THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH

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The door slammed and John Martin was out of his hat and coat and past his wife as fluently as a magician en route to a better illusion. He produced the newspaper with a dry whack as he slipped his coat into the closet like an abandoned ghost and sailed through the house, scanning the news, his nose guessing at the identity of supper, talking over his shoulder, his wife following. There was still a faint scent of the train and the winter night about him. In his chair he sensed an unaccustomed silence resembling that of a birdhouse when a vulture's shadow looms; all the robins, sparrows, mockingbirds quiet. His wife stood whitely in the door, not moving.

"Come sit down," said John Martin. "What're you doing? God, don't stare as if I were dead. What's new? Not that there's ever anything new, of course. What do you think of those fathead city

councilmen today? More taxes, more every goddamn thing."

"John!" cried his wife. "Don't!"

"Don't what?"

"Don't talk that way. It isn't safe!"

"For God's sake, not safe? Is this Russia or is this our own house?!"

"Not exactly."

"Not exactly?"

"There's a bug in our house," she whispered.

"A bug?" He leaned forward, exasperated.

"You know. Detective talk. When they hide a microphone somewhere you don't know, they call it a bug, I think," she whispered even more quietly.

"Have you gone nuts?"

"I thought I might have when Mrs. Thomas told me. They came last night while we were out and asked Mrs. Thomas to let them use her garage. They set up their equipment there and strung wires over here, the house is wired, the bug is in one or maybe all of the rooms."

She was standing over him now and bent to whisper in his ear.

He fell back. "Oh, no!"

"Yes!"

"But we haven't done anything—"

"Keep your voice down!" she whispered.

"Wait!" he whispered back, angrily, his face white, red, then white again. "Come on!"

Out on the terrace, he glanced around and swore. "Now say the whole damn thing again! They're using the neighbor's garage to hide their equipment? The FBI?"

"Yes, yes, oh it's been awful! I didn't want to call, I was afraid your wire was tapped, too."

"We'll see, dammit! Now!"

"Where are you going?"

"To stomp on their equipment! Jesus! What've we done?"

"Don't!" She seized his arm. "You'd just make trouble. After they've listened a few days they'll know we're okay and go away."

"I'm insulted, no, outraged! Those two words I've never used before, but, hell, they fit the case! Who do they think they are? Is it our politics? Our studio friends, my stories, the fact I'm a producer? Is it Tom Lee, because he's Chinese and a friend? Does that make him dangerous, or us? What, what?!"

"Maybe someone gave them a false lead and they're searching. If they really think we're dangerous, you can't blame them."

"I know, I know, but us! It's so damned funny I could laugh. Do we tell our friends? Rip out the microphone if we can find it, go to a hotel, leave town?"

"No, no, just go on as we have done. We've nothing to hide, so let's ignore them."

"Ignore!? The first thing I said tonight was political crap and you shut me up like I'd set off a bomb."

"Let's go in, it's cold out here. Be good. It'll only be a few days and they'll be gone, and after all, it isn't as if we were guilty of something."

"Yeah, okay, but damn, I wish you'd let me go over and kick the hell out of their junk!"

They hesitated, then entered the house, the strange house, and stood for a moment in the hall trying to manufacture some appropriate dialogue. They felt like two amateurs in a shoddy out-of-town play, the electrician having suddenly turned on too much light, the audience, bored, having left the theater, and, simultaneously, the actors having forgotten their lines. So they said nothing.

He sat in the parlor trying to read the paper until the food was on the table. But the house suddenly echoed. The slightest crackle of the sports section, the exhalation of smoke from his pipe, became like the sound of an immense forest fire or a wind blowing through an organ. When he shifted in the chair the chair groaned like a sleeping dog, his tweed pants scraped and sandpapered together. From the kitchen there was an ungodly racket of pans being bashed, tins falling, oven doors cracking open, crashing shut, the fluming full-bloomed sound of gas jumping to life, lighting up blue and hissing under the inert foods, and then when the foods stirred

ceaselessly under the commands of boiling water, they made a sound of washing and humming and murmuring that was excessively loud. No one spoke. His wife came and stood in the door for a moment, peering at her husband and the raw walls, but said nothing. He turned a page of football to a page of wrestling and read between the lines, scanning the empty whiteness and the specks of undigested pulp.

Now there was a great pounding in the room, like surf, growing nearer in a storm, a tidal wave, crashing on rocks and breaking with a titanic explosion again and again, in his ears.

My God, he thought, I hope they don't hear my heart!

His wife beckoned from the dining room, where, as he loudly rattled the paper and plopped it into the chair and walked, padding, padding on the rug, and drew out the protesting chair on the uncarpeted dining-room floor, she tinkled and clattered last-minute silverware, fetched a soup that bubbled like lava, and set a coffeepot to percolate beside them. They looked at the percolating silver apparatus, listened to it gargle in its glass throat, admired it for its protest against silence, for saying what it felt. And then there was the scrape and click of the knife and fork on the plate. He started to say something, but it stuck, with a morsel of food, in his throat. His eyes bulged. His wife's eyes bulged. Fi-

nally she got up, went to the kitchen, and got a piece of paper and a pencil. She came back and handed him a freshly written note: *Say something!*

He scribbled a reply:

What?

She wrote again: *Anything! Break the silence. They'll think something's wrong!*

They sat staring nervously at their own notes. Then, with a smile, he sat back in his chair and winked at her. She frowned. Then he said, "Well, dammit, say something!"

"What?" she said.

"Dammit," he said. "You've been silent all during supper. You and your moods. Because I won't buy you that coat, I suppose? Well, you're not going to get it, and that's final!"

"But I don't want—"

He stopped her before she could continue. "Shut up! I won't talk to a nag. You know we can't afford mink! If you can't talk sense, don't talk!"

She blinked at him for a moment, and then she smiled and winked this time.

"I haven't got a thing to wear!" she cried.

"Oh, shut up!" he roared.

"You never buy me anything!" she cried.

"Blather, blather, blather!" he yelled.

They fell silent and listened to the house. The echoes of their yelling had put everything back to normalcy, it seemed. The percolator was not so

loud, the clash of cutlery was softened. They sighed.

"Look," he said at last, "don't speak to me again this evening. Will you do me that favor."

She sniffed.

"Pour me some coffee!" he said.

Along about eight-thirty the silence was getting unbearable again. They sat stiffly in the living room, she with her latest library book, he with some flies he was tying up in preparation for going fishing on Sunday. Several times they glanced up and opened their mouths but shut them again and looked about as if a mother-in-law had hove into view.

At five minutes to nine he said, "Let's go to a show."

"This late?"

"Sure, why not?"

"You never like to go out weeknights, because you're tired. I've been home all day, cleaning, and it's nice to get out at night."

"Come on, then!"

"I thought you were mad at me."

"Promise not to talk mink and it's a go. Get your coat."

"All right." She was back in an instant, dressed, smiling, and they were out of the house and driving away in very little time. They looked back at their lighted house.

"Hail and farewell, house," he said. "Let's just drive and never come back."

"We don't dare."

"Let's sleep tonight in one of those motels that ruin your reputation," he suggested.

"Stop it. We've got to go back. If we stayed away, they'd be suspicious."

"Damn them. I feel like a fool in my own house. Them and their cricket."

"Bug."

"Cricket, anyway. I remember when I was a boy a cricket got in our house somehow. He'd be quiet most of the time, but in the evening he'd start scratching his legs together, an ungodly racket. We tried to find him. Never could. He was in a crack of the floor or the chimney somewhere. Kept us awake the first few nights, then we got used to him. He was around for half a year, I think. Then one night we went to bed and someone said, 'What's that noise?' and we all sat up, listening. 'I know what it is,' said Dad. 'It's silence. The cricket's gone.' And he was gone. Dead or went away, we never knew which. And we felt sort of sad and lonely with that new sound in the house."

They drove on the night road.

"We've got to decide what to do," she said.

"Rent a new house somewhere."

"We can't do that."

"Go to Ensenada for the weekend, we've been

wanting to make that trip for years, do us good, they won't follow us and wire our hotel room, anyway."

"The problem'd still be here when we come back. No, the only solution is to live our life the way we used to an hour before we found out what was going on with the microphone."

"I don't remember. It was such a nice little routine. I don't remember how it was, the details, I mean. We've been married ten years now and one night's just like another, very pleasant, of course. I come home, we have supper, we read or listen to the radio, no television, and go to bed."

"Sounds rather drab when you say it like that."

"Has it been for you?" he asked suddenly.

She took his arm. "Not really. I'd like to get out more, occasionally."

"We'll see what we can do about that. Right now, we'll plan on talking straight out about everything, when we get back to the house, politically, socially, morally. We've nothing to hide. I was a Boy Scout when I was a kid, you were a Camp Fire Girl; that's not very subversive, it's as simple as that. Speak up. Here's the theater."

They parked and went into the show.

About midnight they drove into the driveway of their house and sat for a moment looking at the great empty stage waiting for them. At last he

stirred and said, "Well, let's go in and say hello to the cricket."

They garaged the car and walked around to the front door, arm in arm. They opened the front door and the feel of the atmosphere rushing out upon them was a listening atmosphere. It was like walking into an auditorium of one thousand invisible people, all holding their breath.

"Here we are!" said the husband loudly.

"Yes, that was a wonderful show, wasn't it?" said his wife.

It had been a pitiable movie.

"I liked the music especially!"

They had found the music banal and repetitive.

"Yes, isn't that girl a terrific dancer!"

They smiled at the walls. The girl had been a rather club-footed thirteen-year-old with an immensely low IQ.

"Darling!" he said. "Let's go to San Diego Sunday, for just the afternoon."

"What? And give up your fishing with your pals? You always go fishing with your pals." she cried.

"I won't go fishing with them this time. I love only you!" he said, and thought, miserably, We sound like Gallagher and Sheen warming up a cold house.

They bustled about the house, emptying ashtrays, getting ready for bed, opening closets, slamming doors. He sang a few bars from the tired

musical they had seen in a lilting off-key baritone, she joining in.

In bed, with the lights out, she snuggled over against him, her hand on his arm, and they kissed a few times. Then they kissed a few more times. "This is more like it," he said. He gave her a rather long kiss. They snuggled even closer and he ran his hand along her back. Suddenly her spine stiffened.

Jesus, he thought, what's wrong now.

She pressed her mouth to his ear.

"What if," she whispered, "what if the cricket's in our bedroom, here?"

"They wouldn't dare!" he cried.

"Shh!" she said.

"They wouldn't dare," he whispered angrily. "Of all the nerve!"

She was moving away from him. He tried to hold her, but she moved firmly away and turned her back. "It would be just like them," he heard her whisper. And there he was, stranded on the white cold beach with the tide going out.

Cricket, he thought, I'll never forgive you for this.

The next day being Tuesday, he rushed off to the studio, had a busy day, and returned, on time, flinging open the front door with a cheery "Hey there, lovely!"

When his wife appeared, he kissed her solidly, patted her rump, ran an appreciative hand up and

down her body, kissed her again, and handed her a huge green parcel of pink carnations.

"For me?" she said.

"You!" he replied.

"Is it our anniversary?"

"Nonsense, no. I just got them because, that's all, because."

"Why, how nice." Tears came to her eyes. "You haven't brought me flowers for months and months."

"Haven't I? I guess I haven't!"

"I love you," she said.

"I love you," he said, and kissed her again. They went, holding hands, into the living room.

"You're early," she said. "You usually stop off for a quick one with the boys."

"To hell with the boys. You know where we're going Saturday, darling? Instead of my sleeping in the backyard on the lounge, we're going to that fashion show you wanted me to go see."

"I thought you hated—"

"Anything you want, peaches," he said. "I told the boys I won't make it Sunday for the fishing trip. They thought I was crazy. What's for supper?"

He stalked smiling to the kitchen, where he appreciatively ladled and spooned and stirred things, smelling, gasping, tasting everything. "Shepherd's pie!" he cried, opening the oven and peering in,

gloriously. "My God! My favorite dish. It's been since last June we had that!"

"I thought you'd like it!"

He ate with relish, he told jokes, they ate by candlelight, the pink carnations filled the immediate vicinity with a cinnamon scent, the food was splendid, and, topping it off, there was black-bottom pie fresh from the refrigerator.

"Black-bottom pie! It takes hours and genius to make a really good black-bottom pie."

"I'm glad you like it, dear."

After dinner he helped her with the dishes. Then they sat on the living-room floor and played a number of favorite symphonies together, they even waltzed a bit to the *Rosenkavalier* pieces. He kissed her at the end of the dance and whispered in her ear, patting her behind, "Tonight, so help me God, cricket or no cricket."

The music started over. They swayed together.

"Have you found it yet?" he whispered.

"I think so. It's near the fireplace and the window."

They walked over to the fireplace. The music was very loud as he bent and shifted a drape, and there it was, a beady black little eye, not much bigger than a thumbnail. They both stared at it and backed away. He went and opened a bottle of champagne and they had a nice drink.

The music was loud in their heads, in their bones, in the walls of the house. He danced with his mouth up close to her ear.

"What did you find out?" she asked.

"The studio said to sit tight. Those damn fools are after everyone. They'll be tapping the zoo telephone next."

"Everything's all right?"

"Just sit tight, the studio said. Don't break any equipment, they said. You can be sued for breaking government property."

They went to bed early, smiling at each other.

On Wednesday night he brought roses and kissed her a full minute at the front door. They called up some brilliant and witty friends and had them over for an evening's discussion, having decided, in going over their phone list, that these two friends would stun the cricket with their repertoire and make the very air shimmer with their brilliance. On Thursday afternoon he called her from the studio for the first time in months, and on Thursday night he brought her an orchid, some more roses, a scarf he had seen in a shop window at lunchtime, and two tickets for a fine play. She in turn had baked him a chocolate cake from his mother's recipe, on Wednesday, and on Thursday had made Toll House cookies and lemon chiffon pie, as well as darning his socks and pressing his pants and sending every-

thing to the cleaners that had been neglected previous times. They rambled about the town Thursday night after the play, came home late, read Euripides to one another out loud, went to bed late, smiling again, and got up late, having to call the studio and claim sickness until noon, when the husband, tiredly, on the way out of the house, thought to himself, This can't go on. He turned and came back in. He walked over to the cricket near the fireplace and bent down to it and said:

"Testing, one, two, three. Testing. Can you hear me? Testing."

"What're you doing?" cried his wife in the doorway.

"Calling all cars, calling all cars," said the husband, lines under his eyes, face pale. "This is me speaking. We know you're there, friends. Go away. Go away. Take your microphone and get out. You won't hear anything from us. That is all. That is all. Give my regards to J. Edgar. Signing off."

His wife was standing with a white and aghast look in the door as he marched by her, nodding, and thumped out the door.

She phoned him at three o'clock.

"Darling," she said, "it's gone!"

"The cricket?"

"Yes, they came and took it away. A man rapped very politely at the door and I let him in

and in a minute he had unscrewed the cricket and taken it with him. He just walked off and didn't say boo."

"Thank God," said the husband. "Oh, thank God."

"He tipped his hat at me and said thanks."

"Awfully decent of him. See you later," said the husband.

This was Friday. He came home that night about six-thirty, having stopped off to have a quick one with the boys. He came in the front door reading his newspaper, passed his wife, taking off his coat and automatically putting it in the closet, went on past the kitchen without twitching his nose, sat in the living room and read the sports page until supper, when she served him plain roast beef and string beans, with apple juice to start and sliced oranges for dessert. On his way home he had turned in the theater tickets for tonight and tomorrow, he informed her; she could go with the girls to the fashion show, he intended to bake in the backyard.

"Well," he said, about ten o'clock. "The old house seems different tonight, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Good to have the cricket gone. Really had us going there."

"Yes," she said.

They sat awhile. "You know," she said later, "I sort of miss it, though, I really sort of miss it. I

think I'll do something subversive so they'll put it back."

"I beg your pardon?" he said, twisting a piece of twine around a fly he was preparing from his fishing box.

"Never mind," she said. "Let's go to bed."

She went on ahead. Ten minutes later, yawning, he followed after her, putting out the lights. Her eyes were closed as he undressed in the semi-moonlit darkness. She's already asleep, he thought.