

BATRACHIAN

Metamorphosis is a marvel of nature that's always intrigued me. Bid when I was a kid, and still does today. It takes many forms, not always that of caterpillar into a butterfly. The thought of beginning life in one body and ending it in something inconceivably different is hard for us humans to imagine, starting and ending as we do with essentially the same shell. I tried to deal with certain aspects of metamorphosis in a book called *Nor Crystal Tears*, which opens with the line "It's hard to be a larva."

Arthur C. Clarke stretched the concept in the classic: *Childhood's End*. Eric-Frank Russell took a different approach in his novella *Metamorphosite*. I wonder if the author of the book *Cocoon* ever read that story.

You take a familiar concept and run it into something; common and everyday, and sometimes you get a story.

"Forget it, man. You'll never get near her."

Shelby moved a pawn two squares forward, trying to protect his king. "Every guy in the building's tried, and few of the chicks, too."

Troy advanced his knight, and one of his friend's bishops was removed from the board. Shelby frowned at this development.

"I can imagine they have. Immature jocks, most 'em. I'll bet you and I are the only two grad students in the whole complex. She's just waiting for someone with a little maturity to come along, that's all."

Shelby reached toward his remaining bishop, thought better of it, and returned to studying the board. "Sure she is. Bet you can't get inside her door."

"What'll you bet?"

"Dinner for two at Willy's."

"Done. The important thing is, is it worth getting inside her door?"

His friend nudged a castle sideways, looked satisfied. "I've seen her going out. It's worth it. Believe me, it's worth it."

"What does she look like?"

"Different. Exotic. Dresden china stained dark. She's a little bitty thing, but something about her intimidates the hell out of me, even at a distance. I'd go up to her and stammer till my teeth fell out. Wouldn't know the first thing to say."

"That's one of the things I've always liked about you, Shelby. You know your limitations."

"And you don't, Troy. Your successes are grander than mine, but so are your failures, and you have more of both."

"That's called living."

"Don't get philosophical with me, man. Save that for Gilead's class. Now, move something. I'm getting hungry."

Troy's queen crossed nearly the entire board. "Checkmate."

Shelby stared at the quilted pattern of squares and pieces. "Well, hell. Where'd you learn that one?"

Troy rose from the couch. "Improvised it."

His roommate sighed. "You'll have to do more than that to make it with Ms. Strange upstairs."

Troy's gaze lifted ceilingward. "We'll see."

The bell rang many times before the door was opened a crack.

"Who's there, please?"

Odd accent, for sure, he thought. "Excuse me. My name's Troy Brevard. I'm on the third floor. I understand you're a student at State."

"That's right." He tried but could not see into the room beyond. The voice was smooth, soft, assured despite the fact that it was obviously utilizing a second language.

"I'm a grad student. Poli Sci. I'm having a lot of trouble with a paper I'm doing on motivations in World War II, and I was wondering if maybe you could help me." Surely a foreign student would be interested in a world war, no matter what her actual major might be.

Silence from the other side. Then, "You're a graduate student. I'm an undergraduate. Why come to me for help?"

"Because there are stupid grads and brilliant undergrads."

"What makes you think I'm one of the brilliant ones?"

"Aren't you?"

Laughter then, or something akin to laughter. The door swung inward, announcing his minor triumph.

"All right, Mr. Brevard. Come on in and I'll see if I can help."

He stepped over the threshold. The apartment was nearly identical to the one he shared with Shelby except for the view. They lived on the third floor. This apartment was on the sixth and topmost. Off to the

left of the small den would be a bathroom and bedroom, to the right the compact kitchen. Through the tall picture window he could see the sunbathed campus of Arizona State University.

The door hid her, and so he didn't see her right away. His attention was caught instead by something else. The den was swamped with frogs.

Stone frogs of Mexican onyx and soapstone lined the wall shelves, guarding endless rows of textbooks. A turquoise Zuni frog fetish sat in a position of honor atop the glass coffee table fronting the couch. Stuffed frogs stared bubble-eyed from the back of the couch, on which lay several hand-sewn frog pillows. There were ceramic frogs and jade frogs, stylized frogs of stainless steel and traditional frogs of wood and pewter, cardboard put-together frog cutouts and paper frogs dangling from the ceiling. Portraits of frogs in oil and watercolor, pastel and pencil, and acrylic decorated the walls. Terraria bubbled and burped as spotted green things moved lazily about behind glass walls. He stepped inside and found himself standing on a thick frog rug.

"You like frogs," he said dryly.

"My collection," she replied.

Then he turned to face her and forgot all about frogs.

Placing her proved impossible. Her skin was coffee-colored. That implied a home located anywhere from the Congo to the tanning salons of southern California. Her features were slight to the point of rendering petite an indication of grossness. Except for her eyes. They dominated that delicate face, huge, damp orbs in which a man could drown with little effort. They were a bright, electric green, as pure as anything generated by a laser, as alive as the floor of a rain forest.

Aware he was staring, he forced himself to look elsewhere.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Oh, excuse me. I forget my manners sometimes. I don't have many visitors."

He flopped down on the couch. Frogs eyed him from high shelves, inspected him from the top of the crowded coffee table. He readjusted a frog pillow behind him and arranged his notepad and books.

"It's real neighborly of you to help me out like this."

"Why didn't you use the library?"

"Libraries can't give you every viewpoint, especially contemporary ones. Besides, I'm lazy. I'd rather ask someone. Especially a pretty someone."

Good Lord, was she blushing? It was hard to tell with that skin. Could it be that no one had had any luck with her simply because no one had tried?

"I'm not pretty. Actually, I'm still kind of ugly."

Was she playing with him? The woman was gorgeous! Slight, almost boyish, but with features that would put many a professional model to shame. If it was a put-on, though, she was playing it well. If it wasn't, maybe it explained something else.

"Is that why you like frogs so much? Because you see yourself as unattractive and they're the same?"

"Oh, no," she said intently. "They're beautiful. I try to see myself as them." As if she'd already revealed too much of her private self, she became suddenly businesslike. A tiny hand indicated the study materials he'd brought with him. "Now, what's your hang-up, and how can I help you?"

He made a show of shuffling through his notes. "How about going out with me Friday night? That would be a helluva help to me. Improve my mental state no end. I know a great place for Mexican. Willy's."

She smiled apologetically, shook her head. "Sorry. I don't go out."

"Someone as pretty as you? Come on!" He had a sudden inspiration. "I know what it is. You're from a foreign country, right? You're not sure how to act, how to react to our peculiar American customs. Don't let that, make you a shut-in. Half the time us natives are just as confused about how to act. Just relax. You can't do anything to embarrass me. I don't embarrass. And I won't push you into anything that makes you nervous. I just think you'd enjoy my company. I know I'd enjoy yours. How about it?"

"You're right, Mr. Brevard. I am from a foreign country."

"Just Troy, please. What do I call you?"

"My real name's a bit longer than you'd find comfortable. I use Eula for short."

Eula. That was no help. "Ethiopia? Somewhere in the Caribbean, maybe? Jamaica?"

She shook her head, showing a shy, reluctant smile

"Too close."

"India, then?"

"I won't tell you, Troy. Let me hold on to some secrets."

"You seem to be all secrets, Eula, but okay. See, I said I wouldn't push."

"I don't think you will." Oh, those eyes.

"I think I will go out with you Friday night. Yes, I think I will. It should be educational."

"Real dedicated student, aren't you? Intense observer of local culture."

"I have to be dedicated, Troy. I'm going to graduate this June."

"Me, too. Going to grad school?"

"Yes, but not here."

"Whereabouts?"

"Back home."

"Which is where?"

She wagged a warning finger at him, and it was his turn to grin.

"Okay." He raised both hands. "Guilty. I won't do it again." Maybe she was a refugee from one of the several minor wars that always seemed to be going in the Third World. He could see where that might embarrass her. Time enough to find out.

She wasn't the usual date, but he'd expected as much. Quiet, watching everything and everyone no matter where they went. As he slowly won her confidence she let him take her anywhere, except for parties. She absolutely refused to go partying.

"I don't like them," she told him frankly. "The people are noisy, they drink too much, and then they get silly and out of sorts. You can't learn anything from people in that state. They all act like preadolescents."

"Not like us mature folks, hmm?"

He was joking, but she wasn't.

"We're not mature, Troy. We're both still adolescents."

"Maybe you think of yourself that way, Eula, but I don't. I'm twenty-three."

He could not interpret the look she gave him. Finally she said, "Each of us has an image of ourselves, Troy. I know what I am. I won't be an adult until I graduate. Until I go home."

He shrugged it off. "Hey, I really don't much care for loud parties myself. I just thought it was something you might find educational."

Her smile returned. "I probably would, but not enough to overcome my distaste. Let's go somewhere else tonight." She softened her criticism by moving close to him. It was a first, of sorts. He put his arm around her, no easy task. At six feet, he was a foot taller than she was.

Two months, he thought, enjoying the warmth of her lithe body. Two months to warm her up this much. Yet the old sense of thrust and parry, of chase and conquest, had left him weeks ago. This girl was not just another mark. She was special, unique, and he'd been more deeply affected by her than he'd realized at first. Her quiet sincerity, her honest shyness had reached something deep inside him, had struck something dormant and now slowly awakening.

To his great surprise, he understood that he was falling in love.

Shelby had noticed it, too.

"You're really hung up on this chick, aren't you, man?"

"Yeah, aren't I, lowlife? And don't refer to her as a chick, please."

Shelby put up both hands defensively. "Excuuuse me! Well, it's your life, Troy. Just don't let her run it."

Troy glanced up from the history text he was perusing. It hurt to know that Eula was only a short elevator ride away. But she insisted on separate study time as well as on her privacy. She refused to let him monopolize her.

"I won't. She doesn't want to."

"She still doesn't intimidate you?"

Troy shook his head.

"Well, she would me, man. When I saw that first blank stare on you, I thought I'd better do a little checking, since you were obviously too far gone to care. I mean, we've shared this dump for three years now. You're a good buddy, Troy. I wouldn't want you to get into something over your head."

"What the hell are you talking about?" He closed the book, shoved the snake-necked Tensor light aside.

Shelby studied the fingernails on his right hand. "Just that she's the hidden wonder of the senior class. You ever ask her what she's majoring in, how many units she taking?"

Troy shook his head. "She likes her privacy, remember. I think she's some kind of general major."

His roommate laughed. "You're right there. I guess when you're taking everything, that qualifies you as some kind of general major. She's a regular Einstein. She's carrying three majors: world history, anthropology, and botany. Seventy-six units. What's more, she's doing each curriculum under a different name, and none of 'em are Eula or anything like it."

Troy struggled to digest his friend's information. He could not conceive of any human being carrying that many units. Of course, he didn't really know much about her school hours. He rarely saw her during the day.

"That's physically as well as mentally impossible."

"That's what I thought, man, but she's doing it. I wonder why the three aliases."

Troy thought furiously. "You said it yourself. She's shy, private. If what she's doing got out on campus, she'd have her picture plastered over every paper in town."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess she would. And when the two of you are out together, she doesn't make you feel inferior?"

"No, never."

"Sparing your male ego, I bet."

"No. That's not like her, Shelby. She's not like that. For all her intelligence; she's still unsure of herself. She's got to be at least twenty, yet she always refers to herself as an adolescent."

He kept his friend's information to himself, afraid to reveal what he'd learned to Eula. He didn't want her to think he'd set Shelby to spying on her. He hadn't, but convincing her of that might be difficult.

"After graduation," he told her one night as they sat parked on Camelback Mountain overlooking the lights of Phoenix below, "maybe we can take a vacation together. Nothing intimate," he added quickly. "Just a trip to enjoy each other's company."

"I have to go home, Troy," she told him sadly. "I'm graduating. You know that."

"Yeah, I know. I'm graduating, too, remember? Surely you can take a week off. As hard as you've worked, you deserve a real vacation." He let his excitement spill out. "My folks have money, Eula. Old money. We can go anywhere, anywhere you want to. Africa. Europe. The Seychelles. Frog hunting up the Amazon."

She laughed at that, filling the night with beauty. "You know me a little, Troy. More than anyone else I've met during my schooling.. Yes, I'd like to go looking for frogs up the Amazon. But I can't. I have to go home. I have to graduate. It's not something I could avoid even if I wanted to. And Troy . . ." She hesitated, looked away from him. There was a vast sorrow in her. "You might not like me anymore after I graduate."

He frowned uncertainly. "That's a hell of a thing to say. What difference does graduation make? I'm going to get a master's. We're graduating together."

"No, Troy. We're not. Where I come from graduation means something more than it does for you. I'm graduating out of adolescence as well as school. It's a big change."

"Well, change, then, but don't worry about me still liking you afterward." He couldn't hold it back any longer. It seemed time was running out on him. On them. "Don't worry about me still loving you afterward."

"Troy, Troy, what am I going to do about you?"

"How about this for right now?" He leaned over and kissed her. She resisted only briefly.

He looked for her during the graduation ceremonies but couldn't find her in the crowd of caps and gowns. That wasn't surprising. If Shelby's information was right, she could have been with the graduating class of any one of three different departments. So he had to content himself with waiting out the speeches of the honored guests, the turning of the tassels, and the throwing of their mortarboards in the air by the new lawyers before he could break from the crowd and rush for his car.

She didn't answer her door. He waited all that day, dully accepting the stream of congratulatory calls from his parents and relatives back east, checking hula's door and phone every ten minutes. Day became night, and still no sign of her. Had she gone already? Skipped the ceremonies and disappeared? Surely, knowing how he felt about her, she wouldn't just pack up and leave without even saying good-bye.

Or maybe she would, he thought desperately. Maybe she'd think it was better this way. A clean, quick break, no tears, no lingering emotional farewells. Maybe that was how they did it in her country.

He raced upstairs. Her door was still locked. He ignored the stares of the other residents as he kicked repeatedly at the barrier, kicked until his leg throbbed and his feet were sore. Eventually the door gave, collapsed inward.

Save for the rented furnishings, the apartment was empty. Every personal effect was gone, down to the last tiny porcelain amphibian. He searched nonetheless, yanking out drawers, scouring closets, finding

nothing. Clothes, makeup, toiletry articles, everything gone.

He ran back out into the hall, checked his watch. Eleven o'clock. She might be anywhere by now. His first thought was to check the airport. Then he realized he still didn't know her last name. If Shelby was right about her multiple aliases, he might not even know her first name.

Shelby was standing there in the hall next to the elevators, watching his friend.

"Where is she, man?" He gripped his roommate by the shoulders. "Where'd she go?"

"She said she was going home. I was surprised to see her. Thought she'd be at the graduation ceremonies, like you. That's all I could get out of her, man. Honest. She was shipping her stuff out. I don't know what she took with her, but there was a big Salvation Army truck loading up downstairs while she was moving out. Maybe she gave all her stuff away. "

"Not her frog collection," Troy muttered. "She wouldn't part with that. Not that. You sure she didn't say how she was leaving? Plane, train, bus?"

Shelby shook his head. "I saw her drive off in that little rented Datsun of hers. Didn't look like she had much luggage with her."

"Which way did she go?"

"Hell, what difference does that make, Troy?"

Shelby was right.. Troy let him go, thinking frantically. If she was traveling that light and going farther than Ethiopia, she had to be taking a plane. That implied a connection through LA or Dallas. Could he check that, using her description alone? It seemed so hopeless. He never should have left the building this morning without her.

Then he remembered the place. Her favorite place. Out toward Cordes Junction, where the interstate climbed high out of the Valley of the Sun toward the Mogollon Rim country. A vast, empty place. They'd driven up there several times to luxuriate in the solitude and privacy. She hadn't said good-bye to him. Would she leave without saying good-bye to her favorite place? It was the only place she'd ever taken him. He was always the one who decided where they'd go. Except for this one favorite place.

It was a chance, probably a better one than the airport. If she'd gone to the latter, then she was probably already winging her way overseas. He rushed down to the garage and burned rubber as he sent the Porsche roaring out onto the street

As soon as he cleared the city limits, he opened the car up, ignoring the speedometer as it climbed toward a hundred. He passed the traffic on the steep grade below Sunset Point as if they were standing still. Truck drivers yelled at him as he sped past.

Then he was off onto the side highway, and then fighting gravel and dirt as he spun off onto the country road leading up into the mountains. The creek they'd cooled their feet in so many times gurgled down the dark recess paralleling the road. There, there ahead, was the little slope that overlooked the valley below. Mesquite and scrub oak and juniper made clownish shadows against the moonless night.

The abandoned Datsun sat forlornly by the side of the road. He pulled off, fumbling for the flashlight he kept in the glove compartment. Exhausted and sweaty from the long drive, he stumbled out of the car and began playing the light around the grove.

He heard her voice before he saw her. "Troy? Oh, Troy! What are you doing here? Go back, Troy. Go home!"

He started for her, was amazed to see her slim form backing away from him. "What's wrong, Eula? Why'd you run out on me like that? I would've understood, but dammit, you at least owe me a good-bye."

"No, Troy, no! I tried to make you understand. I tried.

Go home, Troy. Don't you understand? I've graduated.

I'm not going to be an adolescent anymore. I can't-" She broke off, her gaze turning slowly, expectantly skyward.

There was something overhead, something above them in the night. It was immense, soundless, and falling rapidly toward them. Troy stood frozen, his head back, the flashlight dangling from his hand as the gargantuan shadow descended. A few tiny lights glowed from its underside. It blocked out the stars soundlessly.

A brighter, intensifying light drew his attention back to the trees, to where Eula had been, the Eula he'd known, the Eula he'd loved. The Eula who had graduated and left her adolescence. In her place was a vicious, twisting, explosively beautiful pillar of green fire. It towered over the grove of mesquite and juniper, writhing with incredible energy, so bright that it stung his eyes and made them tear. He tried to look at it and shield his face at the same time. Hints of yellow and white crawled across the fiery apparition; bright little explosions of intense color danced within it.

It moved toward him, and he stumbled fearfully backward, falling to the ground. The earth was cold under him, but he didn't notice it. The overpowered flashlight was forgotten. It was no longer necessary, anyway. Night was witness to a temporary emerald dawn.

It whispered to him, full of an awesome incomprehensible strength. "I tried to tell you, Troy. I tried."

Then it rose into the air and vanished into the massive dark presence overhead. The stars returned as the Visitor disappeared. Troy's hands went to his ears, and there was momentary pain as air was explosively displaced by the Visitor's departure. It was gone, and so was what was Eula.

For a long time he lay there, breathing hard but steadily, considering everything that had transpired. He was frightened, but as the night noises returned to normal, he slowly relaxed. Quail peeped hesitantly into the darkness, and an owl made a sound like a metronome. Down in the creek frogs resumed their staccato conversations. That even made him smile.

He understood a little now. About the frogs, anyway.

Eula had gone home, to a country farther off than he could have imagined. She wasn't an adolescent anymore.

He stood, dusting off his pants. His legs still worked, carried him toward the car. No need for remorse,

he told himself. No need to blame himself for what had happened or for how he'd behaved.

After all, all little boys love to chase after tadpoles.