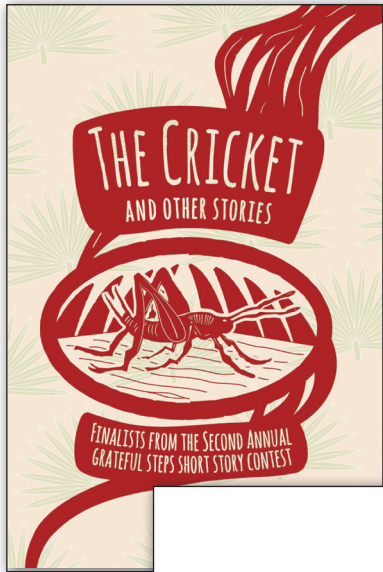


Project: Short story anthology. Cover and interior design and layout. E-book production.

Brief: I designed and typeset the interior layout, front and back covers. Prepared for CreateSpace. Also produced EPUB and Mobi editions.

The Cricket and Other Stories



JOE SOLLAZZO
THE CRICKET

FRANKIE KEANE'S WHISKEY-INDUCED sleep was deep and dreamless. He was oblivious to the thunder and lightning and the wind and rain pounding the pastel-colored walls of his beachfront condominium like the wet slaps of an angry giant. His metronomic snores speared the medicinal scent of vodka into his bedroom, mixing with the stink of cigarette smoke and rotting takeout food and old man.

But as the alarm clock on the nightstand ticked another minute from his life, a sharp sound shook him from his slumber. At first it was subtle, perhaps only his imagination, the dim echo of an otherwise forgotten dream. But the sound grew louder as it slowly pulled him from oblivion into wakefulness. It was shrill and asynchronous, as sharp and irritating as a stick in the eye.

He came awake like a drowning man pulled from the sea, coughing and gagging. He listened to the dark. The sound reminded him of sex on a creaky bed or the rusty hinges on an old screen door. But as the mist cleared from his brain, he realized that it was a living sound. The croaking of a toad? No. The chirping of a cricket. It had probably found its way inside Frankie's bedroom to escape the storm. He cracked open his gummy eyelids, looked at the clock: 3:57 a.m. He cursed, his voice thick with sleep, and wrapped his pillow over his head, tightening it over his ears. It did no good; the sound clawed its way through the pillow and into Frankie's brain like a tick.

Chirp-chirp. Chirp-chirp. Chirp-chirp.

After watching the glowing red numerals on his clock turn to 4:02 a.m., he

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fumbled for his cigarettes, in the process spilling the bubbling glass of Efferdent containing his dentures. He shook a cigarette from the pack and lit it in the dark. He smoked slowly, willing the nicotine to calm him as he waited for the cricket to finish its song.

But, two Camels and fourteen torturous minutes later, the noise became too much to bear. It became more than just an irritating sound; it became something malignant, like a tumor throbbing in the center of his brain.

Frankie flicked on the shadeless nightstand lamp. Harsh yellow light filled the room, revealing the mess of an old man with many vices and little hope. Empty beer cans and liquor bottles, greasy burger bags and pizza boxes, crushed cigarette packs, well-thumbed-through porno magazines and random piles of dirty laundry littered the floor. No decorations adorned the white plaster walls, save for a bloody handprint beside the door, a permanent reminder of a particularly hard night of drinking. He still wore the scar from the broken beer bottle on the meaty part of his right palm.

Intent on finding the bug and crushing it into an unrecognizable stain, Frankie threw the blanket from his emaciated body and rolled out of bed. He stood naked, painfully aware of the wilted, wrinkled appendage dangling between his legs like a wrung-out disrag, and trained his ears to the noise.

Before he could pinpoint its origin, the cricket fell silent. The only sound was the receding rumble of thunder and the soft splash of slackening rain on his bedroom window. The storm was moving out to sea.

For an instant Frankie imagined the cricket was aware of his intentions and had stopped its chirping to avoid detection, but he quickly dismissed the idea. Most likely the bug had mistaken the light of the lamp for the rays of the sun, activating some esoteric instinct to stop its song. To test his theory, Frankie extinguished the lamp. Within seconds, the cricket picked up right where it left off.

He turned on the light and the chirping stopped as quickly as it had started. Frankie smiled, proud of himself for reaffirming mankind's dominance over God's lesser creatures. As long as there was light, the bug's tiny brain told it to be quiet. Frankie climbed back into bed and basked in the glorious glow of his lamp as if he was lying on the beach of a tropical island on a cloudless day.

But the light was too bright. It made him feel naked and vulnerable, blinded him from the path to sleep. He tossed and turned as the light burned through the thin skin of his eyelids, illuminating the microscopic, multi-legged things

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FINALISTS FROM THE SECOND ANNUAL
GRATEFUL STEPS SHORT STORY CONTEST

GRATEFUL STEPS
ASHEVILLE, NC

swim-
creature

It was a place where he hid his most unwanted memories. A childhood filled with hunger and cold and beatings from an alcoholic father, all witnessed by an uncaring, indifferent mother. Two years of memories from Europe at the height of World War II condensed into a spiraling montage of gray corpses and cold mud and low flying planes and bombs and the screams of children. Five marriages all ended by his own mistakes and stupidity. Six children who pretend he no longer exists. So much money squandered on foolish business decisions and the fulfillment of so many vices.

Enough. Frankie killed the light. Before the filament of the lamp's bulb had fully dimmed, the cricket started singing again. Each "chirp-chirp" was like the sound of a door slamming, locking away another memory until there was nothing left but the sound itself. At first Frankie was grateful but it wasn't long before it began to drive him mad, like an itch he couldn't scratch in the center of his brain.

Chirp-chirp. Chirp-chirp. Chirp-chirp.

He bounced out of bed like a man fifty years younger and listened to the dark, trying to pinpoint the epicenter of the noise. It seemed to come from everywhere, swirling around the room like a swarm of bees. He reignited the lamp; the cricket stopped singing immediately. He scanned the mess of his room, growing more hopeless the longer he looked. The bug could be hiding anywhere among the detritus littering the floor; it could be crouched in the shadows of his cluttered closet or under his bed; it could even be nestled in the creases of the very blanket he had been sleeping under. The thought that he might've been sharing his bed with the damn bug made his skin crawl.

Frankie spent the remainder of the night on his couch in the living room, the light from his bedroom oozing from under the door like lava. Though the cricket was silent against the glare, its echo bounced around Frankie's skull like a ping pong ball, causing his thoughts to roll like waves upon a shore, each one washing up another ugly thing he had no wish to see. But, as the first light of a new day slowly brightened the room, Frankie found something among the jetsam and flotsam, something so simple, so perfect that he was surprised he hadn't thought of it earlier. He wrapped his mind around the idea like a blanket and surrendered to sleep.

FOREWORD

THE STORIES CONTAINED in this book were submitted as entries to the second annual short story contest held by Grateful Steps, a traditional, non-profit, independent publisher located in Asheville, North Carolina. They were chosen as finalist entries by our staff, chief judge Cathy Mitchell, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author, judged the finalists and selected Joe Sollazzo's "The Cricket" as the winning entry and Holly Simms' "Just My Imagination" as the runner-up.

Grateful Steps is proud to present these stories in this volume, and we hope you will enjoy reading them.

THE CRICKET
AND OTHER STORIES

Featuring the work of:

Joe Sollazzo
Holly Simms
Patricia Lynn Collins
Sam Conviser
Robin Russell Gaister
Cail Heller
Harold Littleton
Marc Spencer
Spencer Stevens
Robert Tate
Evan Williams

