

The Frogs

I am only twelve when Vincent takes me to see the frogs for the first time. We slide through gaps in the railing of a padlocked fence and walk down to the foetid marsh. Our boots squelch beneath us, slap against mud, break sticks, crush gumnuts. Vincent holds a cheap torch in front of him and, other than the occasional car headlight flitting through the reeds, nothing else lights the path ahead.

‘You need to keep quiet,’ he says. ‘Make sure you don’t spook them.’

I inhale, feel the skin of my belly tighten around my ribcage. Vincent raises the torch towards a ragged paperbark. Its bark falls like confetti from its sides. The light catches something and two glistening globes stare back at us. They are ablaze, an incandescent orange. I recognise it from a book at school – a tawny frogmouth. It murmurs its call – *ooooooooom, oooooooooom* – then disappears, as if in smokescreen.

‘Wrong type of frog,’ Vincent quips.

He beckons me forward again, holding back dangling branches of a peppermint tree. The night is quiet. Our skin brushes against its leaves and the air is perfumed. We meander through scrub and reach a small inlet. Vincent crouches. I follow and we duckwalk to the shore. He scans the area with his torch. At first, I see nothing and itch with frustration.

‘You said they’d be here,’ I complain.

‘*You* just need to be patient,’ he replies.

I kneel in the mud and even my breathing. Above, the bare-faced moon is scintillating, mirrored on water’s surface. The hum starts low at first and I shake my head, excusing it as nothing more than road noise. Then the sound breaks to crescendo. Croaks, ribbits, hoots. The sound of steel rods gliding together, reverberation of cymbals. Unsure where to settle my eyes, they flit around restlessly.

Ripples break on the water before us and Vincent raises his hand to focus my attention. Scanning the water I see eyes, eyes, eyes. They blink in a discordant wave. Their frenzied legs, splayed and kicking, propel them forward leaving a mucky trail in their wake. Frogs in their hundreds spatter the scene in front of me. An amphibian Pollock. I look at Vincent and there is a huge smile plastered on his face. I see my own reflection in the water and there is a smile on mine too.

‘Told ya,’ he says, vindicated.

Another hand signal and we move again, snaking through bullrushes. The creek thins. Vincent lays on his belly, moves the torch close to the water.

‘You’ll have to get down if he want to see it.’

‘It’s bloody disgusting down there, Vin. No way.’

He waggles the torch in front of him like a scolding grandmother. I tut but give in and join him in the mud. I try to pull my shirt down, though the freezing grime has already covered my belly. Vincent scoops his hand through the water and raises it to torchlight. It reminds me of Uncle Garry’s plate after eating his Christmas pavlova – *Why she bothers with that godawful passionfruit curd I’ll never know* – or the claggy chia pudding that my sister Lisa’s boyfriend Rob always eats because he says it is full of protein and keeps him full until his first of seven chicken and rice and broccoli meals of the day. He wriggles his fingers and the frog spawn moves viscously across his knuckles. Cupping his hands, he passes it from one to the other.

‘This must be what God feels like, eh? Life in the palm of his hand.’ As he says this, I notice how the torchlight has lit up his skin and that it is glowing red. He is smiling again, but this feels different than before. Crueller. Megalomaniacal.

‘Put ‘em back in the water, Vin. If you keep them out of the water for too long they’ll die,’ I say, knowing that they’ve got at least a little bit of time before any permanent damage occurs.

His grin widens and I see the veins of his forearm start to tense. He thrusts his hand towards me, apelike, as if to celebrate his barbarism. I slap the pale skin of his forearm and he flinches away, dropping the frogspawn into the mud. He raises his foot, signalling an intention to stomp, and I leap at him. We tussle beneath the moon, grabbing at each other's shirts, pushing, pulling, gasping for breath. Older and larger than me, he pushes me over into some shrubs. The air fills with bog-pong and tension. Vincent's face is covered in mud and his moody fringe sticks awkwardly to his forehead.

'They're just bloody frogs, mate, what's your problem? You're acting as though I've driven a school bus into a kindy. Carl was right, you're bloody soft.'

He storms off, leaving me torchless and sobbing. I wait before retracing my steps to get back home, biding my time by looking over the frogspawn as though capable of triaging and tending to the wounded. Once enough time has passed, I rise from the mud and follow the creek back to the inlet. The beautiful din of the frogs fills the silence. My mind returns to Vincent – how could he be so evil? How could I have not noticed this until now? How could years of friendship be thrown away so easily? I shrug off these questions, hastened by the deepening of the night, determined to return home before my absence is detected.

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I don't sleep much that night, as each time I drift off I am roused by ribbits. My vision filled with twitching legs, splashes, winking eyes. At breakfast, Mum questions my plans for the day and I lie and tell her that I intend to stay around the house with my brother Matthew. He is fifteen and, for some reason, entrusted with my care while we are on school holidays even though he still wears Velcro shoes and has destroyed two microwaves by forgetting to remove his fork from the bowl. This lie is good enough for her, and she kisses me on the head as she grabs her car keys.

'Well, call Lisa if something goes wrong.'

I goad Matthew into playing GameCube with me, trying to take my mind off last night and giving myself some time to mull over my plan. I play mindlessly, letting him win one or two matches, trying to kindle some competitive spirit, but my heart isn't in it. I sigh.

‘What’s wrong?’ Matthew asks.

‘I need to go somewhere,’ I reply. ‘You can’t follow me and you need to promise me that you won’t tell Mum.’

I am unsure whether I have convinced him but can tell from the look on his face that the deal needs sweetening.

‘If you let me do this, I’ll let you use the proper GameCube controller for a whole year. The knockoff one’s mine until next Christmas.’

He’s circling the hook now, nibbling the bait, but I haven’t snagged him.

‘And... I promise not to pick Falco when we play *Smash Bros.*’

I can almost see the barb of the hook poking through his cheek. All that’s left for me to do now is reel in my catch.

‘Deal?’ I ask.

‘Deal,’ he replies.

We spit in our hands and shake. Matthew turns back to the TV and I collect my backpack. Before I leave, I gather a bucket and shovel. The walk to the marsh feels quicker in daylight and some of the mystery of last night is erased. No brushing aside of branches, no torchlit shadows. The tawny frogmouth no longer perched in paperbark. Instead, insects fill the area, thick as fog. Dragonflies, ants, beetles. Bees, flies, snails. I swish my hand through the air to swat away persistent flies.

When I reach the inlet, it feels smaller than before. Frenetic energy of the frogs absent. Mossy green water. Stillness. I see a flash of scales across from me. A fat-bellied dugite writhes around in the dirt. Freckled green legs flash against the black and red of its mouth. In seconds it is over. The snake slinks away and I feel my face flush red and my eyes start to sting. I

imagine the snake with Vincent's face. His buckteeth as fangs. My grip on the shovel tightens and an urge to leap across the water compels me forward. I stop myself once the tips of my shoes touch water. Breathe; this isn't why I am here. The water wets through to my socks and I take a step back. Resolute, I follow the stream and return to the scene of the crime.

For some reason, I expect the area to be blocked off with barrier tape, numbered evidence markers and chalked outlines through the mud. In truth, little marks the events of last night other than a few lasting indents in the ground. Looking closer, I detect the speckles of black that I have returned here for. I survey the scene, shovelling all the crushed frogspawn I can find into my bucket. Once satisfied that I have recovered all of the lost that I can, I walk through the bushes and find a dry patch of dirt. I start to dig a hole. At first, with each strike of the shovel, I imagine Vincent underneath me and the shovel slicing through his pimply flesh. I shudder at this ugly thought. *You're better than he is*, I think to myself. Once deep enough, I tip the bucket into the hole and start to fill it back up. I tap the spade on the surface in a froglet eulogy.

'I'm sorry he did this to you,' I say out loud.

I turn around and move back to the stream. Twinkling in the water below, I see small black blobs, wriggling commas, flowing with the movement of the stream. Rudder-tails vibrating. Onyx Buddha bellies jiggling. The same joy as those first croaks for the night before fills me. Life! Life goes on and I breathe this in. I think about what Vincent said when he had the frogspawn in his hand and know now that he was wrong. This. This is what He feels like. Up there above us all, looking down and through, cheering on life and life and life. Joy and perseverance. Transformation and change. Cycles and the on-and-on.

I look into the water and see myself smiling.