

FROGSONG

BY KATE BRANDT

On the TV it's Boston versus Chicago. 4-0 lead White Sox in the fifth with one out when Lou Marson is up at bat. Marson hits and Buehrle, the pitcher, tries to stop the ground ball with his left foot when it ricochets and rolls up his shin. He races after the ball, grabs it with his glove, then—unbelievable!—throws it backhand between his legs to Konerko, the first baseman, who makes the out. An impossible play. The crowd roars. I want to roar with it. I start to. I rise and my head pokes out of the water. Then I remember.

I'm a frog.

That's right, an amphibian. It still surprises me. I look down expecting the old body and my heart always stops when I see what I've got. The little green drumsticks, the white belly, the webs. My new digs—a twenty-four-inch tank with a water filter, a little duckweed floating in it and some pebbles on the bottom. I kind of hang here, my arms and legs floating, my head just clearing the surface. There's a small plastic hut that looks like a coconut shell. Sometimes, when I can't take it anymore, I climb inside. It's just big enough for me to crouch there, my legs packed against my chest, my webs firmly planted on the glass below me. I like the feeling—the safety, the darkness. An instinct, I guess.

A frog for the time being, that's what I tell myself. I haven't always been. For the first twenty-three years and seven months of my life I was Frank Farms of Dobbs, New York, and I still would be if I hadn't had the bad luck to run into Daphne. She's a witch. A gorgeous witch, yes, with that curly

rown hair down her back, those dancing eyes, that truculent mouth. A body to die for—hips swinging back and forth when she walks; breasts like mangoes. But, apparently, possessed of supernatural powers.

I'm not her only victim. My tank is in Daphne's living room, but over on the other side, near the kitchen, are the other cages. There's Nestor the milk snake curled around a fake branch asleep most of the time; Carlyle the hermit crab in his pen of newspaper shavings; Mo and Chippy the hermit crabs. A motley assortment of animals—I've often wondered about that. Not the sort of grouping that implies *purpose*. There's a kind of manic randomness to it, as if someone went into a PetSmart with \$200 to spend and ten minutes to do it, and came out with us.

According to Daphne, she doesn't have control over it. The magic comes through her, she says. She doesn't control the form we take. Something makes her angry and then—and here her eyes get all big like some four-year-old telling you *it wasn't my fault, the glass broke itself*—it just happens. The magic just comes.

A big talker, Daphne. She's here most of the time, playing online chess, fussing over our food or our cages, skating around the floor in her stockinged feet. There are no bubbling cauldrons, no eye of newt or anything, and not much witch-talk. It's all about the weather and what she's making for dinner. Sometimes she talks about the friends she makes over the internet playing online games—Phil with the doomed marriage who she worries has fallen in love with her; Warren who has a sickness that won't allow him to leave the house.

Sometimes she talks about the future. She takes me out of the tank, sets me on the countertop while she chops up onions or something and her face gets all earnest. "You can change back," she says. She sweeps her hand through the air, indicating the other side of the kitchen. "You and the others," she says. "You lost sight of yourself, got a little out of control, but you can do it. The spell's reversible. You just have to figure it out; take back your humanity gain," she says. "That's all it takes."

Which is a little frustrating, a little vague. Nevertheless I take it seriously. Here in my tank, I've had a lot of time to think about things. What my

priorities should be. What life as a man is really all about.



As brown-haired, six-foot-one Frank Farms of Dobbs, N.Y., I was pretty much average. I had a middle management job—building manager for an apartment complex in town called Hathaway Gardens. I went to bars a lot. I tried to keep a certain look going—dark pants, suede ankle boots, hip-length leather coat.

There was my brother Kyle, who'd moved to the City and become a photographer. I was a little jealous of him, with the money he made doing freelance, and the models he dated. There were my parents, Bev and Raymond, big TV watchers. And then there was Nellie, my girlfriend. Beautiful girl: long brown hair, somber eyes, delicate breasts the shape of margarita glasses. Bit of a problem child, though: a habit of dressing in clothes she thought were Bohemian—thrift store skirts and tennis shoes; sweat-shirts worn inside out with silk scarves to dress them up. Sexy in the sense that it was something a college student would wear, but also kind of dowdy. Lately I'd been trying to get her to change her look. "You have a great body," I urged. "Go to the Gap or something—buy clothes that fit you." Which was apparently insensitive.

"Why are you always trying to change me?" she wailed. "Why can't you like me the way I am?"

A theme with her: *like me the way I am*. Nellie was not from Dobbs: she was from Gloucester, Massachusetts. A real New England blue blood, she grew up reading Stendhal and Proust, hearing her father recite Milton as he paced around the living room. Evidently his was a big name at the university town they lived in and Nellie was his protégé, the daughter who was so talented he had her apply for a Fulbright when she was eighteen. She didn't get it, and that was when the arguments started. Her father told her that if she wanted to make something of herself, be like him, she'd have to work a lot harder. Nellie told him she just wanted to be herself.

It ended badly, I guess. After one argument he told her to "live else-

where." Elsewhere turned out to be Dobbs.

In her mind *not trying to change me* meant not saying anything about the fact that once we moved in together, she never left the apartment. She had a job four days a week at the farmer's market selling baked goods. Aside from that, she never left the house. I'd come home from work and there she'd be in some shapeless thrift store dress, writing in her journal. It wasn't just her presence; it was the *atmosphere*.

"We're in our *twenties*," I said once to her, urgently. "The *party decade*."

She looked up at me all starry-eyed. "I just read the most beautiful sonnet," she said. "Listen to this: *Yourself the sun and I the melting frost*. It's so... *ardent*."

I looked at her. There were times making love—the cries she made, her dark, wet eyes in the darkness—that I thought how lucky I was. But that night I had to ask myself how I ended up with Emily Dickinson. Why couldn't I have some model in my bed like my brother Kyle?

"Sonnet," I said. "What's that, some kind of *douche*?" Her face fell. I felt silly, but I also felt like I wouldn't mind punching a wall.



This whole thing happened in a bar. Girls Night Out at Seelie's and I weren't even supposed to be there. Nellie and I had had an argument about that back at the apartment. I'd been pushing her to make friends and she'd said some people, but she was self-conscious.

"Just drop me off," said Nellie. "I don't want you in there."

"You won't notice me," I'd said. "I just want one beer."

"No, Frank." Her voice rose one octave. "This is *my* night. With *my* friends. This is for *me*."

I didn't want to fight with her; we'd been doing too much of that lately. "Right, I won't go in," I said. "Don't worry about it. I'll go to Foley's in-"

"Really?" said Nellie. Her face softened.

"No big deal," I said.

"Thank you, Frank," said Nellie. She came and rubbed her face against my chest and I laughed a little. *See, Frank?* I said to myself. *It isn't difficult. It really isn't that hard to be a nice guy.*

And I was planning to keep my promise to her, I really was. Nellie came out in her fitted bell-bottom jeans and a black button-down sweater and I told her how nice she looked. We got into the car and drove the two miles to Seelie's.

At Seelie's, I pulled the Toyota over to the curb to let her off. Nellie opened the door, put her foot out. That's when I saw Daphne.

That curly brown hair down to her shoulders. That mouth with the permanent smirk to it. That night she was in jeans and a brilliant turquoise button-down shirt that must have been silk or something the way it fluttered around her hips. She came sashaying up the street. As she did, her leather coat swung open and I stared.

"Listen, Nellie," I leaned out the open car door. "I don't have money for the meters. I'm just going to run in and get change."

"It's seven." Nellie furrowed her brow. "You can park on the street at Foley's for free by now."

"I don't think so." I shook my head. "I think they changed the rules."

She made a face. "All right. Whatever." Later I could always say that I ran into someone I knew from high school. It happened all the time.



In Seelie's they know me. Jake Carr, who I went to kindergarten with, is the bartender. It's a nice place—dark wood everywhere and one long bar with a ten-foot mirror behind it, all silvery. That night I angled myself so I could see the room behind me. I swiveled to the left and saw Nellie with two girls I didn't recognize. Then I swiveled to the right, looking for that turquoise shirt I'd seen. I found her at the pool table. She wasn't alone—she was playing some guy in a Who T-shirt. *Lose*, I thought. *Lose. Lose.* It worked. As soon as he put down his cue, I was there.

"Up for another game?" I asked. She had just put her cue down. Her

brown hair cascaded around her. She looked at me lazily.

"Sure, I'll play again." She had crouched down to the slit in the table where you reach your arm in to get the balls out, and I crouched down beside her. That's when I felt it—the longing. It reached out like a giant fist and grabbed me, pulled me close. For a minute I thought I was going to tip over, fall right into her.

That was the first sign, I guess, that Daphne wasn't ordinary... but who questions pleasure? People go toward what feels good, and that night I did too.

"It looked like you were beating the pants off that guy," I said, with both our arms sunk inside the table. Her eyes flicked over at me.

"I was."

"Was he bad or are you just really good?"

She smiled. "I tend to win a lot."

"A real pool shark, huh," I said.

"Not just pool," she said. "I play everything. Scrabble, backgammon, chess, croquet..."

"And do you always win?" I asked.

She dipped her head, hiding another smile.

"You're scaring me," I said. "I feel like I should ask for a handicap or something." I darted her a look but she didn't return it.

"Let's see how you do on your own. I'll let you break, how's that... What's your name?"

"Frank. What's yours?"

"Daphne. You break, Frank."

"Great," I said. I took my shot and the balls scattered.

Then it was Daphne's turn. "Solids," she said. "I'll pocket over there," she pointed. One quick thrust of the cue and the green and the red disappeared.

"Jeez," I said. "What, do you personally command each ball?"

She laughed, happily. "They like me."

"What is it, your perfume?"

"Energy. They like my energy."

"Goddess energy," I said. "You're the game goddess." I caught her eye. I let my glance drop, taking in the landscape, the slope of the breasts. I remember what I thought in that moment: *in the hole*.

Of course there was Nellie. Most of the time I was able to keep my back to her, but sometimes I had to go to the side of the table that faced her. I just kept my head down, swiveled my eyes around.

"Your shot," said Daphne. I eyed the table. There was a well-placed stripe at the far corner.

Concentrate, Frank, I told myself. Focus.

"You're not from Dobbs, are you?" I said as I bent over the table. "I haven't seen you."

"I moved recently. I live down at Bridgewood Condos."

"Oh yeah? How is that place?" I tried to picture it. I'd driven by—a big white sign at the bottom of a hill.

"It's fine. The parking isn't great."

"Yeah, that's always an issue." My ball headed towards the pocket but ricocheted at the last minute and I winced.

"You live alone?" I tried to make it sound casual. I was already imagining her there, walking around in underpants and that silk shirt of hers. She'd come toward me, swaying those hips. A stitch would come loose—one stitch. A button would pop and then I'd see those glorious mangos.

"Yeah." She raised her eyebrows. "Why are you asking, Frank? Are you getting ideas about me?"

I blushed with pleasure. "Maybe."

"I wouldn't," she said. "I can be dangerous."

I smiled down at the pool table as I aimed. "You know that's exactly the kind of thing that turns a man on, don't you?" I said.

"Seriously, Frank."

I looked up. Her face was all earnest.

"Okay," I smirked. "Whatever you say."



By then we were nearing the end of the game, and Daphne was winning, but there was still hope left for me. I had four striped balls still on the table and I was hoping for a combination shot. I had to win; I knew that. Daphne was a game girl—she lived for the excitement of it. If I lost I would be just another opponent who hadn't made the cut.

Daphne interrupted. "Someone's staring at you."

I turned around, just for a second. Nellie's face had a glazed look. I could see the pain and for a moment I even thought of giving up the game, just leaving. But then I thought there was going to be hell to pay anyway. I might as well enjoy myself in the time I had left.

"Who is that?" asked Daphne.

"That's Nellie," I said. "My girlfriend."

"She looks pretty upset."

"She would be. I'm not really supposed to be here." I smiled conspiratorially at Daphne. "I told her I'd leave."

Daphne didn't smile back.

"And you didn't?"

"Hey, it's just a pool game," I said. "One game." She frowned. I gave her a jaunty look. Daphne looked down at the table. There were two balls lined up with the eight ball behind them. She was going to get it, I knew. She did. All three of them—right into the pocket she called.

"Well, it's my game now," she said, putting down her cue.

"Almost your game." I smiled.

"No, my game. No more eight ball."

"It's a foul," I said. "You can't send the eight ball down with object balls."

"A foul," said Daphne incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

"That's how you play," I said gently.

"In what universe?" She had a hand on one hip.

"Every universe," I said. "Everywhere. Really. Ask anyone. Go to the bar. Ask Jake over there."

"I don't need to ask other people how to play pool, Frank," she said. "I know how to play pool."

That's when I started to lose it. I hate cheating. My brother Kyle used to

cheat and my father used to pretend he didn't notice. "Well, obviously you don't know how to play," I said acidly. "Because you don't know the rules."

"Listen, Frank." Daphne put her cue down. "I'm sorry we have a disagreement about how to play the game of billiards, but I won the game. I see you have something going on with your girlfriend over there, and I think I'm leaving. I've had my two games and I'm satisfied and I'm going to go."

"What a fucking bitch," I said incredulously.

"Watch it, Frank." Daphne turned around, bent over to reach for her coat.

"Bitch," I said again.

"I'm leaving, Frank," said Daphne calmly. "Goodbye."



I've asked myself a gazillion times why. I've gone down in my little coconut shell hut and asked myself *what was I thinking for crissake*. But I've always known the answer. I was tired of it. Tired of being Mr. Average, Mr. Second Best.

With her back to me, Daphne bent down to pick her coat up, and stuck her arms through the sleeves. Once it was on, she started to turn around again. I picked up the pool cue from the side of the table and jabbed her with it, right above her left clavicle. Lightly—more like a poke. Just to get her attention.

"Don't do that, Frank," she said. She turned around and looked at me.

"Don't do what?" I asked with mock innocence. "Break the rules?"

She held my eyes. "Don't be an asshole. Don't get me mad."

"You don't have to get mad," I said lightly. "You can just leave. Weren't you leaving anyway?"

"You're acting like a four-year-old, Frank."

"And you're not?" I scoffed. "Leaving because you might lose a pool game?"

Daphne turned around to pick up her bag, then looked at me earnestly. "Please don't get me mad, Frank. Bad things happen when I get mad."

"Oh yeah," I laughed. "Like what? What are you, She-Hulk?" I mocked. "She-Hulk mad. She-Hulk smash pool table."

"I have powers. There's a spell I cast. I can't help it."

I gave a loud ha-ha at that one. I raised my voice. "Witch here, everyone," I said. "Watch out. Witch." A few heads turned for a second, then looked away. "What, am I supposed to be afraid of you now?" I poked her again, right on the spine, which probably hurt.

"Frank, don't," she said firmly. "Stop it."

But I wouldn't. I kept poking—her back, her shoulders, her arms, even her head.

That's when it happened.



I remember this: things got dark suddenly. Not jet black, more of a graying, like someone hit a dimmer switch. The sounds of the bar faded, too. I was still looking at Daphne but it was more the blue of her shirt that I saw. Then her eyes, burning. They wouldn't let go of me. She was mumbling something but I couldn't hear.

Then I got thirsty. So thirsty. It was like I'd been eating sand for a year and all I wanted was water, and there was no water in sight.



Let me tell you what runs through a man's mind when he wakes up and discovers he has frog legs. There's a phrase for it, I believe: *a state of fugue*. I'd look down at myself—those horrible springy legs, that spongy skin. I knew it wasn't possible. But each time I opened my eyes again, there I was.

My first thought was *run*. That first month, I must have tried escaping ten times a day—swimming up to the top of my tank, pushing off the edge of it, then five mad hops toward the front door. I never got very far. Daphne would come after me and scoop me up, drop me back into my tank again. "This is who you are now, Frank," she'd say to me. "Face it. You're a frog."

Sometimes she'd put me on the kitchen counter, deliver little lectures. How escaping wasn't the point here. How the point was becoming human again, *changing*. Her voice would get all high and defensive and that's when I realized it wasn't just me she was talking to. Mo, Chippy and Carlyle were all guys who had pissed her off too. Once I knew that, all I wanted to do was talk to them, find out what had happened. But you can't talk, obviously. You've got your animal sound, you can hop around, make gestures, right leg out, left leg bent, but that's about it.

According to Daphne, that's the point. Being human isn't about words, she says. Being human is about being *connected*. You're not getting it, guys, she'd say to us. Connecting. Opening your heart. *Love*.

Once I was sitting on the counter and this documentary about frogs came on the television. Daphne got all excited. "Look, Frankie, look," she said. "Frogs!" I couldn't help being interested. It turns out my species is *Lithobates Catesbeiana*, American Bullfrog.

"Listen, Frank," said Daphne breathlessly. "He's going to sing."

Then it came—the sound of another bullfrog. A sound like no other—just that *chump*, like a bite taken out of the air.

"He's singing," Daphne whispered. "Sing back to him."

And I did. I pulled a big lungful of air in and pushed it back out. Somehow I knew how to do it, where to send it. A sac of skin inflated just below my chin and then the sound came out, loud and low. I felt kind of happy—a thing I couldn't put into words. Daphne smiled at me, and if I hadn't had this frog face, I would have smiled back.



On the TV, Boston has just scored its tenth home run. It's the seventh inning and they're so far ahead I know they're going to win. They'll be going to the playoffs now. There will be at least five more games.

Outside, it's getting dark. When I look at the computer, I see Daphne's not there anymore. I hear her upstairs in the bedroom moving around, back and forth, like she's going through the closet, trying things on. I real-

ze she's going out. That doesn't happen often and it gets us all excited. I can hear Mo and Chippy banging their shells against the plastic cage. Carlyle tarts gnawing on the wooden slats of the gate to his enclosure. By the time Daphne comes down, it's pretty tense in here.

Tonight, she's wearing her heeled boots, and a silk shirt like the one he wore the night of our fatal meeting at Seelie's, although it's a different color—flame orange instead of blue. She clip-clops into the kitchen, opening drawers and closing them again.

She makes the rounds, dropping in a snack for each of us: coconut bits or Mo and Chippy, a piece of steak for Carlyle, frog pellets for me. The door wings shut behind her.

Then, silence. The kind of silence you hear; the kind that actually has infinitesimal sounds in it. Carlyle pawing his newspaper strips. The clock ticking. I already miss her—Daphne, I mean. It's hard when it's just us animals. *The female presence*, I think. I think of Nellie, how she used to tell me I looked like Leonardo DiCaprio—*handsome*. Once when we were in bed together in the afternoon she told me how love was when the other person saved you. How I'd saved her.

I knew what she wanted me to say—she wanted me to say that she'd saved me too. I wanted to. I started. But in the end, all I said was that I was glad she was happy.



It must be 3 a.m. when the lights come on—I can hear the clock chiming. There are voices—human voices, which means *there's more than one person in the apartment*. Scared, I crouch down low in the safety of my hut.

Both female, I realize. I want to see so I push off from the bottom of my tank and glide up, the water sluicing past my legs, till I can poke my head out. The sofa is at a right angle to my tank. I watch Daphne plump down on the couch, her hair thrown against the back of it in a fan shape. The other woman is turned away from me, draping her coat over the armchair, but when she turns around I see.

Nellie.

There are a bunch of hormones frogs have that humans don't—Daphne's told me about them. But frogs do have adrenaline, and that kicks in now. I start pushing the air out of my lungs so I sink back to the bottom. I'm half-way down when it occurs to me that I won't be able to hear or see anything if I go back into my hut. That's how I end up backed into a corner, shaking a little, while the two of them talk.



They're both slouched against the back seat of the couch, looking up at the ceiling.

"It was so great playing pool with you," says Nellie. "You're such a great teacher. I was never into games, y'know? I never was interested. But now I think I could really do it. I could really play."

"I play *too much* pool," says Daphne. "Games," she says in a disgusted voice. "It's like all I do. I want to *help* someone, y'know?" She looks urgently at Nellie. "Do something good."

Nellie's taken aback—I can see that. She nods her head.

From my tank I have a good view of her. She's wearing those same fitted bell-bottom jeans she wore the night she went to Seelie's, but over them a multi-colored top that really suits her, loose in the sleeves, but hugging her top part, so you can see the shape of her breasts. Terrific, actually. *She's different*, I think. My legs jerk up like I'm on a Nautilus machine.

"What time is it?" says Nellie, still gazing at the ceiling. Daphne looks at the clock on the wall.

"Around three."

"Three. Jesus. Are you tired?"

"No."

"Me neither," Nellie sighs. "I don't really sleep anymore."

"Too much coffee?"

"I guess thinking too much."

"About what?"

"Frank. My old boyfriend." *My old boyfriend.* My legs contract. Daphne starts to blush. "He left me," says Nellie. "About a month ago. It's still kind of raw."

"Where did he go?" says Daphne, red-faced.

"I don't know," says Nellie. "I actually don't know. One minute we were in this bar; he was playing pool with some girl and then... he was gone."

Silence.

"Wow," says Daphne finally.

"Wow," says Daphne again—this time there's a hush in her voice. I guess I feel the same way. It suddenly comes to me that I never really thought about what it was like for Nellie in all this. She already kind of hated herself, then her boyfriend starts flirting with some hot chick at the pool table, and disappears.

"Did you report it?" asks Daphne.

Nellie sighs. "I thought about it," she says. "But then I realized it was just..." Her voice breaks. "He wanted to be gone."

"Mmm," says Daphne, embarrassed. "Well, at least you're out there again. Going to bars... it looked like that guy you were sitting with was really into you."

"Actually, he was getting obnoxious," says Nellie. "I'm glad you were there. You, like, rescued me."

Daphne laughs. "Yeah, you looked kind of cornered."

"I was."

Daphne clears her throat. "Listen, I'm suddenly exhausted, aren't you? Do you want to sleep over? I have an extra bed in the other room. It's made up and everything." Daphne's eyes are pleading and I find myself feeling the same way, leaning forward in my tank. *Stay, I think. Stay.*

Nellie thinks for a minute. "Sure," she says. "Sure, that would be great."



It's a long night. In my tank I'm suddenly cold—I can't stop shaking. With her being close, it's all so real again; what I am. What I used to be.

I must have slept some, because when I wake up morning light streams in through the kitchen window. Daphne's coffee maker churns away and the two of them are sitting there at the kitchen table.

"Did you sleep okay?" asks Daphne.

"Yeah, I slept great," says Nellie.

"Listen, I've got bagels. What would you like, sesame, poppy?"

"Poppy, I guess. You don't have to feed me..." she falters.

"Of course I'm going to feed you," says Daphne. "Sit. Eat." The toaster pops and Nellie sits crunching her bagel. Behind her Carlyle gnaws at the foundation of his pen.

"What is that?" says Nellie.

"The scratching? That's Carlyle, my ferret. See?" Daphne walks over, picks him up by the scruff of his neck. In her arms, Carlyle's head moves back and forth, sniffing. For a minute I wonder what he was before Daphne changed him—a crack addict? a Wall Street trader? Daphne smiles over at Nellie. "Do you want to pet him?"

"No thanks," says Nellie. I watch her move back a little in her seat; Nellie isn't an animal person.

"These are the crabbies," says Daphne, dumping Carlyle back in his pen and walking over to the crab tank. "Mo. Chippy."

"Quite a menagerie here," says Nellie.

Daphne laughs gaily—a little *too* gaily, I think. "I'm just weird." She crosses to my side of the kitchen. "And finally..." she walks over to my tank... "there's Frank."

Oh no you don't I think. I dive down deep but Daphne is too quick for me. She reaches her hand in and her fingers close around me. She carries me into the kitchen. Her palm opens and there I am, two feet from Nellie's face. It's as big as the moon and just as familiar. The somber eyes; the knobs of the cheekbones; the mauve half circles that I used to trace with my finger when she lay under me. She looks back at me in wonderment. My legs start to shake.

"Frankie is an American Bullfrog." Daphne talks in a sing-song, as if I'm some sort of museum exhibit. "He eats frog pellets. He needs to stay in

the water to keep his skin moist... and he sings.”

“He sings?” says Nellie doubtfully.

“Well, frog-sings. It’s a mating thing, y’know?” She giggles.

“Does he sing in here?”

“I don’t think so. He has to be outside,” says Daphne. “In the wild. In the presence of his mate.”

I look at Nellie. Her eyes are so sad. I think of how she used to tell me I rescued her. She’d look at me all wet-eyed and it scared me. It seemed to me she saw something in me that wasn’t really there.

I inhale. My throat feels hot. The sound startles us all.

When I’m over, it’s quiet.

Nellie’s giant face puffs up and gets kind of pinkish. Her eyes crinkle. Her lashes are wet.

“Are you okay?” says Daphne.

Nellie nods, tightly, but her voice is all choked. “It’s the name, I guess. I actually loved him, y’know?” Her voice breaks. “And I thought he loved me back.” She gives Daphne a watery smile.

“Jesus, I’m sorry,” says Daphne. She looks sorry. She looks like she feels like an asshole, actually.

More than anything, I want to throw myself at Nellie. I want to feel her tears on my skin and roll in them. I want to touch that white skin, get close to those wet-dark eyes.

That’s when I take the leap, right up at her. Nellie’s hand flies up, warding me off, and I ricochet. For the first time in my frog life I’m falling. Fast. My body tenses. At the last minute I hit hard with a smacking sound. Daphne’s stuck her hand out, caught me just like a baseball.

“I’m sorry,” says Nellie. “I don’t like things jumping at me. I’m sorry. Is he okay?”

“Yeah, I think so,” says Daphne. I’m in the palm of her hand and she holds it up to the light, turning me around, gazing at me. I stare at her deep-set eyes, her smirky mouth. “Wow, Frankie really likes you,” she says. “I’ve never seen him do that. That was very sweet of you, Frankie,” she says, lowering me down to eye level. “A very human thing to do.”

Silence. I look at Nellie. Nellie looks at Daphne. Then Nellie steps back.

“So I really should go,” says Nellie.

“Don’t do that!” Daphne cries.

“Really,” says Nellie. My heart’s pumping again—my legs jerk up and down like marionettes. I know she can’t do that. She can’t leave me here. Not after this.

I see her moving toward the coat closet and I jump down onto the top of Daphne’s desk, then on to the floor. I hop in front of Nellie’s giant feet, zig-zagging.

“No, Frank!” Daphne calls after me. I hear her behind me, scrambling over furniture. “You can’t do that, Frank,” she says urgently. “You’re gonna get killed.” I ignore her and keep going. I jump on top of Nellie’s shoe, which is just lifting. I feel Daphne’s hand above me. She grabs me and lifts me up.

“Oh my God,” says Daphne. “Oh my GOD, Nellie, look at this.”

“What?”

“Look.” She holds up her hand, thrusts me in Nellie’s face. “Look! His skin is changing.”

“It is?” Nellie looks terrified.

“It’s white! It looks white!” Nellie leans forward, furrows her brow.

“Is he sick or something?”

“It looks human.”

“WHAT?”

“Look.” More than anything I want to jump over to a mirror and look at myself, but I force myself to stay. I look at Nellie’s face. There’s a look coming over it—half horror, half disbelief.

“Jesus Christ.”

“What is it?”

“No. That’s Frank.”

“I know it is.”

“No, *Frank*. My old boyfriend. Frank?” she says tentatively. I open my mouth. I croak.

Nellie sits. None of us moves or says anything. For a moment I think how long it’s been with my skin out of the water, what will happen if I don’t

o back. Daphne stays where she is, standing. She puts me on the coffee table, then stands again. She watches Nellie's face anxiously.

"I'm just wondering," says Nellie finally. "How the face of my old boyfriend would appear on the face of a frog who lives in your house."

"It's just a power I have," Daphne says apologetically.

"You did this?" Daphne's fingers twist.

"An accident." Daphne looks pleadingly at her.

"What about your other... pets?" Nellie points with her chin to Carlyle's pen.

"It's when they get me angry," Daphne says guiltily. "Mo and Chippy are date rape... attempted date rape. Carlyle was... well, Carlyle tried to run me over with a car."

"Jesus," Nellie breathes.

"I *really* regret it," Daphne says earnestly. "And between me and Frank? I want you to know—there was nothing between us. We were playing pool and he started poking me with his cue and..." Her voice trails off.

"So it was *you* that night."

"I'm so sorry." Daphne's eyes are as big as saucers.

"He *poked* you?"

"I won and he wasn't liking it."

"Jesus, what an asshole."

"Well..." says Daphne. Her eyes are all big, resting on Nellie. "I think I'm changing back," says Daphne hopefully. "Are you going to take him home with you?"

I look at Nellie's face and I see the answer. I can't even picture how grotesque I must be, a frog body, a tiny Frank face. Maybe it's the frog pellets, I want to throw up.

It makes sense, I tell myself. I left her. Now she's leaving me. Nellie's eyes look over me. I open my mouth. I push the air through. Something comes out but it sounds like a human burp.

"I don't know," she says. "Me and Frank... I don't know, maybe it's over. It actually made sense to me that he left. We were... we were really different, now?"

My limbs are numb. My whole body is heavy.

"He must have liked something about you," says Daphne. "He chose you."

"Yeah," says Nellie. "I guess. I don't know why."

"How did you two meet?"

"I was working at the Farm Stand, living at the Y." Her face clears. "I guess he kind of rescued me."

"So—he chose you."

"Yeah," says Nellie sadly. "Yeah, I guess he did."

"So now it's your turn," says Daphne, her eyes on Nellie's face. "*You can choose. F you witch-friend, I think. I open my mouth again. Words, I command my body. Poetry. Something. Talk to her—let her know.*"

And they come. Not from my Frank-mind, but from my frog belly, so I don't know what I'm going to say until it comes out. Then I don't recognize myself.

Yourself the sun, and I the melting frost.

I'm hopping as I say it; I can't help myself.

Myself the flax and you the kindling fire.

I wonder what I look like; a tiny jumping Frank reciting poetry.

Yourself the maze wherein myself is lost.

I don't think I'll ever forget Nellie's face, though: part terrorist attack, part day-at-the-ballet.

I stop. There's silence.

"Wow," says Daphne.

Nellie is smiling. "Wow, Frank," she says. "I didn't know you had it in you. A *sonnet*."

"Yeah," I say in a daze. "A sonnet."

"So it's done!" says Daphne joyfully. Which I don't think is what Nellie means, but then she looks over at Daphne and her face clears and I know she's going to go along with it. And I have a chance.



It's a tough spell to break, though, because it's been a long metamorphosis. Two months now and I've gotten a lot bigger but I'm still half green. Nellie's the breadwinner now—I can't really work with an arm and a leg covered with frog skin. I've been watching the playoffs with a wet towel over that half of my body, and there have been some real highlights. Marson catching a pop fly and ending the seventh inning. Buehrle sliding into home at the bottom of the eighth.

Daphne comes over sometimes. She can't stay away—she's fascinated. I'm her only success story—well, half success story, and she can't get over it, lifting the towel, inspecting my frog arm. I'd be happier if I never had to see her again, but Nellie adores her, and lately, after all this, that's all I want. I want to watch the game, and I want Nellie to be happy.

So I don't forget the poetry. I keep *Oxford's Book of English Sonnets* beside me on the coffee table and when commercials come I flip through it, deciding what to memorize. Between poems, I do a little thinking. I think what it means to be human and how in the end, it isn't all that different from being a frog or a marten or a hermit crab. The powers of our hearts call to us, and generally we follow the song.