

hooray for all the children

All the other children called him froggy. "He looks like a frog," they'd say. "If you squint real hard," they'd say. "Those drab green clothes. He has that froggy way about him," they'd say. "That pond smell; that bull-legged way about him; those puffy jowls; that mysteriously thin straight line for a mouth; the bulging, ping-pong-ball eyes; the weak chin; the sloping forehead; the manner in which the back of his head is so small; that pin-head quality about him, that football shaped head, and those warts, oh those warts, what a spectacular collection. . . ."

His clothes were too old, too green, too small, too tight, too smelly - a weird momma's boy smell. His hair too greasy, too matted. His head was like a lopsided lump of fruit rolling on bony, handlebar shoulders. His freckles were mere blights of disorganized rust tripping across his pale face.

The children would push him down the stairs. And kick his books. They'd have contests. In the halls they'd give him tremendous snuggies, reaching into his outdated, olive pants to yank up his underwear from behind. They'd hoist him to his tippy-toes, tapping a quick dance on the hard terrazzo floor, not relieving him until his face achieved a specific shade of crimson.

At recess he would often wander off the school grounds down to the river where he could find peace in the rocks that he would collect. His favorites were the aggies, with their swirls of colors spinning together as one perfect jewel. He would have to sneak back carefully, hiding the rocks in his unfashionably dark socks as the children would often catch him and make him swallow his treasures.

On field trips they would cram red-hots up his nose. On the playground they would funnel sand through their cupped hands into his throat. And they would hold contests to see how far they could throw him. It was a game soon dubbed "catapult." On the bus home they'd make him eat sticks and leaves and worms because, they figured, frogs liked sticks and leaves and worms.

They'd make him eat saw dust. They'd pour glue in his hair. They'd fill his locker with dead squirrels after they'd fermented them in the sun. They'd put his head in the toilet and flush the lever, insuring that all the girls, with their little electric smiles, would run away from him. They'd make up songs about him - choruses, operas, vast arias, tender lullabies, cute rhyming jingles, and clever limericks with tiny little hooks. And that was all just on Tuesdays.

He was an easy target, so thin he couldn't fight back - what was the use? It only made things worse. They cemented the social order with their gossip. And as the propaganda swelled, even the teachers began to turn against him, casually referring to him as froggy, whether he was around or not.

Later in life froggy staggered off to college where he ultimately prospered in the concrete industry, perhaps inspired by all the aggregate he passed through his system earlier in life on that vast, bright, hot, lonely, magnifying glass of a playground.

He never married, but had squirrels for pets and that alchemy business - mixing different things together to construct something new and solid - bridges and roads and buildings and big, solid, heavy things - monuments that would last for years, monuments that reached into the future, far beyond anyone's grasp, reaching far beyond anyone's vision. He'd build them so he could be there himself, far far away, in another place none of us could even imagine, in a place none of us could touch.

He was getting pretty large in the region - state contracts, unions, politicians, that sort of thing. I'd see his photo in the paper every now and then, all curt and natty now. He was into pretty much everything. For a long time I felt he was concentrating his efforts into an endeavor that, frankly, was a size or so too large for his personality. I figured he'd end up becoming a biology professor or maybe a Department of Natural Resources guy. I just figured he'd be happier that way - alone in the weeds by some forgotten stream.

That's about the time I seem to have felt it began to happen. One day I was reading the newspaper. I was reading about an old classmate who mysteriously disappeared. Eventually he turned up in over 3000 cans of a popular brand of tuna. A horrible fate to be sure, and amplified by the fact that the guy was notoriously reputed to detest tuna.

Then one day another classmate was found several blocks from town, filled with sand, his mouth and nose caulked shut with insulating sealant. Then there was that guy they discovered tarred over in the road, his arms stretched out, trying to cover his head. And another they happened upon who was glued to a wall. As they peeled him off, they noticed he was unusually heavy. The X-rays proved their speculation - that he had been filled with rocks. They discovered another classmate in a field two counties over. The medical examiner said it was as if he'd been catapulted into the air and had traveled a great distance. Another was found floating down a stream - flat as an oak leaf, but curled up at the ends, as if he'd been steamrollered. Another guy came home from work one day and discovered that his house was completely gone - not a crumb, not a thread, not a piece of lint left of it. The spot where his house was supposed to be was all flat and covered with sod. Squirrels foraged for nuts in the leaves where his house should've been.

His house was missing, gone, vanished, and they never found any of it - all his belongings, his entire life erased. One gal walked out to her driveway one morning to find their camper, boat, and three family cars crushed into hay bale sized crinkly metal cubes. Each crumpled, gleaming, jazzy metal chunk was neatly returned to its spot on the driveway and next to the garage. Eventually she had the metal chunks brought downstairs to use as furniture in their pool room. Another guy was unfortunate enough to have found himself just a little too close to a brick making machine. It is believed he was eventually distributed all over the state. Perhaps he is a part of your new patio or garage.

There was a lot of talk around town, suspicious murmurs and rumors and that sort. Was it all just coincidence? A bad run of fate? Bad hoodoo? Why couldn't people leave well enough alone? The past is just best left in the past. Let bygones be bygones. Why hold on to things? Water under the bridge and all that after all.

There was a lot of talk about that overweight kid. What was his name? They say froggy gave him the money to buy the towing company he worked at. Now I don't know if all that was true, but everytime I'm out and about - running errands or what have you - and I can't find my car, maybe two or three times a year, it always seems to turn up in the city impound lot.

This was all well and good, I thought, sitting comfortably, observing from the safe distance of my cozy reading chair in my living room in the suburbs. From time to time classmates of ours would pop up in the paper, stuffed in this device or caught in that, found in a grassy field just outside of town, their bodies a distorted mystery to be unraveled. Hooray! I say. Hooray for all the children! Hooray for froggy!

And then the other night I was watching television tucked safely away in my living room. The game was just getting good when I felt a truck rumbling up - a big truck sneaking up the block. I watched, peeking through the drapes in my suburban paranoia as a large, heavy-duty cement truck squeaked to a shattering stop in front of my driveway. I could feel that heavy beast idling in my chest, oscillating back and forth, to and fro, coiled up with a rapid pulse.

It was pitch black out. The truck's lights weren't on. The damn monster revved to growl and purr menacingly for a few moments, and then slowly lurched forward to creep out of sight in a huff of exhaust.

The next morning word spread from down the block that a distant classmate of mine awoke to find his pool filled with rotting, dead frogs. They had to shovel them out with snow shovels and pitchforks. It took all weekend to load them into plastic garbage

bags. Eventually they had to retiling the entire pool.

About a week later I returned from a business trip in which I was able to bring my family along. We got in late. The world was dark and quiet. Everything so quiet and still, frozen in a peace I wouldn't even want to describe, a peace I wouldn't want to disturb. I laid in bed with my eyes open, and I felt that peace settling inside of me like the leaves drifting off the trees to blow away with the wind.

The next morning I awoke very early to retrieve my morning paper. The sun was just creeping up over the city, shadows stretching to search for new homes, pushing against the lazy purple and green horizon.

I opened my door to find my front step stretching out before me. It had grown to cover the yard, the entire yard smoothly entombed under a four inch blanket of white concrete, yawning exquisitely out to the street, as smooth and shiny as a baby's backside.

I was stunned, and yet strangely exhilarated.

I stepped out onto it in mouth-open wonder. My slippers shuffled on its drying softness. As I walked, leaves pittered with the breeze across its smooth, hard surface.

The craftsmanship was inspiring - the way it terminated perfectly at the street with a crisp, sharp edge. The way it coated the trees twelve feet up in a snug, warm glove. I turned to discover they had completed much of the siding as well, concrete creeping up with crude plywood forms bolted in and tied back with rusting, blushing, threaded rods - up, up, up and over and back down the other side in some places.

Marvelous!

Tremendous!

Applause! Applause!

Encore!

I was moved.

Later, I discovered they had ambitiously completed the entire backyard as well, hugging the flower beds, blanketing the garden, covering my boat, hiding my wife's car under a soft hush of concrete. It was an impressive sight. Poor Sparky, he sat there stoically, an attentive statue, a mere bump in the middle of the backyard. I stood there in the sparkling morning sun in my soft flannel pajamas - the ones beautifully imprinted with the faces of notorious underworld crime figures. I felt that concrete under me, my skin getting warm as if I were Sparky, preserved in time, wearing it forever as it spread out to discover new lives, new events, new times.

I can't recall if I ever did anything to poor old froggy - perhaps I did, or maybe I did not. But I was there and that was enough for me. Hooray, I say. Hooray for all the

children, for we have taught one another well.

I went back inside and gently climbed back into bed as if steadying myself into a small rowboat, careful not to wake even the littlest of things. I closed my eyes as if after an unfavorable dream, as if to clean that ugly mirror of time, as if to wipe it all away, hoping to awaken with everything returned as fresh and bright as it had always been.

Astrological shadows crawled across the ceiling - constellations of the rising sun projecting through the enthusiastic fall leaves. But all I could think of were the shadows on the patio lawn and froggy as a child, revving that truck, driving it in his mind.

By Tony Rauch – copywrited material