Cricket

Kenneth Yu

About *Tai mah's* portrait rose tendrils of incense smoke, framing her visage in distinct waves of white curls. In their movement, they seemed more alive than the blank eyes and expression of the woman that the multiple red joss sticks had been lit for. They were much shorter now, having been burning for hours.

Unlike the smoke, the long lines of the family Chuang, extended family, and long-time friends and associates had long since dissipated. Everyone had made their obeisance, waved their sticks, and stuck them in the sand-filled pot. Everyone had caught up with each other, everyone's stories shared and told. The late, mid-afternoon lunch had been served—care of Lucy, from the heart of her domain, the kitchen—but dusk had fallen, and the leftover food turned cold, which brought the last set of straggling visitors to their feet and to their goodbyes. It was a Saturday, and one year to the day, by the count on the lunar calendar, since the matriarch of the clan had passed into heaven, her age a venerable 108, the most long-lived of a long-lived set of sisters—even if the last 18 had been spent in a senile cloud that never cleared. Come the end of dusk, the house at last turned quiet except for the clink of china and silverware from the back kitchen, the distant sounds of residual dishwashing by the house-help.

Richard, Lucy, and their son David had retreated to the second floor of *Tai-mah's* house; the hosts were tired, and Richard grumbled all the way upstairs about the burden of being the youngest son, whose role and misfortune had been to care for such a long-lived mother, and whose responsibilities stretched so even after death. David, five and oblivious, played with a toy truck on the floor with his *yaya*. Lucy rested quietly on the couch, not even bothering to reach for the television remote control. She felt empty, and certainly did not have the energy to utter the words that would point out to her husband that she had played the role of host for the guests more, while he concentrated on his friends, brothers, and bottles of whiskey; that she had cooked and baked in the hot kitchen since early that morning while he slept; that while his brothers and sisters had indeed moved out years before, when they were all much younger, and he, the sho-ti, had been the one obliged to stay behind, he had been the one to inherit his mother's house—quite a large one. Now that she was gone, it was all theirs, even if it had taken 108 years for it to happen. They could sell it and move to a smaller, more manageable space, one they would own, she wanted to say, to leave behind all his complaints, and the weight of all her memories. But despite his misery, Richard never talked about moving, and so she left the words on her tongue, which became heavier with time passed and time still to come.

By nine-thirty that evening, everyone in the household lay in bed, even the house-help; they had only bothered to watch one soap opera on the small TV provided for them in the back kitchen before turning in; they were that exhausted. The living room, which led to the dining area with a large lauriat table—beyond which were the sliding doors that, when open, extended to the veranda and a garden—lay quiet. This was where all the guests had mingled, laughed, and talked; but now, the air hung still, as the joss sticks burned down, small, ember-red eyes glowing in the dark. Slowly, each one burned to a stub. When the last one winked out, dropping its ash-tip onto the pot's sand--when the last of the curls of incense smoke wafted up and

vanished before the eyes on *Tai-mah*'s portrait, a black cricket chirped and made its way forward from behind the pot.

From what little filtered in from the outside, its carapace caught light and reflected back a soft sheen. Moving forward, antennae trembling, it chirped once more, leaped forward, and landed on a high shelf with a photograph of *Tai-mah* when she was much younger; and then, after dropping its head in a bow, sighed, very much like a person in resignation of some daunting task.

Richard's voice half-caught in his throat, which gave him a chance to change what he was about to say. Masking the many words he had intended with a cough, he instead only said, "Yes," and hastily took his cup and gulped several mouthfuls of coffee.

"Furthermore," said the cricket, in front of a seemingly stoic Lucy and a laughing, amused David, "you would do well to stop all your drinking, you and your brothers. I'm glad that none of you ever got into smoking. The smell! Heaven should be grateful for small blessings, few as they are."

The cricket had made its appearance at breakfast in the kitchen, dropping from somewhere above and startling the family. It had chirped its greeting: "Good morning." Lucy was the first to recover and greet it back—then, in a split second, blush at the absurdity of it all—but her embarrassment was immediately replaced with acceptance. David just smiled and clapped his hands. Richard took the longest to come to himself, before unfurling the newspaper he crumpled in his hands. The cricket sniffed, and addressed Richard immediately about his eating habits; before him was a plate of fried, fatty sausages and a double-heaping of rice, presenting itself like the evidence of a crime.

"This was prepared by Lucy!" Richard had replied, shifting the blame.

"Yes, every day," remarked the cricket, "on your instructions." A darkness touched Richard's heart at that moment, a fear he thought he had escaped, or at the very least, could ignore.

"And you," the cricket said to Lucy, no less firm, but with a just a hint more kindness, "you may want to use that head of yours a bit more!" Lucy was taken aback, having expected some other kind of rebuke. In her mind lay the notion that she was the ideal wife, one that had been there for years even before her wedding. But for some reason, whether it was the timing of the cricket's words—that she was, for that morning, for that very moment, in the appropriate frame of mind and heart—or whether it was the way the cricket said it, she began to question where exactly she stood in the frame of her marriage. Instead of finding herself feeling any number of emotions that she otherwise could have expected, she instead found herself, strangely enough, uplifted with hope. Granted, it was only a small hope, less than a spark, but she liked it enough to consider ways to feed it.

The cricket turned to David.

“You are a happy one,” it said. David, as if in agreement, laughed louder. “But isn't everyone, at your age?”

The cricket surprised them all when it took a long hop and landed on David's bare arm. It brushed its antennae gently on the young boy's skin. Up close, and given the insect's size—it easily covered half of David's forearm—it was quite fearsome-looking. Its mandibles were sharp, and its legs thorny stems that ended in clawed hooks. It was all angles, points, and sharp edges, and gave the impression that it was in a constant state of bristling. But where Lucy held her breath at how close it was to her son, and where Richard's hands tightened into fists and his body tensed in apprehension, David showed no fear, no sense of any danger. He just smiled at the cricket, and even dared to reach out and reciprocate by stroking with his fingers the length of its body. Lost in his touch was the natural roughness of a young child, replaced by what could have been affection.

“Hello,” David said to it.

“Well!” the cricket replied. “Let's see how you all are, then.” It hopped back onto the table, then off, and disappeared into the kitchen's darker recesses and crevices. For the rest of the morning, it popped up with its comments and complaints, to further surprise the family as they went about their business.

Lucy nearly dropped the lid of the wok she was cooking in, when the cricket hopped from the floor to the table beside her hot stove. It remarked right away that it found her too sullen. “You are doing something you do well,” it said. “And yet, you do not smile. Why do it, then?” It hopped away to perch on a ledge near the ceiling, overlooking the entire kitchen.

This time, Lucy found within herself a sense of rising to the challenge of the cricket's question. She began moving with more vigour around the kitchen, actually banging her ladles and utensils against the wok, chopping food for lunch with force, stirring and frying with an energy she did not usually exert, cooking with insistence. What she was insisting on she did not know, but she acted in defence of herself, of who she was, and while doing so, she began, as the cricket commented, using her head.

She was not unintelligent; she had been near the top of her class when she was a student, though she did only a couple of year's work as a teller at a local bank before she married Richard. They met through their parents' mutual friend, and knew each other for nearly a year before the marriage had been set, agreed upon by both of them and their parents. It seemed so natural. She was no great beauty, and her family was not rich, so she knew her prospects were narrow. Richard seemed like a nice enough man, six years her senior, though she did not like the way he scratched himself in places when he thought no one was looking, or the way she caught him slipping off his shoes under the dinner table to curl his toes. He said the right things, to her parents as well as to her. The issue of him being the youngest in a family of six boys and five girls came up only once, but her parents, particularly her mother, brushed it aside as unimportant. She had not known what to think of marrying a youngest son, and so thought

nothing of it herself, until the days after her wedding stretched into the weeks, months, and years of being anchored to a filial duty that her husband resented, and infected her with. Looking back now, it had not been so bad after all; she learned to cook from her mother-in-law, and became as good, if not better, than her. When the older woman became too old to cook, the kitchen became hers.

Became hers, she realized. For the first time in a long time, she smelled the spices from the steaming food in front of her, tasted their sharp tangs, and broke into a smile that took years of lines and inherited bitterness from her face.

David sat on the living room floor alternately reading his picture books and playing with scattered toys. When his yaya saw that he was behaving, she left him to help outside in the garden with hooking the laundry onto the clothesline, still within sight of him but separated by some distance and the sliding glass-paneled doors. The cricket made itself visible across the floor from him; he smiled at it but did not move toward it. Instead, David picked up a book and read aloud from it, as if to no one in particular but really intending for the cricket to hear his words. The insect inched closer and closer, and when it was near, David allowed it to perch itself on top of his shoulder. He finished the book, and another. By the end of the fifth book, the cricket found itself on the coffee table, on a level with David's eyes. They regarded each other quietly. They did not need to exchange any words. The cricket watched David, aware of his youth, and to its eyes he seemed like a clean blank sheet of paper on which anything could be drawn or written.

Since breakfast, Richard had moved restlessly around the house. He could not stay still, moving from the ground floor to the second and back down again, consciously wandering between rooms and sections of the house that were empty. He avoided the kitchen, knowing his wife was there; he did the same for outdoors, where the house help was busy; several times he passed his son sitting on the living room floor, engrossed in his books and toys, and paid him no mind.

The feeling of dread had magnified since the cricket's first appearance. He could not lay a finger on or say clearly what he feared, but he sensed some impending trepidation, a moment of reckoning that he had to face, and he knew he was not ready and would most certainly be found wanting. As to why, he could not say. But he blamed the cricket.

Eventually, he chose his sanctuary in the small, corner stockroom he converted many years ago into a home-office. He would normally never enter this room on a Sunday, but today he found himself walking into it. He shut the door behind him and sat at his desk, settling into an old, fraying, office chair. The desk was covered in old receipts and invoices, correspondence, and office bric-a-brac that had piled up over time. Many of the documents were on matters that were long overdue for his attention, which he procrastinated on, and did not even glance at. Instead, he sat back, put his hands behind his head, closed his eyes, and resolved to forget the morning and the cricket through an activity he often engaged himself in: self-pity.

He thought about money, how little he had and how dependent he was on the salary he was given from the family business, run by his *Ahiya*--his eldest brother--and his wife, who controlled its finances. How all his other brothers seemed to be doing better, whether with their own professions or their private, family lives. How they all seemed to be able to travel and go to different places as they pleased, while he had to wait to be invited so that he could share rooms and meals and other accommodations to fit his shoestring budget. How his sisters seemed to have married into what they wanted, for the most part, but really, their lives did not matter so much to him as his brothers', in comparison. He laughed and put up a front when he was before them, of course —nothing was wrong, everything was all right, I'm doing fine, I can handle this, I'm content. All his worries he would never admit to anyone, but he blamed the secret unfairness of it all on his being the youngest in the family, neither for the first time, nor the last. Why must the burden of being left behind to care for the aging parents always fall on him? He let the self-pity wash over him, mixing it with the images of his brothers in their own homes, his sisters with their husbands, and the pity and scorn he believed he saw in their eyes, and yes, even in their children's eyes, whenever they saw him. There was no respect there, he was certain of it, even when they greeted him with smiles and hugs.

What had his *Achi*, his eldest sister, once said about him? That he was the slowest and most dim-witted of them all. The duty of tutoring all of them through school fell to his eldest sister, and he recalled how strict she was with all of them. She expected nothing but good grades, saying how important it was for their future, but it was with a forlorn expression that he would often watch his other siblings leave the study table ahead of him, yes, even his youngest sister, the flighty, bubble-headed one who had gone against her father, shunned the Chinese-Filipino he asked her to meet, and instead married a Swiss-Canadian; even she seemed to be better off in Canada, a first-world country. It was so unfair that many of his siblings needed so little effort to pass their exams while he would spend hours, hungry and past dinner, studying and memorizing, only to do poorly on his tests. *Achi* shouted and scolded and put up her hands in exasperation, and come high school he finally shouted back. She left him then to his own devices, and it took him five years to pass high school instead of four, and a bit longer to get through college. But he got through! Yet, it seemed as nothing compared to how everyone else had done. *Achi*. She was a successful accountant, and the way she remained distant from him ever since he broke off from her stood out in stark contrast to the way she comported herself with the others.

"Perhaps," the cricket chirped from an upper shelf where boxes of old car parts had been stored, "you would be better off humbling yourself instead of presenting yourself so highly."

Richard opened his eyes, found the insect, and glared at it. "What would you know?"

"Enough. Much. Too much," the cricket said. "Even you must admit that for all your posturing, your siblings know the truth."

"How could you know?" Richard said. He felt his blood rising to his face.

The cricket ignored the question. "Many of your brothers are the same as you. They are not the same as their outward appearances of success. Behind their public faces, they have great

failings in their homes. You may draw consolation from this, but in truth, it is a tragedy, because you, your family, are all the same.

"Why not humble yourself?" the cricket repeated. "For your sake. For your wife's. For your son. Never mind your siblings, for now, but you would be much happier for it."

"You leave my son out of this!"

"He is a good boy. He could be successful, in the right way. Don't infect him with your bitterness!"

Richard could no longer control himself. He felt his rage rise at the insolence of the insect which dared to speak to him in this manner. He reached for the nearest object—a mug used as a pen holder—stood up in a rush, which sent his chair crashing against the wall, and threw the mug at the cricket with all his might.

His aim was off and the mug crashed and broke into many pieces just to the right of its target. An explosion of pens and white ceramic burst and fell to the floor. The cricket jumped and fled, squeezing through a small hole in the upper corner of the doorway and out into the main portion of the house.

Richard flung the door open and gave chase, brandishing one of his slippers. He limped quickly after the cricket, one foot unshod, swinging his arm at the cricket in wild, violent arcs and screaming invectives at it. The cricket flew fast to the left, to the right, avoiding Richard, leaping and flying as fast as it could for dear life. Richard, throwing all caution away, went after it, hitting and bumping his body against furniture and shelves, toppling them over and sending picture frames, vases, books, and appliances crashing to the marble floor.

The noise brought Lucy from the kitchen, her mouth agape in shock and fear. She ran for her husband to try and hold him back, but when she saw him follow the cricket into the living room, taking a swing that dealt a glancing blow to David's forehead, she forgot everything else and gathered her wailing son into her arms and carried him to the corner of the room, shielding him with her body.

All the doors and windows were closed; there was nowhere for the cricket to run. It flew as high as it could, from one upper corner to another, but Richard's rage fuelled him and gave him strength beyond what energy the insect could maintain in escape. It flew much more slowly, and much lower, leapt in slower flight, until, with a mighty swing, Richard connected at last with a satisfying *thwack*, sending the cricket smashing against the wall. It fell to the ground, and Richard was upon it, bringing his slipper down on it again and again, shouting incoherently all throughout until he could no longer lift his arms and needed to stop, to at last draw in great deep breaths for his tired body. The cricket lay at his feet, a mess of yellowish-green viscous fluid mixed with the smashed mess of its crushed body.

"What did you do?" Lucy screamed, cradling David's head against her chest. "Why did you kill it?" The bump on David's forehead was turning into an angry red. He struggled

hysterically against his mother, reaching out with his hands and arms for the cricket; it was all she could do to hold him.

"Shut up!" Richard shouted back. "Just... shut up! And shut him up, too!"

"Why did you kill it?" she repeated. "David liked the cricket! We could have kept it for him!"

Richard did not immediately answer. Instead, he turned away. The anger, spent like a volcanic eruption, was leaving him. He felt drained of energy, but not of the dread and fear. No, those remained, like a loaded gun still aimed and readied against his chest. He could not explain what he did, or why. But his pride and bitterness—and yes, his self-pity—those he did not even try to push away.

"He'll get over it," Richard said to Lucy, and he put all the cold arrogance he could muster into his words.

Something hit him on his head. It hurt, but only slightly, not enough to cause him to even shout out. He turned and saw his son standing defiantly up against him, one foot also unshod, his face a mask of hatred and anger. The slipper he had thrown at his father lay on the floor and to the side after having bounced off Richard's head.

Richard stared at the thrown slipper, then at his son, and then he could only stumble in a daze back to his home-office. The dread and fear inside him increased with each step, and even when he closed the door behind him, he knew that it would not be enough to keep his tragedy away.

Source:
Mouths to Speak, Voices to Sing, Stories by Kenneth Yu, Copyright © 2013 by Kenneth Yu

Lauriat: A Filipino-Chinese Speculative Fiction Anthology. Ed. Charles Tan. New Jersey: Lethe Press, 2012.