh shit, thinks Mandy Lamb.

"Ma'am? Is there anything else I can do for you?" She wishes she didn't have to ask. The woman doesn't answer. Mandy Lamb knows the longer the woman sits there, staring off into nothing in her grief, the more likely it will all come spilling out. Mandy Lamb tries not to sigh.

"Ma'am? Ma'am? Is there anything else?" The woman looks up.

"No," she says and gets up and leaves. Mandy Lamb is a little surprised. And very relieved. This almost never happens. It almost makes her happy.

"Next," says Mandy Lamb.

Mandy Lamb takes her lunch break at 12:45 PM. Precisely. Her manager says precision is important in all aspects of dealing with the public. That they are servants of the public, and the best way to serve the public is to be precise and consistent while being flexible enough to deal with each individual need, and always being willing and able to take the initiative and go beyond the call of duty so that each customer knows the Government cares. Mandy Lamb thinks her manager is a blowhard who talks too much.

Mandy Lamb takes the stairs from the third floor to the lobby. Because she's on a diet and she's trying to exercise. She never goes up the stairs. It makes her tired.

Mandy Lamb is thinking McDonalds. It's close. She can be back in ten minutes if traffic is light and the stupid crew isn't working. Mandy Lamb remembers when she worked at McDonalds. In high school. Her first job. Her manager made a pass at her. He was forty-seven. She was sixteen. He died a few years later of a heart attack. Mandy Lamb never liked him, even before he made a pass at her. He was always eating French fries. Then he would chew out the crew because customers had to wait for fries. Her manager at McDonalds

was five feet five inches tall. He weighed almost three hundred pounds when he made his move on Mandy Lamb. Someone told her he weighed over four hundred pounds when he died. Mandy Lamb felt a little guilty when he died. She felt guilty because she was glad he was dead.

Mandy Lamb walks out into the parking lot and looks for her car. She shades her eyes against the bright sunlight. Bright sunlight hurts her eyes. Her eyes are a pale blue. She hopes she remembered to leave her sunglasses on the front seat. She knows they are not in her purse because she looked before she walked out into the bright sunlight. They weren't there. She looks for her car. Where the hell did I park? she thinks. Then she remembers. She doesn't have her car. It wouldn't crank. Her husband drove her in his truck. The husband who greases her. Over the years of their marriage his grease deposited in her has produced three children. She loves all three of them. She does not particularly like them. They are too much like their father. Greasy.

Mandy Lamb's shoulders slump. She is disappointed. And annoyed. She won't have lunch today. She doesn't want to go back to the office, not yet. She is hungry, but it's too soon. Meagan the new girl will offer to share her salad with her. Meagan has asked Mandy Lamb before if she would have lunch with her. Mandy Lamb always makes an excuse. Partly because she doesn't like Meagan. Partly because she is afraid she will try to stab Meagan to death with a plastic utensil.

Mandy Lamb walks over to the picnic table the government was kind enough to place right in the hot sun. She pulls her cigarettes from the case she has been carrying in her hand. She lights one. Watches the first plume of smoke swirl and rise and disappear. A shadow appears to her right. She looks up. The woman is standing there. Mandy Lamb smiles. It's a reflex. She wants to scream "NO! It's my lunch break!" But she doesn't. The woman isn't looking at Mandy Lamb. She's looking at...Mandy Lamb isn't sure what she's looking at. Something in the distance. Mandy Lamb turns to look. There is no distance. Nothing but the street, the cars, the people

walking up and down the sidewalk. Mandy Lamb turns back to the old woman. Almost before she realizes she's said it she says "May I help you, ma'am?" Then she thinks Idiot! Now she'll answer you. Idiot!

The woman doesn't answer. Maybe she won't, thinks Mandy Lamb. She takes a puff of her cigarette. She is very uncomfortable. Maybe, she thinks, if I just casually get up and ease away she won't notice. She shifts on the wooden bench. Then she remembers she shouldn't do that, because the last time she sat here and shifted she managed to get a splinter in her ass. She takes another puff. I'll just get up, Mandy Lamb thinks, and walk away.

She stands. Turns her back to the woman and heads for the door of the building. Then she remembers she doesn't have her ID card. She hesitates. I'm trapped, she thinks.

"Did you say somethin to me?" God, thinks Mandy Lamb. She turns. The woman is looking at her. Maybe she can lie.

"No ma'am." She feels she should say something more, embellish, something to convince the woman it's all in her head. Voices.

"You got children?" the woman asks. Mandy Lamb tries not to sigh.

"Yes ma'am."

The woman is silent. She interlocks her fingers. Her face is taut, her eyes look off into the distance again. Mandy Lamb tries to think of a polite way to exit.

"You married?" Mandy Lamb smacks her lips at the question, unaware she's doing it.

"Yes ma'am."

"You love him?" Mandy Lamb thinks God, this is a bad day.

"Yes ma'am. I guess so." She pauses. Thinks Maybe if I talk for a minute or so she'll go on. "We've been married ten years."

"How many children did you say?" Mandy Lamb couldn't remember telling the woman or not.

"Three. Boys. Eight, six and five."

"I bet they a mess." Mandy Lamb laughs politely. She wants to scream.

"Yes ma'am, they can be a handful."

The woman looks at Mandy Lamb. Tears are brimming, but Mandy Lamb can see her trying to hold them in. Here it comes, thinks Mandy Lamb.

"You take care of your boys?" Mandy Lamb nods.

"Yes ma'am, I try to."

"You take care of your husband even if you don't feel what you used to for him?"

Mandy Lamb bites her upper lip. The scream is a living thing fighting to get out of her. "I try to, ma'am."

"He take care of you?" Mandy Lamb almost gives the reflexive answer. But she knows this woman knows things.

"Sometimes. Not like I'd like. He's a good provider. I can count on him. He tries his best, I guess." The woman looks down at her hands. Mandy Lamb looks also. Long fingers, the skin wrinkled, worn, hands that, Mandy Lamb is sure, were once pretty. The woman turns her hands over, palms up, as if showing them to Mandy Lamb. The palms are leathery, old leather, calluses over calluses. Mandy Lamb looks up at the woman's face. She realizes the face matches the hands exactly. Lines crisscross, furrows of new and old worries planted deep, old hurts that grew instead of healed over the long years. Mandy Lamb knows this woman has forgotten nothing, not a single second of her life. The woman looks up at Mandy Lamb. The eyes blue, like an endless sky. When the woman speaks it startles Mandy Lamb enough to make her jump.

"As ye sow. You know that? As ye sow, so shall ye reap." The woman's mouth tightens. Holding back the torrent behind that face, deep in that heart. Mandy Lamb wants suddenly to hug the woman, then run away. "It was so long ago." Mandy Lamb looks at her watch.

"Ma'am, I really have to..."

"Just one night. Shoot, wouldn't even a night. Wasn't five minutes. He wasn't nothin like his brother. I thought he'd be nicer, gentle. But he wasn't. After we was together he wouldn't look at me anymore. Told Cleon two days later. Looked like it was all he could do not to

laugh. 'Some wife you got there, brother,' he said. 'Give it up quicker than a juke joint whore.' Cleon didn't say nothin at first. Just looked at me. Walked at me all of a sudden like he was gonna slap me down. And all he said was-" and the woman chokes and Mandy Lamb wishes she hadn't got out of bed at all this morning "- 'Figures. I knew it all along.' Two of em went off and got drunk. Cleon never touched me again, not with no tenderness. Just ever once in a while to relive himself. Like he was takin a piss almost."

Mandy Lamb has one hand to her mouth, the other to her breasts.

"Me and Cleon had begun to think we couldn't have children. Tricia was born nine months and two days to the very day that Russell told Cleon. Cleon never would have nothin to do with her. Russell called her 'Niece', laughed ever time he said it." The woman looks at Mandy Lamb. Her face is void now of all emotion. That scares Mandy Lamb a little. "You got a cigarette, honey?" Mandy Lamb reacts as if the woman has spoken Mandarin Chinese.

"What?"

"Can I get a cigarette from you? I was tryin to quit, had quit for a while, but I sure would like a cigarette." Mandy Lamb pulls out a cigarette and hands it to her. They both stand looking at each other. Finally the woman says "I hate to bother you more, but could I get a light?" Mandy Lamb laughs, embarrassed. Holds her Bic up to the cigarette. The woman inhales, then coughs. She catches herself. "Maybe I ought not start back." Then she takes another drag. No coughing, just blows the smoke out slow.

"Ma'am, I really have to get back to work." Mandy Lamb is walking towards the door as she speaks. "It was nice talking to you." She opens the glass door. Stops when she sees the guard looking at her. Shit, she thinks.

"Cleon said she was just like me." Mandy Lamb is just far enough away from the woman to not be sure she heard her correctly. She turns back.

"Ma'am?" A breeze blows Mandy Lamb's hair across her face. She reaches up and pulls it back. The woman is staring at the cigarette

between her fingers. "Ma'am? I'm sorry, I didn't hear you." Looks at her watch. "Ma'am? I really have to go back to work now."

The woman looks at Mandy Lamb. Defeat. Guilt. Sorrow.

"She wasn't though. I made one mistake. That's all. One bad, bad mistake." She clenches her teeth. Her head begins to tremble, then Mandy Lamb watches the tremble work it's way down the woman's thin body. It occurs to Mandy Lamb that this woman may have been beautiful once. Now she looks, to Mandy Lamb, like a worn out tire.

"I never deserted my baby though. Never, never even thought about it." The woman shakes her head ruefully. "She don't even know about Jeremy yet. I wouldn't know how to find her." The woman sighs a heavy sigh. "I never deserted her. I never understood how she did Jeremy that way."

Mandy Lamb is startled by the guard. The same guard who sees her every day and acts like she's a stranger. "Ma'am," he says, "you can't keep the door open like that." Mandy Lamb glares at him. Lets go of the door and walks back to the woman.

"Ma'am, I really need to get back to work. I'm sorry for your loss." The woman looks at her.

"Do what?" she says.

"I said I have to go back in now. I'm sorry for your loss. Truly." Mandy Lamb turns to go. "Hang in there," she calls over her shoulder, then thinks Idiot! That was stupid.

Mandy Lamb waits while the guard calls her supervisor again. On the ride up the elevator the supervisor chastises Mandy Lamb for forgetting her ID. Mandy Lamb barely hears her. Nods politely and says "Yes ma'am" without thinking. She is thinking of her boys. And her husband. She's thinking Maybe it's not so bad getting greased every once in a while.

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The woman sits on her porch. She stares at the empty wheel chair. The neighbors have noticed she wheels it out every morning

and sits there talking. To the chair or a ghost, they don't know. Sometimes they stop by to see how she's doing, but mostly not.

Once a week her brother takes her to the cemetery. She puts flowers on her grandson's grave. She never goes near the grave of her husband.

One day is like the next. She takes the wheel chair onto the porch, except in bad weather or exceptionally hot days, when the cicadas cry is the loudest.

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