柳树底下的比赛

暑假里我们一伙人捉知了，最热闹的是在村口那几棵大柳树下。树底下放牛的老爷爷都认识我们，看见我们举着网兜跑过来，就把牛往边上牵，给我们让出树下来。我们五个人定了比赛规矩：一人捉一只，谁先捉到谁赢，输的人明天带冰棍。

中午的柳树底下又闷又吵，知了的叫声从头顶压下来，一只叫，一片跟着叫，震得耳朵嗡嗡的。我们仰着头分散开，一人盯一棵树。我盯的那棵上有一只大黑知了，趴在树杈上叫得最响，我一看就觉得稳了。

我举着网兜悄悄靠近，网兜举过头顶，胳膊举得又酸又抖。离三步远，知了停了。我僵在原地。我们组里的刘壮从后面赶过来，踩着一截干树枝，咔嚓一声。知了嗡地飞起来，绕着柳树飞了一圈，落在我头顶上方的枝上。我抬头看它，它低头看我，我气得直跺脚。

更逗的是刘壮。他盯上一只，猛地举网扑捉，网没罩住知了，罩住了一只马蜂。马蜂在网里乱撞，刘壮脸都白了，举着网兜原地转圈，喊救命。我们吓得四散跑开，蹲到远处的庄稼地边，看他举着网兜一路小跑，把网兜扔进沟里，自己一屁股坐在地上喘。

最后是瘦小的周雨捉到的。她捉知了不用猛扑，她举着网兜在树下慢慢转，转到知了背面那侧，从下往上轻轻一扣，网口贴住树皮，知了连飞都没飞起来。她捏着网兜口走过来，脸不红气不喘。我们四个输的，第二天一人一根冰棍。

放牛的老爷爷笑我们，说他们小时候捉知了不用网，用面筋。揪一小团面筋粘在竹竿头，往知了身上一按就粘住了。我们听得眼睛都直了，回家缠着大人要面筋。那年夏天我们后来真用竹竿粘知了，比网兜还灵。

现在想起来还是好笑：刘壮举着网兜转圈的样子，周雨轻轻一扣的样子，还有老爷爷牵牛让树的样子。大柳树的知了年年叫，我们一伙人暑假还凑在那儿，比谁先发现，比谁手法轻。捉知了这件事，一个人捉是好玩，一伙人捉才是趣。

The Contest Under the Willows

In summer vacation our whole gang caught cicadas together, and the liveliest spot was under the big willows at the village entrance. The old herdsman under the trees knew us all. When he saw us running over with nets in our hands, he led his cow aside and gave us the shade under the trees. Five of us set the rules of a contest: each person catches one cicada, the first to catch one wins, and the losers bring popsicles the next day.

Under the willows at noon it was hot and noisy. The cicada songs pressed down from overhead — one started and a whole chorus followed, buzzing in our ears. We spread out with our heads tilted up, each of us watching one tree. In my tree sat one big black cicada, singing loudest of all on a fork of the branch, and I thought victory was sure.

I crept closer with the net raised above my head, my arm aching and shaking. At three steps away, the cicada stopped. I froze in place. Then Liu Zhuang from our group came hurrying up behind me and stepped on a dry branch with a loud crack. The cicada buzzed into the air, circled the willow once, and landed on a branch right above my head. I looked up at it; it looked down at me. I stamped my feet in frustration.

The funniest one was Liu Zhuang. He spotted his target, thrust the net up in one big pounce, missed the cicada, and trapped a hornet instead. The hornet crashed around inside the net, Liu Zhuang turned pale, and he spun in circles on the spot shouting for help. We scattered in fear and crouched by the crops in the distance, watching him jog away with the net raised, finally flinging it into a ditch and sitting down hard on the ground, gasping.

In the end it was skinny little Zhou Yu who caught one. She did not pounce. She walked slowly around the tree with the net raised, worked her way to the far side of the cicada, and flicked the net up gently from below, pressing the rim against the bark before the cicada could even fly. She walked over holding the net opening shut, face not even red, breathing not even fast. The four of us who lost each bought her a popsicle the next day.

The old herdsman laughed at us and said that when he was small they caught cicadas without nets, using wheat gluten. You pinch off a small ball of gluten, stick it on the end of a bamboo pole, and press it onto the cicada — it sticks right there. Our eyes went wide, and we went home begging the grown-ups for gluten. Later that summer we really did catch cicadas with the bamboo pole, and it worked even better than the net.

It still makes me laugh to think of it: Liu Zhuang spinning with the net, Zhou Yu flicking it up so gently, and the old herdsman leading his cow aside to give us the tree. The cicadas in the big willow sing every year, and our gang still gathers there in summer vacation, competing on who spots one first and who has the lightest touch. Catching cicadas alone is fun — catching them as a gang is where the real fun lives.