

I first heard the cricket in my basement about a month ago, and I remember thinking how lucky it was to be inside during one of the worst cold spells Chicago had ever had. I don't know why I never noticed him before, but it only took a few nights of chirping to make it seem as if he had been there a long, long time.

"Honey," I said to my wife, Carol, as we prepared for bed one evening, "how long has that cricket been down there?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Well, none. I was just curious as to whether or not . . ."

"That's the trouble with you," she cut in. "You're too damned curious."

"What's wrong with wanting to know about things?" My voice was a high pitched, overly apologetic whine.

"Nothing," she snorted, "except that it gets in the way of everything."

"Gets in the way?" I whined again.

"Why don't you grow up and be a man?" she spat.

Carol wasn't a bad looking woman, and I considered myself lucky to have her. She was tall enough to look me straight in the eye, a rare quality in Chinese women, and her skin was as rich and soft as ochre suede. Her only real fault was that she was skinny, almost anorexic. No tits. No ass. And she had big feet. But she moved with the grace of a dancer. She told me once that she used to practice Kung Fu. I didn't believe her. Whenever I asked her to show me something, she would simply flap her arms like crane wings and high-step around the living room bobbing her head as if she were an egret spearing fish. Her face was round and flat. She had a short little nose, and her dark, heavily hooded eyes reflected an inner coolness. And I suppose cool best summed up Carol's character. She was cute, but icy. And the little

dimple in her chin always reminded me of Kirk Douglas or Robert Mitchum, and only accentuated that laid-back, cold quality.

“What do you mean ‘grow up,’” I asked slipping out of my pants.

“Just what I said, grow up! This is the real world you live in, not some library where you can spend all your time studying and researching everything.”

I met Carol in college. I was a graduate teaching assistant in the Philosophy Department, and she was a student in one of my classes. I suppose the qualities I liked best in her at that time were her honesty and forthrightness. We went on a picnic once in Grant Park. In fact, it was our first date. And I asked her in a light kind of way how it came to pass that she didn’t have a boyfriend. I didn’t know for a fact that she didn’t have one, and I was using the question as a ploy to find out just how available she was. She looked me straight in the eye and said, “I masturbate a lot.” She never lied to me, even when the truth was painful. I loved her for that. And I loved it when she would kiss me all over my face and say, “I love you, Ronnie.” The soft tone of her voice and her unflinching eyes gave credibility to her words. At last, I had found the kind of woman that I had been looking for for the bulk of my adult life, a woman in whom I could confide and who wasn’t afraid or ashamed to confide in me.

Sometimes it amazed me that I was the one she loved. She was so slick, high heels and Christian Dior fashions. And I was so seedy, patched Levi’s and run-over hiking boots. “I love you for your inner qualities,” she would say. “You’re kind and gentle, and I love you for being the way you are.” Three months after we met, we got married.

Shortly after our honeymoon was over, our problems began. She had graduated by then, and had a position as an accountant with a major downtown insurance company. I was still in graduate school working on my Ph.D. After about a year and a half, she got fed up. She asked subtle questions at first like, How does the job market look for

Ph.D. philosophers? Or, will we have to relocate if a job offer comes? Then one day she came right on out with it.

“Why don’t you leave the university, and get a job where I work?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“But you can’t do anything with a Ph.D. in philosophy.”

“I know, but I hadn’t planned to do anything with it.”

“Then why study it?”

“Because it’s there to be studied, and because I enjoy it.”

“And after you get your Ph.D.?” she asked.

“I’ll study something else.” It seemed obvious to me that one ought to spend one’s life in the pursuit of knowledge.

I finished getting undressed and slipped into my pajamas. Carol crawled into bed nude, her buttocks and back creased where her panties and bra had been.

“You’re a dreamer,” she said as she pulled the blankets up around her neck. “And I wish you would come down to earth.”

I crawled into bed next to her. “That’s the trouble with most of the people in the world today,” I said, “they don’t dream enough.”

I curled up on my side of the bed and closed my eyes, but I knew that Carol wasn’t ready to go right to sleep. She lay motionless for a long minute.

I listened as the cricket in the basement chirped incessantly. It chirped as if it were urgent that its song be heard. I felt sorry for it, though, because I knew that it was in the basement alone. There were no other crickets to hear it. It was chirping in vain.

I felt Carol stirring on her side of the bed. I regulated my breath hoping she would think I was asleep. She cuddled up behind me and moved her hand slowly across my waist and down to my crotch. A lump began to form in my stomach. She moved her face close to my ear.

“Ronnie,” she whispered, “let’s try again tonight.”

She pushed her hand gently between my legs. My pulse quickened. I felt myself respond. She rolled me over onto my back and eased her body onto mine. I could feel her nipples firm against my chest, her long dark hair in my face. She searched for my mouth with her own and kissed me deeply. She straddled my body. And when I was inside her, she began rotating her hips with a slow, even cadence. I braced myself hoping tonight would be the night. I felt the muscles in my face and arms and legs tighten as her cadence quickened. She began to moan in my ear, and I could feel the sweat between our bodies grow sticky. The muscles in my legs and feet became so tense they ached. I wanted her to hurry. I began to quiver from the tension. Carol's cadence was building to a climax, but I felt the pressure begin to slacken. I squeezed my eyes shut as I slipped out of her, and flopped limp and cold.

“Shit!” Carol said as she bolted back to her side of the bed. “Shit! Shit! *Shit!!!*”

I lay awake for at least an hour after it was over. And each chirp of that lonesome, doomed cricket reverberated in my heart and in my head and down to the core of my being, even into my sleep.

I dreamed that night. I dreamt that my voice had changed. Instead of speaking in my usual baritone voice, I chirrupped. And no words came out when I spoke. The only person that it seemed to bother was Carol. Everyone else listened to my chirps and understood. Some were even awed by my obvious wisdom. But not Carol. She grabbed a broom whenever I spoke and began swinging it at my head. She never managed to hit me because I would always duck down to the floor, and ducking seemed to render me invisible to her. But that bobbing up and down, even in a dream, got to be a chore, enough of a chore so that I woke up the next morning exhausted.

As usual, Carol was up and gone by the time I awakened. And after last night, I was glad. I never liked facing her the following morning. This morning was worse than the others, though. This morning I felt

as if I were losing my hold on reality, I was in such a quandary. What was I going to do? I didn't want to go through another night like last night, and I was tired of Carol nagging me about leaving the university. Yet I didn't want to lose her. I loved Carol. And even with our differences, I wanted us to stay together.

I rode my bicycle to school that day, because I had to do something to break up the pattern that my life had taken on. Riding my bicycle in the dead of winter seemed like the way to do it. It hadn't snowed in a while. So even though there were mounds of soot covered snow on lawns and sidewalks, the streets were clear except for an occasional ice patch. But the absence of snow notwithstanding, riding my bike to school was a bad idea. The high that day was zero degrees with a wind chill factor of forty below. Several people along the way shook their head and laughed as I rode by implying that I must be some kind of fool. And by the time I got to school I was in total agreement with them.

My class that day went well. We covered five homework problems, three that gave the class practice in translating sentences from English into statements of the sentential calculus we had developed, and two that exercised them in deriving the conclusions from the premises using the rules of derivation. By the end of the class, I felt as if I had helped nearly everyone in the class toward becoming better logicians. And that made me feel good.

Once back in my office, I worked on a paper that I was to present to the department the following week. In it I discussed what I considered to be some serious flaws in the accepted theories on the foundations of logic and mathematics, and in particular, in Gödel's derivation of the incompleteness theorem. The flaws as I saw them were serious but very subtle. And my arguments would have to be very persuasive, especially to convince the members of this department. I worked hard to make the paper as nearly perfect as I could.

At noon, I called Roger to ask him if he wanted to eat lunch together. He wasn't in his office.

Roger was a graduate student downstairs in the English Department. I'd known him for years, and I considered him to be my best friend.

We had first met as undergraduates, and our friendship grew shortly after we discovered that we had both been stationed in Germany while in the military. I was in the air force whereas he was in the army, and our respective bases were about a half a mile from each other. Even though we were both there concurrently for over a year, we never met. In retrospect, the reason we never met was obvious. He was black and I was white. And blacks and whites at that time in Germany traveled in completely different circles once off base. We ate at different *gasthauses*, drank at different bars. It really wasn't surprising at all that we had never met over there.

Roger was the one who had helped convince me that a mixed marriage in the United States of America in this day and age could work. And he was the best man at our wedding. But naturally, he wouldn't be in his office on a day when I desperately needed to talk to him.

I began feeling sorry for myself. What the hell was wrong with me anyway? Until a short time ago, I had never had trouble making love. The fact is, Carol and I had had a very passionate courtship, and the early part of our marriage was totally satisfying for both of us. Was I under too much pressure from school? Was I under too much pressure from her? I didn't know. The fact remained that I was suddenly impotent, and I didn't know what I was going to do about it.

The phone on my desk rang. It was one of my students with a question about the difference between universal and existential quantifiers. I explained it to her until she was satisfied. Then she said, "You don't sound well, Mr. Burns. I didn't say or ask anything to . . .

“ I cut her off and assured her that I was more than happy, indeed eager, to answer any question she wanted to ask. But I knew I didn’t sound very convincing.

Now I felt ashamed of myself as well. I was so upset about my home life that I couldn’t even answer a simple question and keep my mood out of my voice. I decided to cut my office hours short and go home. I called Roger’s office again, but he still wasn’t in.

The ride home was much like the ride to school: the wind was cold, the people laughed, and I felt like a damned fool. I pedaled as fast as I could, but the wind prevented me from making much progress. It was sheer luck that I hadn’t been blown off the bike altogether. And right in front of our house, my luck ran out. Just as I was turning into our walkway, a sharp gust out of the east caught me leaning the wrong way and toppled me onto the sidewalk. Fortunately, I was able to break my fall and roll. I wasn’t able to roll far, though. Partly propelled by the gust still coming out of the east, I rolled into a dark green Austin-Healy 3000 parked by the curb. And as rare as that car is in this town, it took me a moment to realize that it belonged to Roger. My pulse surged. At last I would be able to talk to him! But what was he doing here? I was sure he knew that I had a class to conduct and office hours today. That’s when I noticed Carol’s silver and black ‘Vette parked across the street. My pulse surged again. “Oh, my God!” I said aloud. I felt my stomach churn and knees grow weak. My whole body trembled as I fumbled to get my bike upright. I remembered Carol telling me once that Roger was one of the sexiest men she had ever met. “But it’s you I love,” she had said.

My vision was blurred because of the tears welling up in my eyes. Would Carol cheat on me? I thought of my performance last night. I sniffed and wiped my face on my sleeve in an effort to fight the tears back. My cold coat sleeve felt like sandpaper on my wind burned skin. I dug around wildly in my pockets for my key. And when I finally

found it, I couldn't get it to fit into the keyhole. I had the key upside down. It seemed as if I groped around trying to get the key in for an hour. But at last, leaving the bike outside, I lunged into the living room half expecting to see Roger and Carol on the couch, their clothes strewn across the floor. They weren't there. My mind reeled, and I couldn't seem to slow it down. Had she changed her mind about me? Tears ran freely down my cheeks as I turned for the bedroom. I remembered her looking me straight in the eye and saying, "I love you, Ronnie." My legs felt heavy, but I forced them one in front of the other. I was so blinded by tears and rage and terror that I did a double take when I saw them down the hall sitting at the kitchen table fully clothed drinking hot cocoa.

Roger was tall and skinny and dark as teak as he stood up to greet me.

"Brother-man," he said looking me in the eye and smiling. "We were just talking about you." His smile faded as he looked at my face. Deep furrows developed in his brow. "That wind really did you a job," he said. "Your eyes are tearing like mad." The light in the kitchen ceiling reflected off his clean shaven head and the gold earring he wore in his left ear.

"Yeah," I said wiping my face with the palms of my hands. "That wind is rough."

"I just got here a little while ago myself," he said. "Carol here called me and said she wanted me to talk to you about something. But we never got around to discussing what that something was." He looked around at Carol as if urging her to bring it out now.

Carol looked away from him.

"Well, I can't talk to him if I don't know what to talk to him about," Roger said.

"It's ok, Roger," I said. "I think we can work it out."

Carol looked at me and smiled a shallow smile that barely pulled at

the corners of her mouth. I smiled back.

“Ah-ha,” Rogers said looking at us smiling at each other. “Looks like I’d better get out of here before you two lose control.”

He got his coat and let himself out the front door. It was at that point that I noticed the cricket chirping, and realized that he had been chirping all along. But now I didn’t feel sorry for him. Granted, he was still down there alone, but he didn’t know that. He chirped as if his chirping would be heard, and that was all that mattered. He never gave up. The likelihood was that he was going to die alone in the basement. But he never gave up. He chirped, and I listened. And I wondered what was going to happen between Carol and me. The things we wanted were so different; I didn’t know how we were going to reconcile them. Right then, though, it didn’t matter. I felt a sheepish grin pull over my face as I realized how much Carol still loved me, and how stupid I had been to doubt her. The cricket began chirping with renewed enthusiasm. I looked over at Carol fumbling to fix a cup of cocoa for me as she fought back tears of her own. I went to her and held both her hands in mine and pressed them to my lips. I blinked my eyes and sniffed. I felt the blood gathering as she pushed her body tight against mine. I held my breath. I pulled her against me and kissed the side of her head and smelled the sweet oils and lotions she used on her hair and skin. Why had I never noticed before that her ears stuck out like little oyster shells? I rubbed my hands along the sides of her strong, thin body, and felt her tiny breasts growing firm beneath her sweater. I released my breath, pulling her closer. She sighed softly as I pushed my hand between her thighs. And in the basement, the cricket chirped and chirped and chirped.