

## **Silvana Gardner**

### **KATY DID**

On the far corner of my bedroom ceiling, a cricket is motionless. I see it for the first time tonight as I am about to fall asleep. It could've been there for weeks or even years, so rarely, if ever, do I look up to that corner. I feel uneasy about its presence as if it were twice my size. I don't like crickets but they're better than cockroaches which fly at the slightest provocation. But crickets have pincers which cut you like scissors and they also can fly.

Summer heat must have driven it inside. It will disappear as silently as it has appeared. I must let it be. Ignore it. What is that saying about "sleeping dogs. . ." ? Let sleeping crickets be?

I can't sleep even though I've left the light on.

The cricket is still in the corner, above the mirror, I don't relax lying horizontal while looking at it. I am at its mercy. I light a mosquito coil directly below it, on the dressing table. The fumes rise like poisonous incense from an altar where it will choke to death. Maybe it will choose to escape outside. I've given the cricket the choice to choose its fate. Let no one say I'm unjust!

The cricket tucks its legs even more firmly under its body. A determined statement: it will not budge or die.

I climb a chair to take a closer look. It seems agitated by my approach. the antennae work rapidly like waving arms, shooing me away. The message is clear and I retreat but I still stare, trying to fathom what it will do next. It changes position and I panic in case it gets too excited and falls on me. The idea repels me so much that I tiptoe to bed, covering myself completely with the sheets. If the cricket decides to creep, crawl, fly or fall, it won't be on me.

I can't breathe. It's amazing how sheets can weigh a ton.

It's a very big cricket.

The bedside lamp casts eerie shadows around it, creating a chihuahua turd changing to warlord in black-brown armour. No longer innocuous, the cricket is repulsive and sinister. If only I had the courage to look into its eyes, I may know what my adversary thinks. It's making sure I won't fall asleep. We guard each other.

Resentful of its domination, I prepare myself to dream.

Private images don't come tonight. They're intercepted by black-brown creatures elongating the landscape beyond my eyes to deserts where Svena and I are imprisoned in endless talks.

Black-brown barbs scratch my words off the soundtrack; grass-hopper legs saw me in half and Svena is cut to pieces, messy like a squashed cockroach.

I've lost Svena.

Eyes wide open, I glare at the cricket. Who's in command here? I'll bring Svena back. Recreate her from a few pounds of flesh left behind.

She appears very briefly, showing only her face which, once again, is fanned away by myriad insect wings on huge maggot bodies.

Who's in charge here? I switch off the light assertively.

In the darkness, I peer at the cricket's corner. Darkness. I cover my face with the bedsheets and the new mental picture is milky white with yellow at the edges. It could be noon. It's midnight. I hate crickets.

I wake at daylight as if the cricket was an alarm clock wound to rouse me at the first sign of light. It's still in the corner, above the ashes of the mosquito coil. It's asleep with antennae right down, tucked beside its body. What does it want of me? Why is it living in my bedroom like a sentinel to my nightmares?

Realizing how little I know of crickets' habits, I consult the *World of Insects*. There must be a logical reason for its presence and I won't accept Svena's "bad luck" superstitions.

There are over 900 species of crickets in the world and some are called Katydids. KATY DID. What did Katy do? My name is Katy, what have I done to deserve this insect squatter which has grown another inch overnight? The book says my cricket is a female because of the knife-like sting protruding from her backside. (Svena had her sting in her mouth when she told me I carried mine in my head. . . ) Katydids lay eggs with their sting. I'm calling her Nemesis. Where does she intend to lay her eggs?

My existence focuses around her presence. I go out, hoping she'll be gone when I return. I come back, wondering if she'll still be there. Then a gnawing worry: if she's no longer in her corner, how can I assume she has gone outside? Has she gone under the bed? Would she go under my pillow?

I'm beginning to suspect her presence goes beyond mere appearances. After four days of cohabiting with her, I begin to grow very depressed. Somewhere else I've seen a cricket cling to a wall inside a house. But where?

Bad things happened there. Bad things.

Was it Svena's house where Drago's bones festered with cancer insects.

Firstly, the small bird appeared. It trapped itself in the enclosed verandah and kept smashing itself against the venetian blinds. Svena opened doors, windows. She hated the bird flapping itself hopelessly inside the house. An omen of death, she shuddered. She called me to help to get rid of it but the silver-eye was determined to break its neck inside. Not outside where we wouldn't see it.

One week, the cancer insects, reproducing by the trillion, choked Drago's breathing, laying waste his lungs, brittling his bones to dead-wood where not even termites choose to live.

A few days after Drago's death, when the house crumbled with sorrow, there was another visitation: a *cricket!*

Svena would not let me console her. Warned me not to kill the cricket for it could've been Drago's soul. Svena tended to be changeable where omens were concerned. She appointed them omens of death or souls aimlessly wandering, depending on her moods.

I wanted to kill it.

The problem is I'm not sure whether the cricket was present all along or whether it appeared *after* Drago's soul transformed itself. It's no good asking Svena. She would probably deny everything. Even the silver-eye. . . .

My Nemesis stands firm. If she's in my bedroom to make me recall fragments of superstitions connected with Drago's death, she's certainly succeeding.

This is the fifth night we've spent together.

My mental pictures get murkier everyday. Nemesis speaks tonight: Why do you tell lies?

I chuckle at Jiminy Cricket and Pinocchio. My name is Katy!

You must not kill me, Katy. (Her voice)

My voice: Help me to die?

Both, both voices: kill me, don't kill me. Drago's voice, behind Svena's back, imploring me to crush the insect monsters eating him alive. I took months to decide. If you love me, if you love me, you'll do it, Drago would beg.

But Svena found out and said it was criminal. Drago was hers and if I killed him, I would also die. The cricket would gnaw my heart out, lay eggs in my brain, send me crazy with guilt.

Sixth night: there are many things I don't know. Nemesis could be Svena's vengeance, Drago's soul or my own conscience.

Nemesis hasn't eaten in a week. Today I shall fast also for a solution. It will be easy since my appetite has gone.

She's *not* Svena's vengeance. I only feared the loss of her love and I don't want Nemesis to love me.

She's *not* Drago's soul. He would have better things to do in his spirit world than perv on me in my bedroom for one week.

She must be my conscience.

Drago did say: help me to die; of this, I'm certain for I'm now speaking with my conscience and consciences do not lie. Why didn't I do it? Was it because of Svena or my own cowardice?

All Souls Day, 2nd of November. . . Nemesis has gone! Disappeared!

A sigh of relief and the briskness of getting on with one's life.

Eating breakfast in the kitchen. I'm cheerful. Nemesis has gone. She's gone, gone, gone. I'm elated enough to hum the Grand March from Aida. I've been disinterred.

Absentmindedly I brush something away from my earlobe. A dangling bobbypin perhaps. But it's alive! It clings to my hand and flicks itself against the table. I scream to see the cricket fly towards my face. The bowl of milk and cornflakes smashes on the kitchen floor as I box my ears, my face and shoulders. A thorough thrashing of my person to knock Nemesis out.

She clings to the corner of the tablecloth. Crawls under the table. It was true, then. She did want to lay eggs in my brain!

I shake the tablecloth with furious rage. Come out! Come out! I'll crush you with a ten ton weight of hate.

She falls on the floor. Stunned. It's the first time I can take a really close look at her. I want to see what's been eating my heart out, this past week. She spiritedly crawls towards me, as if challenging me to fight or kill her.

I run for the insecticide. She follows me at an alarming speed. I spray and spray till she slows down, blind with pain.

Still coming for me, now tottering in a zigzag line as if to say: where are you? I'll get you yet!

Or: I love you, I love you, make peace with me. . . .

And her agony defies what Svena said, what Drago said, even what I say.

I killed her on All Souls Day. I did it. Katy did. . . Katy did. . . .

God knows how many cricket eggs will hatch in my brain.

God knows how long the incubation period will be.