第五下松开爪子

暑假傍晚，大树底下的凉风刚起来，知了的叫声就稀了。这时候最好玩的不是捉会飞的知了，是捉土里的知了猴——刚钻出地面、还没爬高脱壳的那种。我跟表哥每人拿一个手电筒，一人守半棵树，光贴着树干扫。

知了猴比我想的慢。它趴在树根往上一点的地方，爪子抠着树皮，一动不动，像一坨泥。表哥先发现一只，喊我别动，他伸手捏它后背。知了猴的腿张开，扒得更紧。表哥说不能硬拽，得顺着它，让它以为树还在动。他手指轻轻晃，知了猴松了一下爪，一下就进了他手心。

我照着做。手电筒咬在嘴里，光一晃，我看见一只，蹲下去伸手。它扒得死紧，我晃了两下它不松，我急了，指甲抠着它旁边树皮一起揭，差点把树皮抠破。表哥说停，让我重新来。这回我耐住性子，手指托着它肚子底下慢慢晃，晃到第五下，它的爪子一根一根松开了，落进我手心。它在我手心里爬，腿扎扎的，痒得我直咧嘴。

我们捉了十几只，装在一个带盖的塑料盒里，盒壁上扎了洞。回家放在阳台的纱窗上。第二天一早去看，知了猴背着裂开一条缝，从缝里慢慢拱出来，头先出来，再是身子，最后两条后腿从旧壳里拔出来，整个过程我在纱窗前蹲了一个钟头，大气不敢出。表哥喊我看，我摆手让他小声。

表哥还教我看树洞。他说知了猴晚上从洞里钻出来，洞口留一圈新土，一摸是软的。我们挨个树根摸过去，摸到软土就把手电筒放低，等它自己爬出来。有一回我们守着一个洞守了二十分钟，一只知了猴终于顶开土冒出头，我和表哥都不敢出声，光都不敢乱晃，看它一步一步往树上爬。

新出来的知了翅膀是皱的，绿得发亮，一点一点展开、变硬。中午它飞到院子里的树上，傍晚开始叫，跟树上原来的知了叫到一处。我听了半天，分不清哪只是我放飞的。

表哥说，明年还来。我说来，还守半棵树。回家的路上我手心里还留着知了猴腿扎扎的感觉。这个暑假最好玩的事，就是那第五下——它一根一根松开爪子，落进我手心的那一下。

The Fifth Wiggle and the Loosening Claws

In summer vacation, as soon as the cool evening wind rose under the big tree, the cicada songs thinned out. At that hour the best game was not catching flying cicadas but catching the nymphs just out of the ground, the ones that had not yet climbed high to shed their shells. My cousin and I each took a flashlight and each guarded half of one tree, sweeping the light flat along the bark.

The nymph was slower than I expected. It clung a little above the roots, its claws dug into the bark, motionless, looking like a lump of mud. My cousin spotted one first and told me not to move. He reached out and pinched it from the back. The nymph spread its legs and gripped harder. My cousin said you cannot yank it; you have

to go along with it and make it think the tree is still moving. He wiggled his fingers gently, the claws loosened for a moment, and the nymph landed in his palm.

I did the same. I held the flashlight in my teeth and swept the light. When I saw one, I crouched and reached out. It gripped like a knot. I wiggled twice and it would not let go, so I got impatient and dug my nail into the bark beside it, nearly tearing the bark off. My cousin said stop and made me start over. This time I kept my patience, supported the underside of its belly with my finger, and wiggled slowly. On the fifth wiggle its claws opened one by one, and it dropped into my palm. It crawled across my hand, its legs prickly, so ticklish I grinned.

We caught more than a dozen and put them in a plastic box with a lid, holes poked in the walls, and set the box on the window screen on the balcony. Early the next morning we went to look. A crack opened down the back of a nymph, and it pushed itself out through the crack: head first, then body, and at last the two hind legs pulled free of the old shell. I squatted in front of the screen for a whole hour, afraid to breathe. My cousin called me to look, and I waved him to be quiet.

My cousin also taught me to read the holes in the ground. He said the nymphs come out of the earth at night and leave a ring of fresh soil at the hole, soft to the touch. We went from root to root feeling the soil, and whenever it felt soft we set the flashlight low and waited for the nymph to climb out itself. Once we watched one hole for twenty minutes until a nymph finally pushed the soil open and poked its head out. Neither of us dared make a sound or move the light, and we watched it climb up the tree step by step.

The fresh cicada had wrinkled wings, green and shining, that spread out bit by bit and hardened. At noon it flew to the tree in the yard, and by evening it was singing, blending with the old cicadas. I listened for a long time and could not tell which one I had set free.

My cousin said: next year we come back. I said yes, and we will each still guard half a tree. On the way home my palm still remembered the prickly feel of the nymph legs. The best thing of that whole summer was the fifth wiggle — the claws opening one by one, and the small weight dropping into my hand.