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Facts About Frogs

Male frogs have extra long thumbs that help them cling to their female counterparts during mating in case the female tries to hop away. This is important, because sometimes the frogs' mating can last several days. During my first date with Guy, I noticed that one of his thumbs was clipped short and, while this defect certainly didn't discourage me from moving in with Guy, I did—just in case—lodge it in the part of my memory devoted to herpetologically-based symbolic associations (of which I am an expert).

Things went well between Guy and me, for a while, until the night before my surgery when a frog entered our lives—a blue ceramic one wearing a tiara.

Earlier in the evening, Guy had come home with half a dozen paintings from his gallery, each by a different artist. I was sitting alone in the dark. He turned on the light and stared at me for a second, looking confused, and then straightened and spread out the paintings.

"Pick the next Norman Rockwell," he said, smiling and looking more like a wiener vendor than a world-renown gallery owner in his crinkled white shirt and cap.

One of the paintings was a two-toned abstract piece that reminded me of a Chilean Four-Eyed Frog because it looked like an amphibian with two dorsal eye-like markings. I picked that one and Guy phoned the artist in front of me to announce the good news and offer up my observation. The artist said it was supposed to represent the transcendentalist split from the Empirical to the Intuitive but if Guy wanted to liken it to the ass of a frog, then an ass of a frog it was. Guy winked at me. "Now there's an artist who'll make it," he said to me after he hung up. Then we joked about it being a good thing I wasn't studying ungulates because the artist might've drawn the line at comparing his masterpiece to, say, a rhino's

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ass.

“Toohey was squeegeeing his driveway when I drove up tonight,” Guy said, pulling me into the tub later that evening. Walter Toohey is our neighbor who has some weird issues with water and squeegees after every rain. I rolled my eyes and laughed.

Guy sipped his wine and then gently began to smear bubbly white suds along my shoulders. This soon turned into long, slow strokes around my breasts. I stiffened. His touch felt overly gentle somehow, as if he was trying to record the feel for memory’s sake.

I pulled away and didn’t look at him until I heard him clearing his throat. He had placed a small package on the ledge. “For you, womon,” he said using his father’s Jamaican accent as he extended the package to me with his long black fingers.

I opened it—it was the blue ceramic frog. I ran my knuckles over the frog’s lopsided smile and thought about my History of Amphibians professor, and how he had lectured one day about the Aztecs and their belief that bringing a frog into the home invited bad luck.

Guy sat back, obviously feeling satisfied with his gift. “How can a herpetologist live without a pet frog?” he said.

“I’m not a herpetologist yet,” I said.

“You will be. Soon.”

Later, when we were lying in bed, I asked him why he had wanted to take a bath. “You never take baths,” I said.

“Don’t know. Just thought it would help you have a good night’s sleep.”

I thought about the way he had touched me in the bath again, rolled over, pulled the cat close and prayed for sleep.

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The day after my surgery, Guy dug an elongated pit on the mound in our front yard. The next day, he laid a stone slab next to it. From our bedroom window, I watched him as he put on the finishing touches—black rubber edging, water, rocks, Japanese Koi and, of course, the blue ceramic frog.

“Do you like it?” he asked that night as he ladled steaming ginger-carrot soup into my bowl. Those days, it seemed like his eyes fixed so intently on mine—as if he was summoning all the discipline he had to avoid letting them wander downward toward my chest.

Every night during my recovery, Guy would bring me a tray onto which he had arranged my dinner plate, a steaming cup of tea, pills, a fresh cut flower and some item of interest. Usually, the item of interest was an article about a natural science topic, and we’d sit and discuss it while he rubbed my feet: The methane given off by the flatulence of cows makes up almost a fifth of the greenhouse gases that are responsible for global warming. Physicists hope to soon find the so-called God Particle that makes life possible. And of course, facts about frogs, like how researchers are developing a pain-reliever based on toxins produced by the Equadorian poison arrow frog that will be 200 times more powerful than morphine. Or how the word amphibian is derived from the Greek words meaning “double life.”

All winter long, the blue ceramic frog sat happily perched on the icy cement slab overlooking the pond, watching my comings and goings to and from the oncology office where nurses in white and blue ecumenical-looking uniforms would infuse me with toxins via a port in my upper arm; my occasional jaunt up and down the snowy sidewalks in a plastic

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toboggan powered by Guy; and my quiet afternoons sitting in the magnetic warmth of our sun porch drinking hot chocolate with a pinch of ground cayenne.

One day in the spring, as I was laying in the tub feeling particularly hairless with the light glistening off of my wet body, Guy came in, stripped, and got in without asking. I dipped below the suds. "Look at this belly," he said, and grabbed a handful of fat around his navel. I poked it with my toe. He grabbed my ankle and pretended his penis was a nuclear submarine trolling along dramatic subterranean topography toward a hazardous sinkhole. Then he found the bumpy scar on my left breast, and traced it nib to nib diagonally from my armpit toward my chest, kissing every inch of the wake left by his finger.

I let him fuck me that night—the first time in months. He said, "Look at me," when he came. I looked into his black eyes, and visualized his gooey semen oozing its way toward my vacuous fallopian tubes, where his millions of spermatozoa would dart around colliding, if anything, with one another, and finally give up, vanquished by the sterilizing effects of the chemo.

"I love you," he whispered, and stroked my hair. But he didn't mean it. I could tell. His inflection was flat. A tough prospect, I guess, not to be able to enjoy the transparency of your mate's nightgown anymore.

So, instead of responding, I covered myself and asked him to quiz me on Gastric Brooding Frogs, explaining that my dissertation defense was in a few days and I needed to keep the details of this old breed readily accessible in my mind.

"Okay, so how do they reproduce?" Guy asked, grinning.

"How *did* they reproduce," I said, "They're extinct now."

"Oh."

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"The female would eat her fertilized eggs and incubate them in her stomach until they were fully grown. Then, she'd literally vomit out an army of little froglets."

"Wow," he said. "How'd she know to eat the eggs?"

I shrugged.

"Maybe she ate them to get rid of them and the joke was on her," he said, and laughed.

I straightened. "Well, we'll never know—they're gone now. Pollution sterilized all of the females, chasing away all of the males," I said, making up the last part.

He frowned. "Hey," he said, caressing my forehead. "I was just kidding."

"Yeah," I said. "I know. I'm going to sleep, okay."

On the morning of my dissertation defense, the blue ceramic frog spoke to me. I had just stepped on the stoop of our front porch when, clear as day, it said, "Got anything for indigestion?"

I glanced at it. Someone had draped a paperclip collar around its neck which pierced through a cardboard pendant that read, "Veronica, Gastric Broad."

I tilted Veronica forward with my toe, trying to see how she was wired. And then my toe twitched, toppling Veronica off of her perch. She fell toward the pond, jolting to a stop just above the pond's surface, where

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she dangled by a single paper clip that had snagged a jut in the slab. I looked around to see if anyone was watching.

Next door, Walter Toohey was wiping down his car, seemingly oblivious to the world. He and Guy were in a bit of a feud, so I didn't think he would take kindly to my asking him if he knew anything about the talking frog in my pond, but I did nod in his direction as part of my small, ongoing effort to rekindle some kind of neighborly relations.

"Bad storm," I said.

"You better watch that pond of yours," he replied. "It might overflow next time and drown those peonies."

Mr. Toohey and Guy haven't talked since Mr. Toohey re-directed our gutters to drain into our basement window wells instead of onto his grass. For revenge, Guy directed our whirly-squirt sprinkler to hit the corner of Mr. Toohey's picture window and splash onto his rock garden, causing rivulets to stream into pools that mottled the garden's landscape. I was in Chicago at the time, interviewing for a curator job at the Field Museum, but Guy told me that Mr. Toohey was out there for a couple hours that evening, wearing thick galoshes and using a portable pump to suck the wetness from the tiny chasms between the garden's pebbles and limestone chunks.

I glanced back at Veronica, and then scurried back inside to dress for my defense.

In our bathroom mirror, I could see that the top I had picked out clung to my chest a little too true, so I stuffed a prosthetic into my bra and wrestled it around a bit until it looked more natural. I adjusted my wig and fixed it in place by bobbing-pinning it to the wiry strands of my hair that had recently started growing back. One last look in the mirror, and I was off.

And now, here I am, at the University, waiting for Guy. He is twenty

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minutes late.

When Guy finally arrives, my defense is well underway. Three professors are interrogating me about the climactic effects on the global frog population, and I am certain that I see Guy glancing every so often toward the visiting female professor seated near him, whose low-cut button down is accented by two perfectly rounded mounds giving form to her chest pockets. My wig is hot and itchy and I am afraid to move too much for fear that I may dislodge the prosthetic. But I pull through. Guy flashes me a thumbs up when it is over, and scurries out the door, back to work. The professors take me out for drinks.

I have earned my PhD now and am free to accept the curator job in Chicago.

After drinks, I return home and step outside to collect the mail. Veronica is gone. Walter Toohey is reading on his front porch and I debate whether I should question him about it. Instead, I walk to the garage to get a pail so that I can look for the frog under the guise of picking up the twigs and other landscape scraps strewn by the storm.

Guy is in the garage with another woman. A pudgy, thirty-something with short hair and no make-up.

"Oh. Hi," I say. "I thought you were at work."

Guy slips something behind his back. "Nope. Buyer got cold feet. I thought you were supposed to be out celebrating?" The woman turns away from me. There is a greasy streak on the back of her sleeve.

"I was."

"This is Dawn," Guy says, pointing to the back of the woman's head. "She's helping me out with our speakers." A breeze blows past and I see Guy eyeing my shirt, probably waiting to see if my nipples still stiffen in

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the wind. "Did you have lunch?" he asks.

I almost respond truthfully. Then I ponder ignoring it and asking him about the frog. But instead, I decide to lie and escape.

"Yes. I'm off to run some errands, now" I say. "Nice meeting you Dawn," I say, spinning on my heels. "See you later."

I go to a movie and try not to let my mind get carried away with my own thoughts. But I can't and by the end of the movie, I have a plan.

As I drive home, I visualize it perfectly. I see exactly how it will play out, with all the predictability of a bad movie, complete with cliché dialogue:

I'd step inside. "Who is Dawn?" I'd ask Guy, without saying hello.

"Hey," he'd say, and then raise his eyebrows. "Dawn's a friend."

"Is that all?" I'd ask, with my hand on my hip.

He'd start to get mad. This would be apparent by the way he'd look down and wait a second before he replied. "Yes. That's all. I think it's pretty obvious she's not exactly my type. What's going on with you, babe?"

"What's going on with me?" I'd say, "What's going on with *you*?"

"Nothing is going on with me."

Then I'd say something like, "I can't handle this" or maybe, "Guy, I love you, but let's be real" and walk out. For the next few weeks, I'd be polite, but decidedly restrained, so he'd know that I was serious. I'd sleep in the other room. I'd announce that I'm moving to Chicago in the fall to take that curator position, leaving out the part about his coming with me.

And over time, unable to stomach me any more, Guy would throw me out. I'd take the expulsion honorably and hand him a perfectly crafted note telling him that I will always love him and thanking him for all that

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he has done for me—a parting gift that he could keep in his back pocket to take out and look at whenever he would need a boost. Then I'd leave for Chicago to start my new life. I'd breathe in the city air and let the excitement of its newness seep deep into my corpuscles, free at last from being reminded daily of the person I used to be.

The real scene goes almost as planned.

Veronica is sitting silently back up on her perch when I return, and Guy is in the kitchen shaping turkey burgers. I confront him. He looks at me like I'm crazy at first, and then explains that he had wired the frog in the pond as a special treat for the surprise graduation barbecue he'd been planning for me. (And didn't I remember for my 30th, how he had wired the back of my car, so that the phrase "Hotter Than 29" lit up in a Christmas light display every time I hit the brakes?) He explains that he'd done so early this morning while I was still sleeping and had inadvertently left it wired in the pond when he had to run off to a breakfast meeting, and hadn't I heard it? He returned later to disconnect it, only to discover it dangling above the pond, hanging by its collar, and that's why he called his electronics friend Dawn and how could it have toppled over like that?

I say I didn't know anything about it and that maybe the culprit was Mr. Toohey performing some kind of symbolic lynching to get even.

I go up to our room and shut the door in an effort to calm my mind. I see Guy marching over to Mr. Toohey's, holding a watering can. Toohey answers the door and Guy starts talking and flailing his free hand. Then he lifts the watering can and turns it upside down. Nothing comes out. Toohey smiles at Guy as Guy extends the watering can, lowering his head at the same time as if the can is some kind of offering. Toohey laughs, takes the can and pats Guy on the head. Then he and Guy walk into Mr. Toohey's stone garden and together look out toward our pond and chat. After a few minutes, Toohey smiles again, slaps Guy on the

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back and waves goodbye before turning and walking back into his home.

I don't see Guy for most of that night. After he comes home, I smell the woody smoke of the grill and hear the TV. When he finally comes into our room, I am reading on the couch. He walks over to me and kneels.

"I want us to go to a counselor."

I stare at him.

"Why, so we can spend thousands of dollars for her to tell me what I already know?"

He holds his hand up. "—Don't. Don't do this. Please."

"I don't need a fucking counselor."

"I didn't say you did; I said *we* do. Don't you see? Nothing I try is working."

"Oh don't be condescending," I say, and look down at my book.

I feel his eyes on me for a moment, and then hear him walk to the bathroom. His electric toothbrush buzzes for a few moments, and then the shower goes on.

I pack a few things and slip out the front door.

Veronica feels cold when I lift her from her perch. I take her to the street and hurl her hard at the cement, shattering her into pieces.

It looks like rain on the western horizon as I drive away.

A wood frog croaks in the swollen pond under the overpass at the bend in the road. It's really more of a quack. Guy loved it when I told him about these quacking frogs. The male of the species quacks for hours in the spring, hoping to attract a mate. When he does, he climbs onto her

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back and releases a fluid containing sperm onto her eggs as she lays them. Then the fertilized egg mass floats away, eventually flattens, rises to the surface and turns green. Some who see it summarily dismiss it as pond scum and sweep it away with their net. But those with clearer vision will know that it is much more special indeed.

– Susan Soloman is a lawyer living in Chicago . She has been published in online and print publications, including Pebble Lake Review, 42Opus, Chick Lit Review, Long Story Short, Salome Magazine, and Gator Springs Gazette (in some cases under the pen name Susan Porter). In addition, her story, "Smile Catchers," placed "Commended" (top ten) in Writelink's 2004 Weekender Challenge (United Kingdom), and her story, "Medici, For Beginners," was selected as an Editor's Choice story for 2005 by Pulse Magazine. She has recently returned to writing after a several-year hiatus following the birth of her daughter.

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