

Frog: A Tale of Home

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From when one leaves his parent's home at eighteen until one has a place of his own at whatever age, there isn't much opportunity for gardening. It's one dorm, apartment, or shared house after another; a few years bouncing around a campus, then halfway across the country to a job or more school. So it works out that people in their twenties have a greater preference for bars and the company of their peers than yards and the company of trees.

I myself had been no different until I spent a summer fixing up old houses with my father and brother in small-town Pennsylvania, a profit-driven enterprise that had long been a dream of my father's. That experience working with my hands was a departure from my life the rest of the year as a struggling grad student at the University of Chicago studying philosophy—and the fact that I found it so much more satisfying than the academic work I had thought I was meant for ought to have been enough to tell me I would eventually have to leave the academic life.

Then, two years ago, my girlfriend and I decided to leave Washington, D.C., where we were living, to spend two months at my childhood home in the woods of Pennsylvania. My father, who had lived there alone since I left for college, had suddenly decided to move to Virginia the winter before. Around the same time he moved, the housing market tanked, meaning he couldn't sell our home at half the price it had been appraised for just a year earlier. It sat idly on the market for five months, the water shut off to guard against burst pipes. Meanwhile, my girlfriend had recently quit her job and lined up another that wouldn't start until July, and I was rootless, still studying for a profession that no longer tempted me. We'd been living in a cramped shared house on a cramped street in a cramped city, and with no job or commitment keeping us there, we—wisely? hastily? prudently? necessarily?—decided to go to the woods for two months and do nothing.

Our plans before the move had been vague: Perhaps some mini golf. Cooking and baking and taking advantage of having a clean kitchen all to ourselves (fresh mushrooms at 30 cents a pound!—God bless rural living!). Maybe a swim or two if summer wasn't hesitant in following spring. Mostly the plan was to do nothing, a sort of subconscious test to see if our relationship could withstand the complete absence of jobs, commitments, friends, or the circus of city living—the two of us alone and nothing else.

We quickly settled into the routine of retired life, going to farmers' markets and little-league games, sitting on blankets along with grandparents, rooting for the team I'd played for as a boy (our championship team was still engraved on a plaque at the concession stand, though now there were fifteen other champions who had won the league since).

But there was one exception to this otherwise unstructured existence: we knew we were going to garden. First and foremost, we were going to restore the pond behind the house to working order. The pond was a little thing, maybe four by six feet, but it had a waterfall from which water had once flowed, and fish that had once swum, a perimeter where flowers had once outnumbered weeds, and most importantly, a frog who had once spent the nights croaking.

Signs of Life

When we arrived from D.C. and pulled into the driveway, instead of first climbing the steps to the front door, I walked around to the back to check on the forsaken pond. The water no longer flowed and the fish had died and the weeds abounded and one look at the leaf-choked, black sludge made it clear there was no frog.

It took a week to restore the pond, working around the scattered thunderstorms of early May. Unaccustomed to dealing with nature, I first approached the project protected from head to toe with plastic and rubber, groaning aloud at what my dishwashing-gloved hands pulled up from the pond. But by the end of the week, I was standing in the pond barefoot, pants rolled up, plunging my uncovered hands straight to the bottom, finally convinced that there weren't pythons and crocodiles down there waiting for me. The transformation echoed what I'd accomplished fixing up houses years before, and I had to wonder how I ever thought my happiness could be found in a library instead of outdoors.

After a week, we could again see to the bottom, the weeds were gone, a lily pond was showing signs of life, and the waterfall offered rhythmic sounds more soothing than the constant traffic had provided in the city. Our to-do list from before we'd left had had this one item on it, the restoration of a pond I hadn't helped build but had always enjoyed in my childhood, and we proudly checked it off. It didn't take long—three, maybe four nights. My girlfriend was already in bed asleep, tucked in by the darkness of a house in the woods on a moonless night; I was pacing about the living room, happy simply to have a stretch of space all to myself, a

place where I might walk back and forth aimlessly and answer to no one for it—not *my* home, not quite, but the closest thing to it yet.

Then I heard him. The croak of each kind of frog sounds different, and surely there are subtleties in each call I can't detect—hints of danger, calls to a mate or a friend. I've never bothered looking into it, because the sound, whatever its source, whatever it means, signifies one thing to me: I have a frog, and I am happy for it. Though a decade removed from the end of childhood, I could again sit in my den with the window open in the evening and listen to that croak against the sound of the water falling, reading a book or thinking a thought or doing nothing at all.

My first instinct was to awaken my girlfriend and share the good news. She didn't know what to make of my enthusiasm, but she was glad for it all the same, and as she quickly fell back asleep, I lay there smiling that we had returned the pond to its past splendor, and having done so, a frog had returned as my reward.

Seven more happy weeks passed for the three of us until it was time for two of us to return to the city. What was the frog's life had been our vacation, his real our surreal, the prime of his life our feigned retirement. We said our goodbye and piled into our car and drove back south, and if he resumed his croaking that night, it was no longer for our benefit.

Croaking Out an Ode

We moved into another shared house, this time out in the suburbs of Washington—a less cramped house on a less cramped street in a less cramped neighborhood. But still a shared house. Still someone else's. My girlfriend, soon fiancée, began training for her new job while I briefly returned to Chicago to pay my last respects to the failed promise of a Ph.D. before getting a real job: entry-level, the same level many of my classmates had started at five years earlier without all the meandering. Fall came, and winter after it, and then another spring. Wedding planning consumed the weekends that blizzards didn't. Progress on every front but one—we were returning to summer without a frog.

After some negotiations with our landlord, I convinced her to let me put a pond in her backyard—a little thing, six by nine—on the condition that I take it apart and fill it back in with dirt before winter. I went to Home Depot to buy the tools I'd need, thinking it odd that this shovel and this pickaxe knew less of the earth than I did. A week later, where there had been nothing but poor soil and an ant colony, there was a pond. My

pond. A pond I'd designed and built with my own two hands, not inherited and rehabilitated.

A week later the pond had a waterfall, and in another three or four nights we were graced with a frog. If I hadn't built a home for myself, at least I was building one for another. My thoughts returned to my abandoned Plato and his theory of forms, wondering half-absurdly and half-seriously about what the idea of "frogness" might mean. I concluded there was a multiplicity of particular frogs that converged to become One Frog, The Frog, My Frog. Every particular frog collapsed into this ideal. Thus I didn't bother naming the new frog "Frog II" or *somesuch*; he was simply Frog, no different than the one the year before, and his croaks were no less moving to my ears.

He lived his life while we lived ours, until a storm in early July blew down a tree over the pond. The waterfall stopped, and so did Frog's croaking. The landlord took a chainsaw and made quick work of the fallen tree, leaving my pond filled with wood chips, leaves, twigs, and small branches. The water level hadn't fallen any, meaning the lining was fortunately still intact, but all the same there was no way around it: I'd have to drain the pond, clean it, and refill it.

As I reversed the pump and water started flowing into the grass, I felt as though I were betraying my frog even as I knew I was doing him a favor. He couldn't live in these conditions—if he was even still in the pond at all. I watched as it slowly emptied, circling around it like a nervous expectant father wearing out the linoleum in a hospital waiting room. When it was two-thirds empty, I saw some movement around the branches and wood chips. A second later Frog bounded out, practically onto my foot, scaring the hell out of me. I screamed and must have jumped as high as he had, immediately thankful that I hadn't landed on him. He went hopping off as I laughed uncontrollably, my heart racing.

Night fell and I continued working with a flashlight, restoring his home to the state it was in before the tree collapsed on it. The next night his croaks were back, and I was relieved that he hadn't hopped so far away after all. While my fiancée became my wife that summer, I don't know if Frog got a mate—I don't even know if he was trying; I only know he sounded as happy each evening in August as he did in May, croaking out an ode to life, warmth, darkness, water—to *home*, by my ear's reckoning.

Then fall came, and along with the rest of nature, Frog fell silent. It is a child's question, innocent, but baffling all the same to my adult self:

what happens to all the animals when winter comes? I don't imagine a dozen or so frogs form a V and go hopping southward down I-95. I hoped his silence meant his departure, because I had a deal to uphold: winter would soon be here and the pond had to be taken apart, the hole in the ground refilled. A week before Thanksgiving, having put it off as long as I could, I again reversed the pump—this time not to clean out the branches of a fallen tree and repair a home, but to disassemble it for good.

More nervous pacing, watching and waiting to see if I'd get to the bottom and find that all my worrying had been for nothing—that Frog had found his winter home long ago, and it wasn't in my yard—*my* yard that legally belonged to another, my yard that wasn't actually mine at all, my yard that I had to restore to the vision of another.

He was in there. This time he didn't make his presence known until the water was nearly drained. Instead of hopping out at my feet and scaring me half to death, he pathetically jumped against the liner, trying to find a footing that would allow him to get over the pond's edge. I watched him there, scrambling helplessly, no doubt wondering what sort of pond he'd chosen that all its water could leak away in a matter of hours.

I turned off the pump. Inside the silent house, I wondered how I would react if the floorboards began methodically and inexplicably flying out the window. When I went back outside fifteen minutes later to check on him, Frog was gone.

Return of Frog

Then it was May again, and I might have renegotiated with my landlord the right to restore her yard to how I wanted it, and welcomed Frog again as if the demolition of his home six months ago were only a bad dream. But my wife and I were in the process of trying to buy a home of our own, so we were looking to pull our roots out of this place, not plant more.

We have a thoroughly American plan—which is to say some blend of dreaming and pragmatism. Given an unprecedented buyer's market, a mortgage payment will be cheaper than continuing to rent. It won't be our dream home, but we'll be building equity for the day, years away, when we might build our dream home. I realize it often happens that the places you think you're just stopping by become the places you stay in the longest, so I won't be surprised should I be entertaining grandchildren thirty years from now in this ostensibly temporary home.

We have a house picked out and a signed purchase agreement. Nearly every day I field several e-mails about missing appliances and cracked windows and termites, and, replying with a sigh, I think to myself that all Frog had to do was hop into the pond I'd built and it was his. He had a lot less paperwork to fill out than we do.

The house we've picked out is a foreclosure, meaning our bubble is to be inflated by the burst of someone else's. Though structurally sound and more or less functional, the house needs a lot of work, including taking care of those termites, broken windows, and appliances. What the appraisal doesn't mention, and what our bank doesn't care about, is that one of the smaller bedrooms is the stereotypical blue of a boy, and the other is the stereotypical pink of a girl, and on the walls are stenciled the names of the children who recently lived there. Amidst all the garbage there's a forty-pound bag of dog food in the middle of the living room floor, split down the seam with kibble spilled haphazardly in all directions. Removing this will be the easiest part of a long refurbishing: nothing a broom can't take care of in a matter of minutes. But years from now, when we've moved out, or when the house has become a home and the memories belong to me and my wife and the stenciling on the walls is gone or belongs to our own children—even then I'll remember this bag of abandoned dog food lying in the living room to welcome us as we walked through the front door.

As for the yard, it's an enormous lot, right now being put to use growing grass, or struggling to. But I've got plans—the same plans I've had since before we picked out this house, since before we considered buying a house at all, plans that only require two things: a patch of bare land and a deed in my name.

The only person I'll have to negotiate with is my wife, and I don't anticipate there being any problems. The pond will be a little thing—twelve by twenty or so. This time I won't worry if there's a stream or reservoir nearby. I know that three or four days from when I turn on the waterfall, a frog will find his way there, wherever he is coming from and however far he has to hop. And whatever the temperature, whatever the humidity, I'll power down the central AC, throw open the bedroom window, kick off the covers and fall asleep, his croaks blanketing me through the night.

And if this does end up being home—not just *a* home, but *home*—and those grandchildren do come visiting thirty years from now, I look forward to taking them out to the back yard to look at the pond—a little

thing, really, by then only twenty-five by forty or so. They'll see the fish and marvel at the waterfall and pick flowers I'll inwardly wish they weren't picking while I outwardly smile and encourage them to. And with dusk falling and the grill going, I'll make them hush, teasing them that they're about to hear the most beautiful sound they ever will—but I won't be teasing. And sure enough, Frog will start croaking, singing them the same song he's sung to me for the better part of my life.

I don't know if they'll "get it" the same way that I do, as the idea of *home* is about as nebulous as the idea of *ground* is fixed. Their own ideas of it may be how a particular sink drains or a floorboard creaks—childish notions that deserve to survive the descent into adulthood. More nuanced, but ultimately no better or worse than a frog's idea of home: fresh running water and a place to hide.

One sets out in youth to become his own man, then looks to find the mate he wants to share himself with for the remainder of his days, and finally hopes to find a permanent place where he might do that. The rest is a matter of details. But some details will always be more important than others—and such is a frog and his nightly song for me.

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