

Frogs

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The number of times I've awakened crying with tear-stained pillows, looking at the clock on my nightstand, is a number I lost track of, a number that can only be estimated in the hundreds, if not the thousands, of years. Although, the number of times I've been murdered by my neighbor Francis across the street stopped at three hundred thousand. Each morning I wake with the residual pain from the previous night's tragedy: every day is always the first day of losing my mother to gang violence crossfire.

When my mother died, I got a call from a raspy-sounding deputy downtown. I clearly remember watching the news as the massacre occurred, stunned, as if caught in a terrible dream, one that was on the verge of becoming a nightmare. The dread and hopelessness grasped my heart tightly. Every morning I would learn that it was one-hundred and fifty dead, another eighty-five critically injured, statistics permanently carved into my brain as if by a torturous tablet carver. I was told the hospital beds filled up and my mother died waiting in a dingy parking lot off 7th and Homestead, a mile away from the shooting. I drove as fast as I could to see if it was true. Downtown, I saw the streets of our city's downtown flooded with flashing sirens, shouting policemen, the footsteps of SWAT teams, screaming people. Blue and red danced off the surface of every building and reflection and person. The entirety of what we considered downtown was blockaded off by wooden posts and cement barricades as if a new Great Wall was spontaneously built to contain the violence held within. I got to a point in the road where the path was congested with vacant cars, their various doors left open. I left my vehicle as a panicked driver hit the back of it, but I wasn't bothered enough to look. My eyes were on the policeman directing the rapids of scurrying people.

He held up his arms and grabbed me by the waist before I could leap over the barricade. "Please turn around and head with everyone else. There are still active shooters." His voice was that of a scared child.

"My mother, please, my mother," I croaked, voice fluctuating, sobbing.

"Run, please, just run." He pushed me away and blocked me off. A few shots popped not so far away, behind some buildings. They were as loud as popcorn in your microwave, and a few more kernels popped, returning fire from a different location.

Eventually, I found my way to where my mother's body was lying still, like a doll. One of the doctors or nurses must have closed her eyelids like they do in the movies. That's how I've chosen to picture it. A small act of kindness makes the stinging sensation microscopically better. I looked down at her body. The

bullet hole went straight through her abdomen. She was wearing her favorite blouse, one I thrifted for her, mostly because of the name-brand on the tag. It was a steal, she said. I remember how he held it up and twirled it around, inspecting it like a newborn child. My eyes told me she was faintly smiling, perhaps smirking. Did she know I would come? In her final moments, did she smile thinking of me? Having been killed myself, it was hard to think of anything but the immediate animalistic responses stampeding through my veins.

Minus the blood, her makeup was still pretty, unbesmirched, as it was when I applied it that morning. As a young kid, she told me that her hands began to shake the day she saw her mother die in war back home overseas. That's why she couldn't steady her hand with mascara.

I've left this inheritance for you, she seemed to be telling me. I could feel the pull of her spirit tugging at my heart. *Not money or land, no jewels, but my hands that loved you so*. I felt the impression of hands upon my cheeks.

I looked down further at my own body, and that's when my hands began to shake. My hands continued to shake for quite a few years afterward. Somehow, I got over it. Looking back at it, I think it was because I got better at expecting Francis to knock on my door. Him killing me every day didn't help, but I got used to the terror, the violence. Francis wore flannels that stressed the buttons containing his beer belly. If he expanded his lungs with a deep breath, even a deep sigh would do, I'm willing to bet that the buttons would have popped off with a bullet-like velocity. His beard was uneven, boots always smudged from whatever work he was doing in his backyard (I found that he made wood carvings in his backyard and that the smudges were various oils and paints. I saw all his tools of the trade in his garage as I threw him into the woodchipper ala *Fargo*). His mouth-breathing tendencies were comically emphasized by his Southern Cross hat he wore when he came to visit me each day.

The first time he came he banged on my front door as hard as he could, and I heard a crash. An EMT worker and an officer dropped me off and put me to bed the previous night, so I wondered, did that wake him up last night? What's his issue this time?

There was a picture of my mother and me hanging up next to the door that crashed every morning. It's become an alarm clock of sorts. I opened the door, and he was always standing there, out of breath, holding a large shotgun across his chest. His eyes were red, strained, from what I don't know. His presence felt like standing amongst raging bulls.

"There you are, you goddamn ____." He said, on command, each time. "Where's your mother?"

It's obvious that he lacked empathy or lacked the knowledge of what a grieving person may look like. He didn't notice my wet face, my slumped shoulders, feet pointed inward. Every sign of weakness I

displayed passed into his eyes and bounced around in his empty head before he would shout:

“What the fuck did I tell you about your goddamn frogs?” He shouted. The veins in his neck strained, ready to burst.

Oddly enough, I had a frog in my throat. It blocked my airway. Momentarily, I forgot how to breathe as one might forget how to catch themselves when they fall. “Oh, here we go, are you people always like this? Do you understand what the fuck I’m saying?”

I frailly lifted my hands, pleading for unspoken understanding.

The strain in my throat prevented me from speaking, and my head was blown off. I knew then what people meant when they said that time slowed down. In the instant, I counted the individual pellets, and I wondered if they were flies, if the frogs in the backyard missed them during the previous night’s dinner, before things went dark and I saw my nightstand clock again. 7:37 am. I awoke startled, still crying from the previous night. I thought that it was weird, that I rarely had dreams like that which woke me up. Then came a bang and a crash. “There you are, you goddamn _____. Where’s your mother?” This time I noticed the bubbling saliva at the corners of his mouth. It slightly blurred his yellowed, fuzzy teeth. I’ve been stuck here for lifetimes untold, in an endless cycle of violence. Later, I would learn what kind of violence, a violence of difference and hatred for the unorthodox, the subaltern, the neighbor with a different lawn than the ones you’ve known your whole life. It was hard for me to find a way to survive after the realization I was about to get my roof knocked off again, and again, and again. Sometimes I would hide in my closet, and he would enter, screaming about the frogs in his yard and home.

“You fucking _____ and your goddamn freaks...” He mumbled to himself, searching the home, catching his breath between each fragmented sentence. The frogs had gotten out the previous night when I wasn’t around to care for them. We’ve had this problem with him for a while, and we would always do our best to accommodate our side work. For him, it wasn’t enough. To him, raising, selling, and eating frogs was abhorrent, though I’m sure he wouldn’t know what the word meant. It might be considered a _____ word, but I’m sure Francis is an American mutt, a French mixed with whatever. It was odd for Francis that people like me, whom my mother knew from work and word of mouth, and from overseas, would come and buy. Maybe he missed the French people who looked like him coming to supply their restaurants with the finest frog legs this side of the Mississippi. Those chefs would hold their breath when they would visit while they selected frogs, and I would hold my breath when Francis was near, but so many times I betrayed myself.

Once, I left the closet door cracked open to peer out. He caught the glint in my eye and shot me through the door. I died slowly that time, wood fragments and shells littering my skin, and I could hear him reloading. He flung open the closet and screamed incoherently at me. He shoved the barrel in

my mouth, and the last thing I saw was his Southern Cross hat as I awoke again.

Once, when I found that I could run down the street if I hid under the sink, I messed up my routine and tripped. He dragged me by my ankles into the living room where he would shoot me. Sometimes, if the monkeys smashing the typewriters in my head couldn't figure out a new route, I would falter in my process and would get shot in several different ways. Each time I would wake, staring at 7:37 am.

Once I managed to get the gun from him. I had enough time to grab a pair of scissors from my mother's room and hide in an ambush spot in my closet. I hid in dresses as if they were bushes. I waited to pounce at my prey with a tiger's ferocity and tenacity. I would see his barrel sticking out, then his arms would pass my gaze and I would leap, slashing him. I got the gun and aimed it at Francis, but the recoil of the blast made me miss the target entirely, and he choked me out. I fondly remember more saliva foaming at his mouth as he gurgled and crushed his teeth together as he lay over me, killing me. I would see that same expression on his face when I finalized my perfect route.

I tried killing myself many times. I mean, I did technically kill myself, but I still woke up in the same bed in the same position, enduring the same pain I would assume family would share if I wasn't stuck in eternity. Even when I tried doing nothing, Francis would walk into my room, screaming, saying we should have stayed back over in jungleland with our relatives, and then he would shoot me.

Sometimes his expression changed when I changed mine, though the nervousness of about-to-be-getting-murdered was always swirling and prickling my stomach like ravenous hornets who decimated the butterflies inside me. The anticipation kills almost as much as the blast. I don't know what caused it, perhaps I was a bit closer to the door while I laid in bed, but once he told me that we _____ shouldn't have ever started raising those goddamn motherfucking-frogs, and that he'll make sure whatever _____ comes by today gets what's coming to them, too. It was shocking to me. I felt a moment of realization that interrupted this dream I had been living in. I've been here so many times that the familiarity of torment was becoming commonplace, and an almost entertaining, competitive aspect began to dominate my consequence-free life. But then I realized there are worlds where Francis continued his wrath, perhaps sitting in my mother's knitting chair, polishing his shotgun barrel with a cloth, and cleaning liquids we kept in the pantry in the washroom. He would get someone after me, a frog eater. There must be a future after this event in the singular strand of continuous time. My consciousness wouldn't allow me to enable that. So, here's how I started killing Francis.

There was more trial and error that continued which kindled and turned up the volume of the fire lit under me. Every failure was another person dead. Some routines were spent thinking. I found a great place in my garage, under a tarp in the corner. The air-conditioning would turn on, and the breeze would

wrap the tarp around my silhouette. Shooting me through the tarp must have been preferable to Francis, for he would have to wrap me up like a rug. But it was worth it, I'd say. That route gave me an extra seven minutes of straight thinking. Other forms of hiding led me astray, wasting time, though I suppose I had an unthinkable number of days to spare. One day I would think under the tarp, the next day I would explore my hypothesis, rinse, repeat, over and over. I felt like I was a mad scientist. Once, as I awoke wiping my tears, I thought to myself that I should be experimenting at university by now. After all, I had been stuck with Francis for half a year, which branched well into my first semester of post-secondary education.

As evident by my frail frame, physical altercations, sneak attacks included, didn't do the trick. I couldn't jump Herculean. I couldn't lift Schwarzenegger. My legs offered seconds as compared to a long-distance runner's hours. Even with heavy objects, I found myself floored by the weight of the things before I could lift them over my head. Take a vase, for instance. One sat on the front porch. I could get around Francis easily enough, but the dirt was too heavy, and taking it out took too long. When you are lost, adrift in the sea of space and time, you come to realize your shortcomings, the things you had wished you worked on earlier in life.

I discovered Francis had a peach allergy a few months into my experimentation. I think it was the fuzz. Something like that. Thankfully, we had a few to spare. My mother used them to make peach cobbler, an addiction she picked up from working for a white man whose mother carried that same sweet burden. I'm not complaining. I miss the freshness and hotness of the treat straight from the oven. The holidays I've passed have been lonely work.

Every morning I would hear the crash and grab three peaches and claw at them, removing the skin. Next to my mother's knitting chair was an armchair I used to curl up in to relax on better days. Crouching behind it did the trick. I would wait patiently, unmoving, like a rattrap, waiting for the door to burst open. It always did. His heavy boots would stomp like a monster on the floor, booming through the house. Keeping low, I would sneak my way behind him and sprinkle as much peach fuzz as I could on his exposed hairy neck. Sometimes I would challenge myself and try and target the mole grossly protruding like a mushroom. The first few times didn't go too well, and I would end up shot and back in bed. I started leaving bits and pieces of it around the house, recounting the same trail he would take each time I hid behind the armchair. Kitchen counter. Room door handle. Pantry handle. Garage. Those were enough backups for my mistakes.

The first time Francis had a reaction I froze. His airways were squeezed closed as if an unseen force was constricting him. His face and eyes would turn red, a full-body rash began to form. Small portions of skin would form into flat bumps like plateaus, and he would collapse. Who knew a few bits

of peach skin could be so deadly?

As I pointed the barrel of his gun to his head for the first time I thought about hunters and prey. Our roles reversed, so to speak, I thought Francis looked sad. He clutched his neck with one hand, spazzing, coughing, holding his other hand up in weak surrender. His fingers shook. I held the gun at him for what seemed like an eternity, though it felt like I'd lived through one already. He was a huntsman who was caught in a trap of his prey's brilliant design. I was the rabbit who held his life in my hands.

I found myself unable to pull the trigger.

That is, until he spoke.

"Please, p-please, no, help, I..." His words slithered out from under his tongue. I haven't heard a sound so loud in my life. I hit his chest, point-blank. How dare he turn my words against me? I inhaled deeply the smell of gunpowder. The sulfurous smell, cloudy at first, brought with it a wave of reconciliation and repentance. I had killed a man for the first time. The gunshot blast almost severed his chest in half. I could see his insides, all red, same as mine. I heard him breathe his last crackling breath. His eyes didn't roll back like they do in the movies. They stayed in place, not moving their gaze from me, the frantic mess who was on the verge of hyperventilation. In the gaps between my breath, I could hear frogs ribbiting. My heart rate slowed and I lowered the gun. A relief of calmness smoothed over my brain. I dropped the gun into the pool of blood. It splashed onto my feet. The blood spread out, covering Francis' Southern Cross hat. Red encompassed the flag emblem, drowning it out, hiding his hatred completely.

All life became still.

My breath broke through as I thought of someone calling the police until I remembered where we lived. The few other houses in my neighborhood were mostly vacant. Besides Francis, we had two other neighbors, both living alone on opposite sides of the street. The sale signs in other yards stood strongly as if the wooden posts grew roots and began to sustain their new position. It was usual for anyone nearby to hear the blasts of a firearm. All our homes sat on the edge of the unknown wilderness. Hunters were abundant, and new ones sprung every day.

I went back to bed. In the end, I concluded that killing him felt no different than butchering the frogs for their parts. I drifted off into the first of many new periods of sleep. 7:37 am.

There was a loud knock and a crash at the front door.

I leaped from my bed and scrambled for my peaches.

A person may look back on themselves in high school and compare themselves to their adult self

or compare adults to their elderly selves. ‘That was the old me’ is a term many people say who have changed in some way. I like to think there were three versions of me. There was the me the first night my mother died, then there was me who enacted revenge and vengeance upon Francis, and there was me as I am now. Three selves.

After my shift to the second self, I began to enjoy the art of killing. If I could have worked on something before my day reset, I might have written my own version of *Art of War*, a version that would have made Sun Tzu hurl up his insides. Once more I took it upon myself to explore the human body’s anatomy in its entirety. At the time, I found it splendid. I was living a mad doctor’s wet dream. I had complete, unsupervised, unethical, and unadulterated access to the concept of human itself. I found that depending on the volume of blood its darkness would change. Intestines really were *that* long. I learned that Francis’ shotgun could clean off a leg with one shot. Arms, too. I studied the way the skull could fragment and disperse. Eyes would pop between my index finger and thumb. The brain was the most interesting of all.

Once, when shooting became a little tiresome, I started stabbing Francis in his heart of evil. It was nice not being called a _____ in so long. At that point in time, I don’t think I heard that term for about a year. After he passed, I would practice surgery by removing parts of him, studying what it meant to be human. His heart, along with the knife wound, was larger than I expected, and heavy. It fit firm and snug in the palm of my hand. It was slippery, and for a muscle in constant strain, it was very soft. When I moved to the brain, I found that to be soft as well.

In my hands, I held that pink blob. In my hands I held Francis. The brain is what makes us who we are, for it stores our core essences I’ve come to discover. Everything that made Francis, Francis, was there. His uncouth words against people like me, his bad habits, his hatred for the symphony of frogs that I’ve come to enjoy, it was all there. How could something so frail and vulnerable harbor such hatred? His passions lay there, too. His deep focus on woodworking, the knowledge of operating a forklift, barbecue techniques, favorite foods, images of loved ones, memories; it was all there. If there was anything that made him good, I was holding it. Was there anything in there that made him good?

It was dead now.

I hadn’t realized that before.

One day, while I was throwing Francis’ parts into the woodchipper he kept in his garage, I remembered his threat. So many times I took his life as he did mine and I didn’t bother to recognize that another _____ never came that day. His words, not mine. I stood and looked at the façade of my home. My lawn was neat and trim, flowers lining the perimeter of the planter in the center of the grass. Besides the blood smear going down and across the street, the driveway was clean, free of debris and tire tracks.

The reset occurred when I went to bed. I could stay up until the next morning if I killed Francis silently. The sun would rise, and I would get hungry, though sleep always came one way or another. It felt good, for a while, killing and dismantling Francis, though he technically never stayed dead. I will admit that. I have killed Francis for many years, and for the first time, it felt wrong. A pit of anxiety deepened in my heart. I stood his body with a piece of wood, jamming it down the woodchipper chute, pressing one of his limbs further down into the machine. The splatter on the wall looked like a deep-red portal. It had its own peculiar movement as excess blood dripped down the walls in viscous waves. Momentarily, I thought I could see someone beyond, reaching out for me, begging for help. A façade. It looked like me.

I threw my head into the woodchipper and awoke the next day with the express purpose of watching Francis after he couldn't find me. I would watch as he wandered then sat down to wait in my mother's chair, as he did before, but after a while he'd get up and leave, slamming the door behind him. I hadn't seen that before. I didn't know if his frustration was with me and my mother not being around, or with himself. His breathing calmed as he waited for me in that chair. I could hear it slow like a train coming to a stop, expressing its last deep breath as it came to a stop at the station. Did his anger subside? Did the boiling in his head reduce to a simmer, then stand still?

I watched Francis in his home from various angles. He would go inside, set his shotgun by the front door, and then sit in his own chair in front of an old black TV. Over his TV on the wall was that damn Southern Cross again. I leaped for the gun and held it up. He scrambled to his feet, still holding his opened beer can, as I aimed the gun at him.

Francis, when calm, cried like a baby. It was odd seeing him this way. All I ever knew of him was a stench that I've come to associate with anger, the stench of sweat and hard breathing, unbrushed teeth, and onions. Smelling it here and now, while his lips skittered to produce words, while his eyes jittered and flowed tears, it smelled more of a child than a man. I shot his head clean off. The first time the blood covered the flag I felt nothing. Now I felt cruel and unusual. Francis had no longer become a threat. How long had he not been a threat? I checked the next day to see him once again hunt for me then return home unblooded.

I expected Francis to get some work done, but as I watched from inside his house he became quiet, unsettlingly so. He was transfixed on his TV. It felt as if it wrapped his arms around his neck like a lover leaning in for a kiss. He was unmovable. His lips would twitch and stir from time to time, and when he held his head up for a drink of beer he would keep his eyes set on the screen.

As I am now, I haven't seen Francis for a few months. I believe he's busy watching reruns again, as he was doing the last time I saw him. I've spent my time thinking of my mother in bed instead, or looking after the frogs (after avoiding him, of course). I would gently spray them down every morning

with the hose. The same bucket of worms sat next to their pool each morning fully replenished. At first, the way the worms slithered and wriggled in my hands like wet noodles sent shivers into the core of my being. I would toss them over and the frogs would leap into a frenzy as they swallowed their prey. I got used to this as well. Every so often I would peek through my front windows to see if the light was still glowing through Francis' front windows. I spotted the same frog leap up to his driveway and then stick to his backyard gate door.

I've likened the art of frog farming to that of gardening. Using my hands for something positive has been great for my peace of mind. Working this way, putting the physical half of my brain to work, has allowed for acute thought on other things. I've learned that frog leg production is anywhere from one million to three million pounds and that all the frogs I have are common bullfrogs who lay eggs between April to July (though I'll never see them).

My mother would cross my mind from time to time. I haven't forgotten what she looked like. Memory tends to blur things, even things close to your heart. I've forgotten my childhood friend's faces, the path to my favorite restaurant, even the flavor of vanilla ice cream. Most of my life before this loop started has become fogged by lost clouds, like souls searching for the afterlife. They pass through the ridges of my brain, and the faint light of memory shines through the thickness. Not my mother, though. I still remember how her hands shook.

My hands stopped shaking the more I killed Francis, fortunately enough. They even became progressively steadier, refined by my work on the frog pond each morning. They became smooth and executed each process with the oiled precision of fine machinery. I wonder, still, if my mother's hands would have ever steadied. She told me it started when she saw her mother die overseas. I've never been to our ancestral home, where our blood had been spilled into the trees and buried with so many others. I raised my hands, sunlight accenting the edges of my hands, light spilling through. Mother, did you see the blood on your hands every time you looked as you held my hand? I could feel the blood in your veins shake when you held me so tightly, and I thought you might squeeze my hand off. Could you have been the person to overcome such violence? What were you capable of?

What did you think I was capable of? Don't worry, Mom. That was the old me. Look at me now, at the new me. I can clean up the frogs from last night and fix them up for their morning routine within the hour now. I'm almost as good as you. See? The old me is gone. But the old lingers in my new self. My scars heal every night, but I can still feel them gouged deep into my skin like ravines. The smell of blood lingers in the back of my nostrils, forgotten like it's all I've ever known. It hangs like rotten fruit I cannot reach but must always smell. But look Ma, look at how smooth and steady my hands are. These hands don't rip and tear anymore. Thirst and curiosity haven't guided them in years. Thinking about it, I feel I

could twist Francis' head off like a bottlecap for what he could do to us. What he has done to us. But he and I have both ended up nowhere. My self-defense melded to revenge, to vengeance, to violence, for he is still the person capable of those things as I am, and the things I have done have gotten me no further than the first day you were gone. I dread leaving this eternal void. I'm afraid these actions have made an impression on me. Consequences are not sequential. The day begins anew, and I am still the person who did those things, forever and always, like marking numerals into stone stained with blood. Oh, God, I did those things. I think I can still do those things. The hands you bequeathed me are gone. These are my hands now. And I'm scared that these feelings will be part of me forever. Maybe there's no new me, or even an old me. Maybe there's only one me, the one here and now that's speaking to you.

Now it's dark. I've been lying in bed for hours. The sun is coming up on a new day I'll never see. I've slipped off into sleep again. No matter how many times the sun rises or sets, no matter how many times I wipe away my tears for you, it's still me. There's only me.