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Of Genus and Species

Amber Blaeser-Wardzala

The metamorphosis of my husband into a frog was surprising but not unwelcome.

I came home late from work on a Friday after one of my research assistants had made a catastrophic error in the application of the teratogen. If I hadn't caught him, it could have put us months behind schedule in our research and might even have lost us our grant funding. As it was, this mistake would set us weeks behind schedule, requiring us to re-begin with this particular tank and teratogen.

I had forced the quivering graduate student to help me correct the mistake, sent him all over the city finding replacement specimens. When he had finally returned with a new tank of northern leopard frogs, it was two hours after quitting time, and we had yet to give this tank the proper teratogen. The boy clearly thought we would delay that to Monday, further showing his inept nature. Together we prepared the tank for the experiment and applied the correct teratogen.

After we had finished, I fired the idiot and was subjected to his sobbing and begging for a full forty-five minutes before I was able to escape his dripping nose. When I finally walked into the house and tossed my briefcase onto the chair by the door, I called out, "I'm home!"

There was no response. Not unusual in our home. My husband, Caleb, rarely greeted me these days. In fact, he rarely said anything to me anymore. I expected divorce papers any day now. I knew that most people would be upset by such a prospect, but the idea truly didn't bother me. Frogs don't mate for life, with the exception of the ranitomeya imitator, also known as the mimic poison frog. But ranitomeya imitators are not a frog type I would suggest people mimic—after all, they spend the entirety of their lives pretending to be something they are not.

Why should humans mate for life if the majority of this highly intelligent species did not? Only religious and societal expectations keep the archaic idea of monogamy a chain in the lives of humans. Lucky frogs did not have such foolish ideas dictating their lives.

Even though it was not unusual for my husband to ignore my existence, it was unusual that our cat, Sassy, was not waiting at the door for me and demanding food, claiming Caleb had forgotten to feed her. Always a lie.

I took off my plain black blazer and hung it on the coat rack. "Sassy! Sassy, where are you?"

I heard a meow from the living room. I walked over to her and found that Sassy had caught a northern leopard frog. Every time it moved, Sassy slapped at it with her paw. Then she would withdraw the paw and wait, let it jump again, and . . . *smack!* Luckily, she didn't release her claws.

"Sassy, leave it!" I said.

The tuxedo cat looked at me with her big green eyes and then slapped the frog again. Sassy and I didn't really get along. She was Caleb's cat, and he had a weird affection for her. If Caleb put even a

fourth of the amount of energy into our marriage that he put into trying to get Sassy to like him, I might be more disappointed by our coming divorce.

I grabbed a throw pillow and threw it at Sassy. She went running away at top speed towards the bedroom. I hurried over to the frog and picked it up.

One close look at the frog was all the proof I needed that the frog was Caleb. Northern leopard frogs have gold eyes. Every time. This frog had blue eyes, one slightly darker than the other, just like Caleb's. And it had the tiniest tribal tattoo on its shoulder, the same placement and the same racially insensitive tattoo as Caleb's.

I placed my frog husband into the terrarium I kept set up in the kitchen. I didn't usually keep frogs at home, but every once in a while, I did have the urge to grab a tree frog off our window and keep it for a few days to watch. An urge that Caleb referred to as "unnatural" and "weird."

Once my husband was safely locked in the terrarium, I picked up my phone and dialed my aunt.

"Olivia, it's bingo night at the senior center. Can this wait?" Auntie Joyce said when she picked up the phone.

"How did you know it was me?" I asked.

"*Ikwezens*," she said, "I may be old, but I do know how to work caller ID. Now, what do you want?"

I pulled out a cigarette from my pants' pocket and popped it in my mouth. "Caleb turned into a frog."

She scoffed. "And President Andrew Jackson was the kindest man to ever live. Now, if you're done talking crazy, I got to go beat all those other old Indians at some bingo."

I lit my cigarette and let out a puff. "I'm being serious, Auntie. Caleb turned into a northern leopard frog. I have him in my terrarium right now."

"What you and your husband do in the privacy of your bedroom should not be shared with your elderly relatives, *ikwezens*. Now, for heaven's sake, I have social security checks to win."

"I thought you said you were going to bingo," I said.

"First bingo, then old Marian down the road invited some of us elders down there for some poker. If all goes well, I'll be having steak for dinner the rest of the week. Wish me luck. Oh, and stop talking nonsense talk. We don't want you to get the reputation of being a crazy Indian."

"Luck," I said before she hung up.

My husband jumped against the glass and looked at me with his large blue eyes.

I bent down so we were eye to eye and blew out a puff of smoke. "Listen, *chimookomaan*," I said, "if I want to have a cigarette inside the comfort of my own home instead of standing out by the mailbox, I'll have a cigarette in the comfort of my own home. It's not like you can do much about it."

The frog jumped into the glass again, and I stood back up and inhaled. "You see? Nothing you can do about it."

I never loved Caleb, and Caleb never really loved me. We met in college. I was straight off the rez, and he was straight out of some expensive private high school. I was a scholarship and student loan student, and his parents were paying for his entire schooling, no loans or scholarships. He was blonde haired, blue eyed, and burned within thirty minutes if he wasn't wearing sunscreen. And while I wasn't a full blood Indian or anything, my white ancestry had had less effect on me than my Native ancestry.

He thought my Native identity made me cool and interesting and I guess "exotic." I thought it nice to have a rich trust fund baby pay for everything. I never intended to marry him or anything of the sort. I just figured white people had done so much damage to my people that he or someone of his subspecies sort of owed me this. His family had money to spare. They wouldn't notice.

In our fourth year of college, after a beer or two, Caleb asked me to marry him. We were sitting on his dorm room bed, his hand on my knee. I stared at his hairy knuckles and thought about how to tell him no. But then I thought about all the bills he had paid and would continue to pay if I said yes.

We eloped a few weeks later. Neither of our families was happy about it. His parents had wanted him to marry a country club blonde who played tennis and had few opinions about anything. My family, well, just didn't like him.

"He's so white!" Auntie Joyce said. "I bet his family has their lawn sprinklers going when it rains."

"Well, he's my husband now, Auntie," I said. "Get used to it."

"I never thought you, out of all of my nieces and nephews, would be blinded by money and *chimookoman* blue eyes," she said.

Our marriage continued much as our relationship had before. He took me to events and business lunches to make him seem more interesting. I forced a smile and answered the ignorant, racially insensitive questions of the country club crowd.

"You don't look like an Indi—I mean, like a Native American," one man said to me when I joined Caleb for a luncheon.

"Well not all of us can be gifted enough to look like Frank De Kova," I replied and took a long drink of my scotch. "Guess I should have been born Italian."

The man laughed nervously and didn't speak to me for the rest of the luncheon, which was preferable to me. I don't think he even understood my humor or knew who Frank De Kova was. Such a pity I always waste my best jokes on the undeserving.

After that luncheon, Caleb and I had one of our biggest fights. He asked why I couldn't be like the other wives, polite and agreeable instead of making jokes at the expense of his colleagues.

"Oh, lay off, Caleb," I snapped and pushed him away from me. "I didn't make fun of anyone."

"You most certainly did! The VP of the company we're trying to partner with told me I needed to 'reign in that woman of mine.'"

"What is this, the 1950s? Besides, if you wanted one of those simpering country club women, then you should have married one of them instead of me!"

"Can't you just be nice, Olivia? For five minutes, can't you just smile and be pleasant?" he asked and grabbed one of my hands, squeezing.

My other hand formed a fist. *Just smile and be pleasant.* He had been telling me that since day one, telling me to let things go, to get over it. Stop trying to make everyone else into the villain, he always said. It didn't matter if we were talking history or watching *The Last of the Mohicans* and I pointed out that not only was the movie perpetuating stereotypes but it also starred a white man as the "last Mohawk." I was always in the wrong, always being too sensitive. Movies take liberties, get used to it. History is written by the victors, and I wasn't the victor. Let it go, smile and accept that.

It was funny though. Whenever we watched a movie about ancient Greece, he would get annoyed. "Can you believe they did that?" he said. "How dare they! It's so insulting to such a brilliant culture. Who watches this garbage anyways?"

When I pointed out his own hypocrisy, he dismissed my words with a simple, "That's not the same thing. God, Olivia. Stop making everything about you."

And when he took me to luncheons, I was dressed in clothes that he chose for me. Because I "didn't understand how to present myself properly."

His arm was around my waist as we walked in, and he whispered in my ear, "Smile."

As if I was an accessory. Something to make him stand out, to make other people interested in him. He always told me to keep the conversation light: weather, sports, and vacations. Those were the only conversations he approved of me engaging in. If the conversation took a turn towards anything else, he told me to excuse myself, to not engage. To smile and nod, *be pleasant*, until I could gracefully leave that conversation.

I ripped my hand from his grasp. "I'm not going to just lay down and let them walk all over me with their . . . little comments."

"Oh, for God's sake, Olivia! You can't blame them! You barely look Indian. What else do you expect?"

I flinched backwards and felt the tears filling my eyes.

Caleb rolled his eyes. "And here come the tears!"

I ran out of the room, crying. Not my best moment. But I adapted. The next day, over our breakfast, I told Caleb I wasn't going to go to any socialite events or high-powered luncheons anymore. He told me to do whatever I wanted. That was the beginning of the end to a marriage that never should have happened in the first place.

“What do you think I should do with him, Sassy?” I asked. It was two days after the discovery that my husband had turned into a frog. I stood in the kitchen, staring into the terrarium at Caleb. “Maybe I should experiment on him? Try to find out why this happened?”

I grinned at Caleb and petted Sassy’s head. “Or maybe I should feed him to you.”

Caleb started to jump around wildly in protest or fear. Sassy sat on the kitchen counter watching his every movement with her wide green eyes.

I flicked the glass. “Would serve him right, wouldn’t it, Sassy?”

The doorbell rang, and I set down my glass. I walked over and looked out the peephole. Auntie Joyce stood on the doorstep, holding a large Tupperware container in her arms.

I unlocked the door and opened it. “Auntie, what are you doing here?”

She shoved the Tupperware container into my hands and pushed past me into the house. “What, I can’t bring my favorite niece some of my famous soup?”

Sassy jumped down from the counter and ran to the bedroom. Auntie’s eyes scanned the room, looking for something.

I shut the door and locked it again before putting the soup on the counter. “Sure you can, but most people call before making the four hour drive down. What if I had been working?”

She waved away the words, still looking all around the room. “It’s a Sunday, and we both know how much of a Christian you are. You would never *dare* disrespect the Lord’s day.”

She turned around and winked, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

“How did bingo and poker go?” I asked.

She huffed. “Oh, that old devil Marian wasn’t playing fair. I won big at bingo, but I lost it all in poker. I’m sure that Marian had marked the cards or something. I’ll tell you that’s the last time I play with her.”

“So no steak for dinner then?”

“Only any unlucky *waaboos* that hopped into the snares in my backyard,” she said. “Don’t tell though. Rabbit season ended in February. Wouldn’t want those young white boys from the DNR to find out.”

“Don’t worry, Auntie. Your secret is safe with me.” I walked to my fridge and opened it, pulling out two porterhouse steaks. “However, I might have a solution to such a problem. How about I cook these up for us?”

“Won’t your husband be mad if you waste such a fine cut on a little old rez lady?” she asked even as she settled herself in a chair at our kitchen table.

I glanced at Caleb who was glaring at me from inside his glass home. Steak, especially expensive cuts, was his favorite. “Oh, Caleb doesn’t have much say in matters these days.”

As I began to prepare the steaks, Auntie asked, “So where is that *chimookoman* you married anyways? Working?”

I took out the meat tenderizer and began to hit the steaks with it. "I told you, Auntie. Caleb turned into an *omagakii*."

"*Ikwezens*, people don't turn into animals. Unless it's those Indians from *Twilight*, but no one should use *Twilight* as a measure for life. If we did, that president of ours would be sparkling."

I pointed at the terrarium with my chin. "See for yourself, Auntie. He's right in there."

Auntie stood up and shuffled over to the terrarium, peering in at my frog husband. She tapped the glass and murmured too softly for me to hear. It was only when I finished seasoning the steaks that she turned back to me.

"Well?" I asked. "Do you believe me now?"

"Didn't know you practiced witchcraft, *niikwezens*," she joked. Then she turned serious and looked in at him. "What are you going to do with him?"

I shrugged. "Don't know. Never really had a husband turn into a frog before."

"You need to report him as missing. Otherwise when his parents realize he's gone, you'll be the lead suspect in his disappearance, and no *chimookomaan* will believe you that he turned into a frog."

"But what do I do with him, Auntie?" I asked.

She looked back at Caleb for a long moment before looking at me again. "I never liked that man. Too white. And not even good white. Awful white. He's like bleach. Tries to turn everything and everyone he touches white so that he can claim it as his. Best to get rid of him."

Never had I heard someone so casually mention killing someone. There was no hesitation in her voice, no doubt. I said nothing and just stared at her.

Sassy came waltzing back into the kitchen and sat down by her bowl. I abandoned the steaks for the bag of her dry cat food. I filled the bowl.

"You kill frogs all the time in those labs of yours. What's one more?" Auntie Joyce said.

She was right. It was my job to experiment on frogs, leading to most of their deaths. It would be so easy. I could simply bring him to the labs and add him into one of the tanks, maybe even the tank we had just redone. And that would be that. He would simply be another frog in a tank with a teratogen. I wouldn't have really murdered him. No gun, no knife. Just a frog dying from a chemical, a common occurrence even in the wild these days with all the pollution. Pollution caused by the white man. If I got rid of him, there would be one less white man to disrespect the earth, one less white man to claim global warming was a radical left lie.

I pulled out one of my cigarettes and lit it. I puffed on it more rapidly than normal.

"He's a *businessman*, Olivia," Auntie said, wrinkling her nose as she took one of my cigarettes, lighting it for herself. "You would be doing the world a favor. Now, where are those steaks?"

You would be doing the world a favor. Exactly. I *would* be doing the world a favor. It wouldn't really be murder. It would be more of a service for all of humankind.

I blew a smoke ring. "You're supposed to let the steaks sit out for twenty to thirty minutes before cooking."

Auntie set her smoldering cigarette on the counter and picked up the steaks, putting them under the broiler. "I've never had a steak prepared that way, and I'm eighty-seven. We're having them my way."

"Okay, Auntie," I said, too distracted to argue.

Of course, Auntie stayed the night in the guest room. We played poker until midnight. She won nearly every game and stuffed my money into the pockets of her robe.

"Better luck next time, *niikwezens*," she said and patted my cheek, chuckling softly. "Think of it as payment for my excellent advice, *enyanb*?"

"Okay, Auntie. Sleep well," I said and took a swig of my beer.

She waved at me without turning to look at me. I stayed at the kitchen table, finishing my Stella, long after her door had closed. Sassy lay on the couch, purring, oblivious to me as usual.

I looked over at Caleb who was still awake and watching me. My finger tightened on the beer bottle. I hated him. I hated him more than I had ever hated anyone before, more than I thought I could ever hate.

Sure, he probably thought he had it bad, stuck in a frog body, but he knew nothing. He had a safe container, food, and water. What more could he possibly want? White people always came out on top, always made it out okay, and never truly appreciated how far that extended.

"Fuck you," I said.

I stood up and approached his terrarium, beer bottle still in hand.

"You can't blame me," I said and raised the beer bottle. "You barely look human. What else do you expect?"

He just stared at me with his large blue eyes, bulging like headlights.

He deserved it. All his kind deserved it. They were given life on a silver platter while I had been an elk born into a wolf's den.

All I had to do was hit him with the beer bottle, and it would be done.

My hand quivered, the bottle coming a little closer to the enclosure the frog sat in.

I couldn't look away from his blue eyes. There was so much fear and resignation in them. He knew that he couldn't do anything, that he was the victim, all control taken from him.

"Fuck," I whispered and slammed the empty bottle down on the counter. A crack snaked up the side of it.

I kicked the cabinet door again and again until the wood splintered. Then I looked at Caleb who still watched me with those too human eyes. "I can't kill you. I can't kill you no matter how much I want to. *Fuck!*"

I picked up the terrarium and carried it to the front door. I settled it against my hip and held onto it with one arm as my other opened the door. Sassy jumped down from the couch and came over to inspect what was going on.

I walked out the door and into the grass. The buzz of mosquitos and the peeping of frogs filled the night. I set the enclosure on its side in the faint glow of suburban streetlights.

“Vamoose,” I told him and stood up, “before I change my mind.”

The frog looked up at me for a few moments, blue eyes staring into brown. Then he jumped out of the terrarium and disappeared into the damp green of mowed grass. Sassy rubbed herself against my legs then, and I picked her up. I stood there several moments longer listening to the croaking of frogs.