

CICADAS IN THE SUBURBS

By Mary Leason

Mrs. Davis had the ability to freeze time. She could engage in any mundane task, like folding laundry or rinsing the dinner dishes, and in a moment the present suspended to make room for the past. Memories from the last 35 years lived again, spread out like rich canvases splashed with color and texture. On Sunday morning, it interrupted the task of sandwich-making. As she dragged the knife along the spongy white bread, and the peanut butter was smoothed into a caramel blanket, Mrs. Davis found herself in reverie.

She stood in a room, looking up at marketing images that spanned the wall like a bulletin board. A woman blowing dust from her hand that turned into dancing images further down the page. A powerful black swoosh that enigmatically stretched against stark white paper, creating images that may or not be there, like a Rorschach ink blot. A dress made of butterfly wings, draped in a window, daring little girls to become ballerinas. An impassioned woman with bright red lipstick and hair pulled back to the nape of her neck, peeking out from behind the lip of a Salsa costume as she dresses for the stage. But which of these images captured the idea of dance performance best? As Marketing Director, it was her job to choose. The power to create a vision for the public was intoxicating; she could imagine nothing more fulfilling, except perhaps gracing the stage herself.

“Mommy, that doesn’t look like a sandwich.” The small voice pulled Mrs. Davis back into the present, where she found a counter smeared with peanut butter and the remnants of a very sorry piece of bread.

It happened again, but this time she was walking the dog. They trotted along their usual route, down one side of the cul-de-sac to the other, beneath colorful autumn trees that threatened to lose their leaves. Most still clung to their mothers, fearful to make the death dance to the ground, but the smell in the air told them it was about time. As they were in the final stretch home, Sam the golden retriever led his human off the normal path to the adjacent cemetery.

While some might think it strange that anyone would want to live so close to a graveyard, Mrs. Davis had always found it to be pleasantly quiet and somehow comforting. She didn’t go out of her way to stroll among the plots, but when she did find herself there, she walked respectfully. Sam was not so careful as he pulled her along, deeper into the cemetery. Mrs. Davis sipped her pumpkin spice latte and she savored the warm liquid as it spilled into her mouth and down her throat. A smile met her lips for just a moment, as she examined the lipstick ring that was left on the cover of the coffee cup, and she was pulled back into her memories once again.

The wine glasses were lined up next to each other on the counter, each marked by a different shade of color. Hers was unapologetically bright red—a stain that portrayed confidence and spunk. Mattie’s thin mark was warm pink with sparkles, just like her personality. Eva’s was bold and voluptuous, burnt orange with a “come hither” faded outline. And Megan’s was somewhat in between in size, but very faint in hue, for she was a Chapstick girl and only tread into the world of gloss for special occasions. Laughter filled the air as they compared the residue of kisses that might be spent in regret or in life-long promises. A glass of wine among 20-something friends was always the time for sharing secrets, hopes, and dreams. It was her safe space and they were her retreat when the burdens of the world became too heavy.

Mrs. Davis was yanked out of her trance by a barking Sam and the cold sensation of wetness on her feet. She looked down to find herself on the edge of a pond in the middle of the cemetery. Startled, she backed up but lost her balance on the sloping edge. What was wrong with her? She sat for a moment, looking up at the large weeping willow that hung over the water gracefully, its leaves almost touching the surface. She thought she saw the outline of a cicada's exoskeleton there, hanging on for dear life, but could not be sure. Shaking her head as if clearing the fog, the woman held back tears. Most of the time, Mrs. Davis liked that she could freeze time, but lately it had been less of a choice and more a loss of control. Time, it seemed, was manipulating her.

As Sam and Mrs. Davis made their way home, she was frightfully aware of the fact that the bottoms of her khakis were wet and her soft pink sweater-set was marred with dirt from her fall. She walked quickly, hoping to avoid prying neighbors. Despite her stealth, the street was buzzing with activity, prepping houses for Halloween. But she noticed something as she returned friendly waves and ignored quizzical glances tossed in her direction. While the husbands and children seemed engrossed in the yard activities, many of the wives were not so.

They stood in the background, taking pictures and prepping snacks, on the periphery of joy. It would not be fair to say that Mrs. Davis accurately noticed this about all the wives, but she thought she did, and in some cases, she was right. Some noticed her, too, not because of the disheveled state of her outfit, but because of a camaraderie of sorts. Perhaps only those on the fringe notice when others linger there.

At 2011 Sunshine Lane, Mrs. Johnson watched as her sons played basketball, dribbling, shooting, scoring. A smile was pasted on her face but did not quite touch the corners of her eyes. Had she trained herself to avoid wrinkles or was she acting the part? She had become an observer even in her own life—a cheerleader only for others. Next door at 2013, Mrs. Williams sat beside her husband on the porch swing, listening intently (or appearing to) as he explained his upcoming work week. She was a passenger on the ride, at his mercy to steer her in one direction or the other. She gazed off to the side, her thoughts probably wandering into territory that just belonged to her, but her husband did not notice. And across the street at 2018, Mrs. Jones stood on her porch, watching everyone else busy at work, having no one to look after because her girls were back at college. As her eyes locked with those of Mrs. Davis, they seemed to narrow, the crows' feet sticking out like crooked tree branches. The pearls around her neck wound around aging skin like a tightening rope, and for just a moment, Mrs. Davis thought she saw them morph into skeletal hands. As her eyes drifted around the neighborhood, the wives appeared in various stages of irrelevance. She imagined them like cicadas seeking freedom, trying to crawl out of their former shells. Perhaps it had not been a good day to add rye whiskey to her pumpkin spice latte.

Later that week, Mrs. Davis sat quietly in the kitchen with her laptop. Dinner had been eaten, her kids were tucked into bed, and her husband rested in the living room with Sam, watching the news. With a glass of merlot in her hand, she clicked through websites of online colleges she had seen on TV that promised a path to reinvention. Could she find a new career at 35? Once she had been on top of her game; marketing came like second nature to her. But this was a new world filled with Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, and Snapchat filters (if she was honest, she did not even know what a "tweet" was). Even if she wanted to go back to work, the landscape had changed and she was no longer relevant.

It was then that she first heard the whisper. It started like a hum that might be wind through the trees or might not be. It was someone trying to breathe, but the exhale continued for far too long to be human. It paused... began to hum again.

Mrs. Davis stood from her perch at the counter and moved toward the window, which was slightly ajar. The night was charcoal outside, lit only by the distant lamps on the street, all the way on the other side of the house. Were her ears playing tricks on her?

But then she heard it again: “Ashhhhhhhh....” Mrs. Davis froze. The whisper dissipated into a secret, hushing the startled yelp that nearly escaped from her throat. Was there someone standing outside her window? She thought to call her husband but her throat would not cooperate. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the light flickering from the TV. He was probably asleep by now.

“Ashhhhhh!” came the whisper, more eager now, stabbing through the air to find her ears. She jumped back, the proximity of the voice alarming. With a burst of adrenaline, Mrs. Davis flicked on the light switch, flooding the backyard patio with light. But there was nothing to be found but wind-swept leaves that decorated the well-kept lawn. With a hard shove, she closed the window then drew the blinds, feeling comfortable again only when no prying eyes could invade her warm, safe kitchen.

As she sat back down at the computer and continued looking for her future on the myriad of websites that urged her to “chat now”, Mrs. Davis melted into the despair that grew in her heart. With every sip of merlot, she gulped down the dreams she once had of traveling the world, the freedom she felt at 25 that was nothing more than a recollection now. She loved her family—of course she did – but there had to be more than dancing on periphery of joy. She could not shake the feeling that time was running out.

The hush in the air drew her out to the stage, quietly, nymph-like. There she lingered in a graceful pose until the light woke her and the music floated closer, enveloping her body. It coaxed her into the soft ebbs and flows of rhythm, from her fingertips down her arms, through her torso and to her legs, which carried her across the stage and back again. Hundreds of eyes fed her passion, and she danced for them – with them—leaping and turning, until they were dizzy and moved to tears. As she settled back into a cocoon pose and the music receded into a soft lull, their applause filled her with hope.

Mrs. Davis woke with a jolt as her head slid from the keyboard onto the counter with a soft thud. The lights in the kitchen were on, the blinds were still drawn, and the TV glow shone from the living room. Had she fallen asleep? The clock on the microwave indicated 3:02am and the empty bottle of wine rested beside her, tauntingly. Embarrassed, even though no one was looking, Mrs. Davis stretched and planned to tiptoe across the kitchen floor. But when she looked down, she was horrified to discover that her feet were caked with mud. A set of dirty footprints led to the back door, which hung open in the cool autumn night. Through tear-filled eyes, Mrs. Davis cleaned up the evidence and crept up to bed without so much as waking her husband. She was going to have to stop drinking like this.

A week passed by. Halloween came and went without incident. The kids wore their costumes, joined the procession through the neighborhood, and yielded bags of candy that would have them on sugar highs for the next month. Most of the leaves had abandoned their trees, and lay crunchy and decaying on the ground. Talk of the Thanksgiving holiday had begun, with recipes for homemade cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie being traded among neighbors. But Mrs. Davis always marked this time of year by pulling out the winter coats and exchanging the candy-

rimmed “Trick or Treat” wreath on the door for the one decorated in “Natural Harvest”. Maintaining her environment helped her achieve a particular sense of control.

The first snow came earlier than usual, bringing with it a chill that Mrs. Davis could not quite shake. She had told herself firmly that there would be no more time-freezing and no more drinking. She was too old for these games. After all, she was a mother, had a mortgage on a lovely suburban home, and drove a mini-van; the days of adventure and fantasy would be left in the past, where they belonged. But sometimes the past does not listen... sometimes it has a mind of its own.

It was late one night that Mrs. Davis awoke to the sound of whispers. “Ashhhhhhhh...” they hummed. But this time, they did not scare her. They lulled her, like a string quartet pulling her onto the stage, coaxing her to lift her head from the soft, warm pillow. She slipped out from underneath the covers, her husband not even stirring from sleep. Placing her feet in everyday slippers, she envisioned ballet shoes, laced up her calves. Her nightgown was a delicate tutu and her robe the wings of a fairy. She glided down the hall, past the posed studio pictures that lined the walls, past the nightlight that glowed like a beacon, across the creaks in the floor that once would have woken sleeping babes.

“Ashhhhhhhh...” The whispers grew in strength, the voices increasing from a few to many.

Down the stairs she floated, like a diva entering an elaborate ballroom, graciously waving her arms and acknowledging her fans. The back door called to her like portal—the gateway to a theater that awaited her presence. She paused quickly at the hallway mirror, not seeing the eye cream and curlers in her hair, but rather stage makeup and a glistening tiara. This would be a performance to remember.

“Ashhhhhhhh!” No longer gentle, the whispers urged her forth.

Careful not to miss her cue, she floated to the door and crossed the threshold into the winter wonderland. The scene was just as she had imagined—a white sheen coated everything gently, and a soft blue hue hugged it like a mist in the full moon light. The breath escaped her mouth softly, in an adagio of its own, as her voice joined the whispers: “Ashhhhhhhh...”

Chasse, chasse, chasse. She moved down the cul-de-sac street in the ballet move, leaving grooves in the dusting of snow. She stopped and assumed fourth position, then: *Grand jete!* She leapt into the air gracefully, then landed and paused for dramatic effect. The applause was thunderous in her ears. *Chasse, chasse, chasse.* She continued on, her slippers still somehow on her feet.

By the time she arrived at the pond, her skin was like ice, but she could not feel it. She was lost in a snow globe, a winter fairyland, a child’s jewelry box that played *Fur Elise* and featured her alone. *Chasse, chasse, chasse.* She was at the edge of the water now. *Arabesque!* As she lifted up her leg behind her into the pose she had learned as a child, and leaned forward, she could see her reflection in the watery surface. It was not cold enough to be frozen yet, though the edges of the water were beginning to crust. The face looking back at her sparkled with fairy dust and her wings were spread out behind her like translucent crystal. She was a blown glass figurine, a topper for her daughter’s birthday cake with hair of spun sugar. The snow drifted around her like dandelion fuzz—a wish blown from the other side of the world, pushing her forward just a bit. As she teetered toward the other face, she leaned into the kiss, becoming one with the self she had not seen in many years.

“Ashhhhhhhhley!” The chorus sang. “Ashley!”

Touching the surface, the exoskeleton released her and brilliant wings inflated in its place. She had found herself. It was not time that had been chasing her, or even the past. It was the person she had left behind at the alter. The one who wanted to see faraway places and fulfill impossible dreams. She longed for the freedom to spread those wings—whether by gracing the stage herself or choosing images that empowered other little girls to do so. It was the music she had lost that now found her, the movement that had become so foreign that once filled her. She tumbled into the cold wetness, shattering the image of her old self and sending it in fragments to the edges. The ripple carried pieces of her away, making room for the parts she sought. Like broken china, she pulled the shards together one by one, on the other side of the surface, beneath the weight of a thousand teardrops. She spun around and around in a *pirouette*, a smile on her face as she folded back into a finale – a *coda* for a *pas de deux*. For a moment, both sides of the reflection were one, and then there was only Ashley, for Mrs. Davis had become a ghost.

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