Between the Species

CONVERSATION WITH A CRICKET

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In the late-autumn world, in fields clamorous with crickets, untold billions calling to each other, to the opulent harvest earth, and to multitudes of creatures such as myself whom they sense moving about in the misty sunlight---I

FICTION

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take a path through high grasses, golden rod, purple thistle, and milkweed. I am carrying food for my bird brethren of the woods, whom I feed daily. My knees are crippled by arthritis; my slow, painful steps are made with even greater care to avoid stepping on a cricket comrade.

The path is clearly defined. I can see if a cricket is in my line of advance and veer aside. But if one has stopped dead and I gauge how to make my move—and then throw my weight forward so as to keep out of his way in landing—if I do this and he leaps suddenly, I can be lost, doomed—because I cannot arrest my weight in mid-motion.

As I step, the spry fellows spring away to safety from in front of and beside me; they go in showers of gray and metallic green, catapulting, arching, disappearing in deep grass. "There are so many," I think, "though I try to land beyond their range, how is it possible I am not crushing any?" I keep looking to see if one is wounded, writing in the path. With all the will-power of my love I cry silently: "Oh living Christ of mercy, help me to avoid them."

I can feel my love raying out to shield my friends. But can that alone protect them? I marvel at their safety. Crouching down, I ask one if he can explain. His voice is lean and springy like his body:

"We know our brethren, of whatever species; we sense them coming; we observe your foot descending before it happens and leap to escape, diverting you also by thought projectile. We catch the enormous impulse of your will-power, the love behind your acts; it helps to give us reflex, to direct our movements."

"What is a thought projectile?" I ask

It is a prayer form, love made tangible, dynamic—and efficient. A being's maturity is measured by the inclusiveness of its love—plants, animals, insects, trees, stones—all that lives—and everything lives. It is this

maturity, this cosmic love that shapes the universe. But within the one universe there are billions of smaller ones reflecting individual evolutions toward perfect compassion. Love creates its own world, its own reality—a miracle of truth. But its power is open only to the meek, the simple and plain, those who love in humility and who reject the arrogance of the worldly—who seek status and power materialistically.

"And so the crickets create their safety because they will it, they cause the reality?"

"Yes. By the will-power of love—but it is all part of an inter-relationship, an interchanging and inter-fusion. We shield ourselves partly because we send love out toward you and because you are sending yours to us. Each must have the other. Your love directs us: we fly from your feet by psychic vibration, arrowed by an extra sense. You place your foot as though guided by a computer, in the one spot where you will do us no harm, will not touch us—but only because our compassionate will interacts with yours."

"Then you, the crickets, send out help to me, the human?"

"Yes, in a multitude of times and ways you are unaware of consciously, but subconsciously perceive and are guided by."

I stood up. The sunlight bound me in a genial vise of strength. My pulse raced with rejoicing and recognition.

"Thank you," I said. "I will be more alert to the invisible. I am sure that in the past I have received the bounty of such reciprocal guardianship without realizing it."

A few days later a man telephoned me to ask for aid. A baby robin had fallen from its nest. The caller had not put it back because he had heard that a mother bird will not feed a baby that has been touched by a human hand.

"A ridiculous old wives' tale," I told the man. "Absolutely insane. And tragic. It kills so many thousands of

nestlings every year. I have saved hundreds of youngsters over the last twenty years by returning them to their homes, where the mother continues to feed them. What have you done with the baby you found on the ground?"

"We have so many roving cats in the neighborhood that could kill it; I took it to Tamarack and put it in the woods along a side road I travel near every day on my way to work. There is practically no traffic and I figured the bird could find its own food and survive."

"Tamarack! My God, man! That's thirty miles away! The baby can't feed itself at that age. It's helpless. It will die! Dear Christ!"

I asked him if he would go back there with me and point out the place where he had left the bird. He agreed. We drove the thirty miles at a heady pace.

The side road was lonely, quiet. I got out of the car with feverish anxiety. If only some other mother bird had heard the baby robin calling and had fed it! But I knew this seldom happened in Nature. More likely some predator had discovered and eaten it. There was a brook running parallel to the road; we searched there first, thinking the baby might have been drawn by the sounds of flowing water. We went up and down, calling. We listened intensely. We went across the road and farther back into the woods on both sides, calling, calling, listening.

"Almighty God," I kept crying out under my breath, "help us to find him. May he still be alive."

The man who had left the bird here, Raymond Devaux, was sharply beset by guilt.

"I did it. I didn't know. I'm to blame," he kept saying. "We've got to find him."

We went back and forth over the same ground again and again, starting at the point where he had placed it. I was sick with amazement, grief, despair. How could anyone be so stupid as to bring a baby bird thirty miles from the mother, and---

even more incredible---think it would feed itself.

A half hour must have passed.

Finally, I said, "Raymond, I don't see how, if he's alive, he could travel this far from the spot where you left him, if he's as small as you describe him. The tendency also would be to crouch in one place and call for his mother."

"And we haven't heard a peep," Raymond said. "No," I answered, "and that's what mystifies me---no bird cries of any kind."

Raymond was quiet, downcast, defeated. "Yes," he said, "we've hit bottom."

I started to turn back to the car. Raymond was standing on the opposite side of the road from me. Some impulse made me cross the road to him rather than return to the car. Raymond was staring into space, motionless, miserable. Some power greater than reason or circumstance made me go up close to him. I stopped, looked down past his shoulder. A spark sprang alive in my heart and raced into every part of me.

"Jesus God!" I whispered, spellbound. "There he is! There's the robin!" He was standing two feet from Raymond's shoe. Raymond could easily have stepped on him. He looked down. "Good Christ," he exclaimed, "---so near me, and I didn't see him."

"He didn't move, that's why," I replied. "He was afraid of us. That's why he didn't call out. Right on the verge of leaving, and we find him. Something took you close to him, Raymond, made me cross the road."

"A damned miracle!" Raymond remarked softly. "It's more than that," I answered. "Much more."

I bent down and picked up the baby bird. He was soft, calm, unresisting. For a moment his eyes looked at me steadily.

I thought of the cricket.

178

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