

# La Cigale et La Fourmi

The Grasshopper and the Ant  
French fable by La Fontaine

La Cigale, ayant chanté  
Tout l'été,  
Se trouva fort dépourvue  
Quand la bise fut venue:  
Pas un seul petit morceau  
De mouche ou de vermisseau.

Elle alla crier famine  
Chez la Fourmi sa voisine,  
La priant de lui prêter  
Quelque grain pour subsister  
Jusqu'à la saison nouvelle.

«Je vous paierai, lui dit-elle,  
Avant l'Oût, foi d'animal,  
Intérêt et principal.»

La Fourmi n'est pas prêteuse:  
C'est là son moindre défaut.

«Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud?  
Dit-elle à cette emprunteuse.  
— Nuit et jour à tout venant  
Je chantais, ne vous déplaîse.  
— Vous chantiez? J'en suis fort aise.  
Eh bien! Dansez maintenant.



The grasshopper, having sung  
All summer  
Found herself most destitute  
When the north wind blew:  
Not even a single little morsel  
Of fly or worm.

She went to plea her hunger  
To the Ant, her neighbor,  
Begging her to lend her  
A little grain so she'd survive  
Until the new season.

«I shall pay you, she told her,  
Before the harvest, animal's oath,  
Interest and Principal.»

The Ant is not a lender:  
This is the least of her faults.

«What were you doing during the warm season?  
She asked this borrower.  
— Night and day, to everyone who came by  
I sang, no offense to you.  
— You sang? I'm happy to hear that.  
Oh well! Dance now.

I learned this fable in my first French class – 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It is a familiar one for French children to learn. I had to memorize the pronunciation, as well as the meaning. I've always remembered it though because of the lessons in it for me. When I grew up in the hood DC, we didn't have much – and we lived among others who didn't have much. But what we had, we were expected to share. When there was food, anyone in the neighborhood who was hungry was welcome to come and eat. This in itself was framed as community-minded generosity by my mother. The problem was that others – my aunt, my Granny, me – were expected to do the work to earn the money to buy that food my mother gave away so generously. I started working at 11 years old and used all I earned to help support the family (and I did not have any kids. My mother had 5 of us with me being the oldest). While we were working and saving – she was literally singing (and dancing). And I felt envious – I longed to sing – and she'd shame me, ask me not to sing, saying I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. My sister, who had my mother's approach to life to enjoy each moment and ask/expect me (among others) to provide from what I earned and saved – was also encouraged to sing. So on the one hand, I think it's an act of incredible faith in the universe to believe you'll be provided what you need when you need it. On the other hand, it felt unfair to feel denied the joy of singing-dancing so that I could be the one providing food for not-my-children and neighborhood hangers' on. I noticed that I'd work and save, and then be asked to give my savings to my sister, mom, other siblings and neighbors when we didn't have food, clothes, rent, etc. If I didn't share what I earned & saved, I was called selfish. My nature however, is generous – and so I had to figure out a middle path – a path where I had enough to handle my responsibilities and my goals, to share generously when I could, and to make time and space to dance/enjoy my life too. I learned that when they asked to borrow money – I'd give it to them if I could afford not to get it back, with the caveat, that if they didn't pay me back, they could not borrow again. It didn't take long for my bank to be closed. And while I still haven't gotten rid of the 'I can't sing' narrative; I dance with joy on a regular basis.