

Frog Pond

by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

No matter what Mr. Thompson said, it was a good day for frogging and fishing. The morning sun had that bright double halo that meant the whole day would be clear. I got up before Mom, took some old pie from where she hid it last night, grabbed my wading shoes and net, and lit out for the creek. I had to leave real quiet. I'm not supposed to be going down to the creek any more. They say it's dangerous down there.

But the creek ain't dangerous if you know what you're doing. You just have to stay away from pink water spots, and you're safe all the way.

I took the long way around the Baxter place. I think Pop was right about them; something's wrong there. Dr. Baxter ain't been at Town Meeting for a long time—Pop thinks that maybe some sick people moved in on the Baxters.

So I walked through the brambles on the edge of the woods where the new trees are growing. It was sunny and fine, and the breeze came in nice and sweet from the north. No cities up that way, not for hundreds of miles.

Caught some crickets along the way, the big kind with the long wings. They make good bait for the stickery fish in the shallows. All I got to do is tangle them up in the net and put it down in the water. The stickery fish go right for 'em. Mr. Thompson, he says that it ain't safe to eat 'em, which just shows you how much he knows. I eat 'em all the time.

I headed right for Rotten Log Hollow. There's a nice big hole in there, and a gravel bar, and you can catch lots of frogs there if you're careful. They like to hide under that old broken pipe, under the foam. I got maybe a dozen there, last time out.

First I walked along the bank, looking down into the water to see what was there, you know. It was still, and there wasn't a lot of foam piling up. There wasn't any fish either, so I sat down in the warm gravel, ate my pie, and pulled on my wading shoes. They've got high tops that Pop always tells me to pull all the way up, but I ain't bothered with that for years. Heck, a little water can't kill me.

After a little while I went into the water real cautious—careful not to scare the frogs. I worked my way out into midstream and started peering around for frogs. I had my net in my belt, but I don't use it much—not for frogs.

So there I was in the creek, careful as could be, when all of a sudden this bunch of rocks and grass comes rolling down the bank, and this city fellow comes down after it, trying to grab hold of bushes on the way. He hit the pipe and it stopped him, but he sure messed up the water.

A couple of minutes went by, and he started to get up. He had a heck of a time doing it. He kept flailing his arms around and pulling himself back onto the pipe.

I was mad because he'd scared the frogs, so I yelled out, "Hey, mister, don't do that!"

Boy, did he look up fast. You'd of thought I was a C.D. man or something the way he snapped around. His eyes got wild, and he shook all over. Before he could fall again, I called out, "It's just me, mister,

down in the creek."

He turned around, grabbing the pipe for balance. I waited till he'd steadied himself, and then I said, "You're scaring the frogs."

"Scaring the frogs?" he yelled back, sounding like frogs were monsters.

"Yeah, I'm trying to catch some. Can you just sit there a minute?"

I could see he was thinking this over. Finally he sat back on the pipe like he was worn out and said real quiet, "Why not?" And he leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

I got three frogs while he was sleeping there. They were big and fat. I put a stick through their throats and let 'em dangle in the creek to keep fresh. I almost had the fourth one when the city guy woke up.

"Listen," he called to me. "Where am I?"

"Rotten Log Hollow."

"Where is that?"

I sure couldn't see the point in yelling all the time, so I told him to come closer and we could talk. "Talk makes less noise. Maybe I can still catch some frogs if we're just talking."

He hustled off the pipe and scrambled along the shore, splashing dirt and stones into the water.

"Hi," I said when he got closer.

"Hello." He was still awful nervous and had that funny white look around his eyes, sort of like turtle skin. "What's your name?"

He was really trying to be friendly, and even if Mr. Thompson says in that spooky voice of his that there ain't any friendly strangers, well, this guy wasn't anything I couldn't handle.

"My name is Althea," I told him, polite like Mom tells me to be. "But mostly my friends call me Thorny. Who are you?"

"Uh—" He looked around, then back. "Stan!—Stan—just call me Stan."

You could see that he was lying. He wasn't even good at it. So I said, sure, his name was Stan. Then I waited for him to say something.

"You like this place?" he asked.

"Yeah. I come here lots of times."

"You live around here, then?"

A dumb question. He was really all city. Maybe he thought we had subways out here in the country. He kept looking around like he expected a whole herd of people to come running out of the pipe.

"Yeah, I live at the Baxter place." It was a lie, but he'd told me one—and besides, Pop said I wasn't to tell people where we live, just in case.

"Where's that?" He said it like he wasn't really interested, like he didn't give a damn where the Baxter place was. He just wanted to talk to someone. I pointed back toward the Baxter place and told him it

was about a mile along the road.

"Do a lot of people live there, at the Baxter place?"

"Not too many. About six or seven. You planning on moving in, mister?"

He laughed at that. It was one of those high laughs that sounds like crying. My brother Davey cries like that a lot. It ain't right a six-year-old kid should cry like that. About this Stan—or whoever—I didn't know.

"What's funny, mister?" I would have gone and left him there, but I saw that he was standing almost in some green gunk that comes out of the pipe and washes on shore so I said to him a little louder, "And you better get away from there."

He stopped laughing. "From where? Why?"

Wow, he was nervous.

"From that." I pointed so he would not get panicked again. "That stuff is bad for you. It can give you burns if you're not used to it." That isn't quite right. Some people can't get used to it, but it never burned me, not even the first time. Mr. Thompson says that means selective mutations are adapting to the new demands of the environment. Mr. Thompson thinks that just because he's a geneticist, he knows everything.

Stan leaped away from the green stuff like it was about to bite him.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Just stuff that comes out of the pipe. When the Santa Rosa pumping station got blown up a couple of years back, this broke and started dripping that green stuff." I shrugged. "It won't hurt you if you don't touch it." Stan looked like he was going to start laughing again, so I said, real quick, "I bet you're from Santa Rosa, huh?"

"Santa Rosa? What makes you think that?" He sure got jumpy if you asked him anything.

"Nothing. Santa Rosa's the first big city south of here. I just figured you probably had to come from there. Or maybe Sonoma or Napa, but those ain't too likely."

"Why do you say that?" He was real close now, and his hands were balling into fists.

"Simple," I said, trying to keep my eyes off his fists. He must have been sick or something, the way he kept tightening and loosening his fingers. "The big highway north is still open, but not the one between Sonoma and Santa Rosa."

He wobbled his head up and down at that. "Yes; yes, of course. That would be why." He looked at me, letting his hands open up again. I was glad to see that. "Sorry, Thorny. I guess I'm jumpier than I thought."

"That's okay," I told him. I didn't want to set him off again.

So Stan stood back and watched me while I looked for frogs.

After a while, he asked me, "Is there anyone needing some help on their farms around here? Anyone you know of?"

I said no.

"Maybe there's a school somewhere that needs a teacher. Unless I miss my guess, I could teach a few things. You kids probably don't have too many good teachers."

What a spooky thing to say. "My Pop teaches at the high school. Maybe he could help you find work." We didn't need teachers, but if Stan knew about teaching, maybe one of the other towns could use him.

"Were you born around here?" Stan was looking around the hollow like anyone's having been born here was real special and unlikely.

"Nope. Over at Davis." That was where Pop had been doing the research into plant viruses, before he and the Baxters and the Thompsons and the Wainwrights and the Aumendsens and the Leventhals bought this place here.

"On a farm?"

"Sort of."

His voice sounded like being born on a farm was something great, like saving the seaweed or maybe going back to the moon some day.

"I've always wanted to live in the country. Maybe now I can." He stumbled along the bank to the sandy spot opposite the gravel bar and sat down. Boy, he was really dumb.

"There's snakes there," I said, real gentle. Sure enough, up he shot, squealing like Mrs. Wainwright's pig.

"They won't hurt you. Just watch out for them. They only bite if you hurt 'em or scare 'em."

And with him jumping up and down, I wasn't going to get any more frogs, that was for sure. So I decided to settle just for conversation.

"Is any place safe in this bank?" he asked.

"Sure," I said with a smile. "Right where you were sitting. Just keep an eye out for the snakes. They're about two feet long and sort of red. About the color of those pine needles." I pointed up the bank. "Like that."

"Dear God. How long have the pine needles been that way?"

I slogged over into the deep water. "About the last five, six years. The smog does it."

"Smog?" He gave me a real blank look. "There isn't any smog here."

"Can't see it or even smell it. Mr. Thompson says there's too much of it everywhere, so we can't tell it's there any more. But the trees know it. That's why they turn that color."

"But they'll die," he said. He sounded real upset.

"Maybe. Maybe they'll change."

"How can they? This is terrible."

"Well, the pines are holding up. Most of the redwoods south of the Navarro River died years ago. Lots of them are still standing," I explained, seeing him go blank again. "But they aren't alive any more. But the

pinus here, they haven't died yet, and maybe they aren't going to." A real sharp shine was coming into his eyes, and I knew I had said more than I should have. I tried to cover up as best as I could. "We learn about this in school. They say we'll have to find ways to handle all the trouble when we grow up. Mr. Thompson tells us about biology." That last part was true, at least.

"Biology. At your age."

That kind of talk can still make me mad. "Look, mister, I'm thirteen years old, and that's plenty old to know about biology. And chemistry, too. Just because this is a long way from Santa Rosa, don't think we can't read or like that."

I was really angry. I know I'm little, but, heck, lots of people are small now.

"I didn't mean anything. I was just surprised that you have such good schools here." Boy, that Stan really couldn't lie at all.

"What do they teach where you come from?" I knew that might make him jumpy again, but I wanted to get back at him for that.

"Nothing important. They teach history and language and art with no emphasis on survival. Why, when some of the students last semester requested that the administration include courses in things like forestry, basketmaking and plant grafting, they called out the C.D. and there was a riot. One of the C.D."—Stan licked his lips in an odd way—"was ambushed and left hanging from a lamppost by his heels."

"That's bad," I said. It was, too. That was the first time I found out how bad it had got in the cities. Stan was still smiling when he told me what had been done to the C.D. It wasn't nice to hear. He kept trying to make it better by calling it gelding. He said that the last time they did it was during the black-white trouble.

And that guy wanted to teach in our schools. He said that he knew what it was really like with people all over and could contribute to our system. I could see Pop's face getting real set and hard at what Stan was saying. But Stan insisted he thought that it was very important for people to understand "The System"—like it was a religious thing. You know? I was beginning to get scared.

"Thirteen is too old," he went on. "Do you have any brothers or sisters younger than yourself?"

I was pretty cautious about answering him. "Yes. I got two brothers. And one sister." I didn't tell him that Jamie was already doing research work or that Davey didn't do anything. Or that Lisa was getting ready to board in the next town so that we could keep the families from interbreeding too much.

"Older or younger."

"Mostly older." So I lied again. At least I was good at it. He didn't think to ask anything more about them.

"Too bad. We are going to have to change what's been happening. Martial law, searches without warrants, confiscations. It's terrible, Thorny, terrible."

He must have thought that living out here we didn't hear anything or see anything. He kept telling me how bad it was to have soldiers everywhere and how they were doing awful things. I knew about that and a lot of other things, too. And I knew about how there were gangs that killed people and robbed them—and murder clubs that just killed people for fun. Heck, Jules Leventhal used to be a clinical psychologist, and he taught us a lot about the way mobs act and how too many people make problems for everybody.

"How are things north of here?" Stan was asking.

"Not too bad. Humboldt County is doing pretty good, and there are more people around the Klamath River now." I sure didn't want a guy like him staying with us. I figured that maybe telling him about conditions up north might encourage him to move on. But he just looked tense and nodded, like that crazy preacher who wanted us all to die for God, a couple of years back. "Of course, that's redwood country, so they might have trouble there in a few years."

He looked at me real hard. "Thorny, do you think you could tell me how to get to Humboldt County?"

Dumb, dumb, I told you. All he had to do is keep going up old 101, and there it would be. That crazy guy hadn't even looked at a map. Or else he had and was trying to trap me, but I ain't easy to trap.

"You can keep going up the main highway," I said, talking real sincere-like. "But there might be C.D. men up ahead, you know, near Ukiah. Or Willits. The best way is to cut over to the coast and just follow it up."

There, I thought. That ought to get him; he was jumpy enough before.

"Yes, yes, that would work. And Eureka is a port—there would be the ocean for access—"

He went on like that for about five minutes. He wanted to launch some kind of attack against The System, to protect the People, but for another System. He kept talking about rights and saying how he knew what the People really wanted and he would change things so that they could have it. He said he knew what was best for them. Wow, I wish Mr. Leventhal could have heard him.

"And what about you? You should be in school, right?"

"Nope," I said. "We have school just two days in the week. The rest of the time is free."

I wondered if that much had been all right to tell. We weren't supposed to let out much about our school.

"But it's a waste, don't you see?" Stan crouched down on the bank, looking like a huge skinny rabbit squatting there. "This is the time when you must learn political philosophy. You should be learning about how society works. It's terribly important."

"I know how society works," I said.

Heck, all the kids who learned from Mr. Wainwright know about that. After all, one of the reasons the Wainwrights came along with the rest of us was that the politicians in Sacramento didn't like what he was teaching about the way *they* worked. And they were society.

"Not this society," he said in a real haughty way, like Mr. Thompson when he's crossed. "Society in the cities, in the population centers."

He was going on that way when I saw a couple of frogs moving on the bottom. I watched where they were going, and then I reached down for them, holding my breath as my face hit the water. I dragged one of them out, but the other got away.

"Spending your time catching frogs," Stan spat.

"Sure. They taste real good. Mom fixes 'em up with batter and fries 'em."

"You mean you eat them?" he squeaked, looking gray.

"Of course. They're meat, ain't they?" I waded over to the other frogs on the stick and stuck the new one on, too. He wiggled and jerked for a bit and then stopped.

"But frogs? How can you eat frogs?"

"Easy." I didn't think he was going to get over it: that we eat frogs. Just to be sure, I reached over and grabbed the stick with the frogs on it. "See? This one"—I put my thumb on one's belly—"is the fattest. It'll taste real good."

"And do you really chase after them without seeing them?"

I turned around and looked at him. He was standing up on the other bank, and the frightened look was back in his eye. "No. You got to see what you're after."

"But in the water—"

"Oh, I don't open my eyes like you do," I said, real casual-like. "I go after them with these." And I slid up the membranes.

Stan looked like he'd swallowed a salamander. "What was that?" he demanded, looking more scared than ever.

"Nictitating membranes—I was engineered for it," I said.

"Mutants," he gibbered. "Already!"

He started trying to back up the bank, watching me like he thought I was a werewolf or something. He slipped and stumbled until he got to the top, and then he ran away—I could hear him crashing through the brush, making more noise than a herd of deer.

By the time he left, the whole hole was filled with leaves and sticks and rocks, and I knew that there wouldn't be any more frogs or fish that day, so I took the frogs on the stick, got off my wading shoes, and started back for the house. I knew Mom would be mad, but I was hoping that the frogs would help her get over it. I guessed I had to tell them about Stan. They didn't like people coming here.

They were real mad about it. The funny thing is that they were maddest about my having shown my eyes. But cripes, that was just one little flap of skin that Mr. Thompson got us to breed. Just one lousy bit of extra skin near the eye.

But to hear him tell it, you'd think he'd changed the whole world.

The End

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