

The Secrets of Cicadas

“Once I can distinguish between a premonition and a flashback, then I’m sure I’ll be able to deal with the present.” Nicolas said that two months after the event that in an instant redefined his life.

Shortly after the accident he began to hear phantom voices in the background. He tried to ignore them, but the same ones played over and over in his head. They grew increasingly ominous, discussing his chances of recovery. He suppressed them as best he could as he began learning to read again. Doctors had told his family that if he had been found earlier, the damage would have been much less. He had stumbled on the running path near dusk and struck his head on a rock, rendering him unconscious. No one found him until the next morning. In addition to suffering multiple skull fractures, his brain swelled to a life-threatening degree. He regained motor skills and some cognitive skills, but he was unlike the 28 year old who had decided to leave work early in order to fit a training run in before dark. Because of the hour, he left his running partner, Dusty, a spaniel mix with a dirty brown coat, at home. Had Dusty been with him, she certainly would have brought him help. He wondered about “what if’s” like this as he thumbed through *Green Eggs and Ham*.

In the ensuing days and weeks following his fall, Nicolas grappled with the most basic of issues. Not only could he not remember others, he lost touch with who he was. He struggled to recognize himself in a mirror. He couldn’t recall what he enjoyed doing. A single book repeatedly caught his attention. It stood alone from all of the others in his bookshelf, beckoning him.

One day he heard another voice from someone he assumed was a shrink describing what she called “temporal incongruities.” She referred to Nicolas in the third person, suggesting that he may suffer from this syndrome. He thought he heard her say something like, “You have to know your current location for a map to be of use in helping you to get where you want to go. The same is true with time. Without the knowledge of the direction of time.” This suggestion warped his very sense of being. She aptly described his enigma. He felt lost in a sand timer. He flowed with the sand particles, but was still unaware whether he was flowing into the future or the past. Even the present didn’t hold still. No matter how much he concentrated, he remained in flux, unable to distinguish past from future.

What he heard, or at least what he thought he heard, terrified him. He fought against revealing his panic. He feared that his shuddering or sweating brow would betray his emotions. But then he wondered why he was worried? He only heard voices. He looked around the room. Why wasn’t anyone around to help him?

He soon directed his attention back to the rogue book. He willed it to reveal its secrets, he tried to imagine what they could be. He became convinced that he was locked into a world infused with an ambiguity of time. A sense of urgency consumed him. He sat down with the book on his lap and read the cover notes. The protagonist suffered from mental disorders. He still had no memory of the book, but it felt to hold answers for him. He prayed that unraveling the mystery surrounding the book

would help to resolve his dilemma. He had no idea why, but somehow he believed it contained a lifeline to his recovery. And so it came to corral his imagination.

The title intrigued him, *The Secrets of Cicadas*. The forest green-colored cover sported an elaborate woodcut print of the primeval insect, reminding him of M. C. Escher's woodcut prints of stairways with no endings or beginnings. His joy returned upon realizing that the book was firmly anchored in his past. He had no need to contemplate its place on his convoluted timeline. But then he started thinking, wondering if it had not existed to play a part in his future, the future that had become his present. He gasped in anguish. He once again was trapped inside the sand timer. Only this time, the cover, the stairways and the connections between them presented him with a new outlook. He stood up and rushed to the bookshelf. Within the pages of the Escher book, he found the image he was looking for. He had never fancied himself as an ant until that moment. In an instant he realized that time wasn't his issue. He was an ant on a Möbius strip. Long ago, his grandfather had shown him how the ends of a narrow strip of paper can be twisted once, then taped together. And how the resulting loop-shaped object has a single side as shown by drawing a line, without lifting the point of the pencil from the paper, along the middle of the strip until it touches the starting point. A single line appears on what once were both sides of the paper. The strip has no beginning nor end.

Nicolas was traversing such a path with no beginning, no end, and only a single side. He could travel in either direction, it didn't matter. He was locked into a special space, on a single path. He called out to the shrink about his realization. She did not respond. He shouted to her and shook his head to summon her attention. The pain in his skull reminded him to settle down and focus on something less disturbing.

He returned to reading from *The Secrets of Cicadas* until he awoke to a throbbing pain in his head. It felt as if someone was tugging on his brain. He attempted to resist, but he felt restrained. It felt like this every time. After a while the distraction subsided and he looked down to see the book lying open on the floor.

He had read that the protagonist was an artist, one in need of a friend or even a willing ear at the local bar. But even children scattered like cockroaches in the light when he walked into a room. Some felt anger, others, pity. What mattered most was that he no longer was simply tragic, he had evolved into toxic. Filth-ridden outbursts and violence typically accompanied his dissatisfaction with something, anything, even the weather. As he read, Nicholas had a vivid image of the man and his actions. He felt as though he was watching him from a distance, fearful of being noticed. One unruly and violent performance earned the man a supervised visit to the emergency room followed by a night at the local jail. Walking home from the lockup he saw a dead cicada lying feet up on the sidewalk. He knelt down to study it. It spoke to him. And he listened. He carefully cradled it in his hands and carried it to his apartment where it became the subject of an extended series of sketches and woodcuts.

Nicolas found the book sales receipt between pages 38 and 39. It was bought three years before his accident. He thought back to that time, but nothing clicked. It had been purchased with a gift card. That he had saved the receipt perplexed him

the most, he never saved receipts. Or was it a gift? The additional clues increased his confusion. But that, he reasoned, was also true when seeking to understand life.

He committed himself to finding a way to extricate himself from the endless path of the Möbius strip. He had a new mission. He believed that the book would provide him guidance. He knew it made no sense, but then neither did his situation. If he could only recall how he came to own it. He was certain that scrap of information held an important key. His patience abandoned him. He stopped reading and began frantically flipping through the pages, looking for a passage, a word, a footnote, anything that would trigger a memory. A premonition would suffice. Even a hallucination. His jaw dropped at that thought. Yes, why hadn't he thought of that? In his present state of mind, a hallucination could make perfect sense.

He returned to the book. In his desperate page turning, he saw the word "abyss." He instantly found himself standing precariously on the Möbius path looking into a gaping chasm below, as it grew ever larger. He felt it summoning him, reassuring him that the answer he was seeking lay within. After suffering so much confusion, Nicolas began to succumb to the promise of relief. One of the earlier voices returned and spoke to him. All he could discern was the word "easy." Easy what? As in easy, let go? Or easy, guy, don't do it? He lied down on the path, with his hands clenched, clinging to its edges, terrified that he might somehow tip it, as he once did as a child, before falling out of a hammock onto his head.

His terror transmuted to greater confusion. The path, the abyss were forgotten. He was ushered back to a dank classroom inside a dreary sky. He was learning, living the meaning of an existential crisis. Why there, why then, why him, why at all? He touched his face and head and barely recognized himself. His hair was shaved. He still had tubes in his head. He was sore and swollen. He feared that he had fallen into the abyss and not realized his hopes for understanding. He tried to terminate the hallucinations, but they held him tightly. And then he again heard "easy." "Easy what?!?" he demanded to know.

He felt to be levitating. He watched a pajama-clad woman using a long blade, opening the earth with a determined single slice. She peeled open the soil just enough to slip him inside, as if it were a zippered garment bag. Only his head remained exposed. He had no fear, not even curiosity. He felt soothed. Comfortable. Calm. Where he should be. And then it happened.

He opened his eyes and looked into a mirror across the room from the bed in which he was lying. He saw massive bandages around his head. His hallucinations quickly unraveled and dissipated. He had no concept of time before awakening, for the simple reason that he had emerged from the earthen cocoon of his imagination. He had spent the last many days confined inside a medically induced coma nightmare. He would soon be reunited with his family and Dusty. He would soon finish reading *The Secrets of Cicadas*. He would soon learn that cicadas evade detection from the emergence of their predators by employing life cycles based on large prime numbers. Now, Nicolas had an extraordinary secret of his own. He, too, had learned to become invisible... even to himself.