

KISS ME

by Katherine MacLean

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Denny's new girlfriend, Laury, was not interested in sci-ence; she was busy studying computer applications to busi-ness, but she was pretty and she hung around his laboratory most of her free time and happily listened to him explain what he was doing.

This time his laboratory was full of frogs.

"This bunch is from South Africa, and this bunch in the plastic crate," he pointed, "they are from Kenya." He moved his skinny self over to a big damp glass box. "These are from a lake in Georgia, where they fell into a fishing boat. Usually people only send in frog falls when they come down in dry ter-ritory or on city sidewalks, come down like rain. Maybe they come down over lakes too, but on a lake, they could have jumped into the boat from the water. So I don't trust this batch."

Laury stared solemnly at each one, trying to see some exciting difference. All the frogs were dark brown, or green with spots, or a pinkish tan, and they all had big yellow-gold eyes. "Beebeeb," said a big one.

"But they all look normal!" she was disappointed. "They don't look strange at all." She picked the biggest tan one from his glass box and kissed it, but nothing about it changed. It stared at her and puffed its throat in and out, "Reebeeb."

She put it back. "Reebeeb," she said back.

Denny was eager to explain. "That's what's strange about them, there aren't any tree frogs or desert toads or poi-son frogs or any of the interesting ones, the frogs people send in from frog falls are always the same three kinds, no matter where they are from."

"Where did you get all these frogs?" She tapped on the side of the glass box. Most of them jumped away from her fin-ger into the water, and some jumped toward her finger and bumped their noses on the glass.

"Ouch," she said sympathetically to the ones who had bumped their noses. "That must have hurt."

Denny was pleased by her interest. "The whole collec-tion—" he waved at the room full of glass-faced boxes full of frogs, "was turned over to me by the Charles Fort Foun-dation. People are always sending them frogs from sidewalks and city roofs. They are funding me for a research project on the frogs that come down in frog falls."

"Funding you?" She looked at him with admiration. Scientists seemed to have a talent for generating money for their most kooky projects. "What do they want you to do?"

"Just study their genes. I put it to the university gene fingerprinter machine. So far just normal *Rana pippens* and such. No lead there." He leaned warmly against her shoulder to point. "That bunch is from a desert in Arizona. Look at the date on the label. They were just sent in this week."

Laury was baffled. "Arizona? Frogs don't grow in deserts, do they? They grow in water."

Denny was excited. "They didn't grow in the desert. They rained out of the sky. A rain of frogs. The bible has something about rains of frogs in Egypt. But when it happens in a desert, ten or twenty miles from the nearest puddle, peo-ple really notice it and save some frogs to look at. Then I have a chance to get samples."

She was indignant. "You think I'll believe frogs fall out of the sky? You're putting me on. How did they get into the sky?"

"Here, read this," He shoved a big book into her hands. "It's a collection of reports about frogs raining from the sky." Dennis pointed at a photograph of a wrinkled-looking toad. "Ask me where that toad came from."

Obediently she asked, "Where did it come from?" She calculated the chances of making a tourist business about frog falls. Could Denny predict them?

"It was found inside a lump of coal. That means it's a billion years old or so. Maybe all frogs and toads came from rains of frogs. Maybe rains of frogs started life on land, instead of lungfish. Frogs are a billion years old."

She looked at the big one she had kissed. "They don't look that old." She thought of putting a million-year-old frog on display. Would anyone pay admission?

He took a deep breath to control his temper and looked at her figure for consolation. "I don't mean these frogs. I mean the ancestors of all frogs. And maybe we are descended from them too. My theory is that some alien space satellite was set in orbit to seed Earth with life, and it has been cloning frog eggs and raising pollywogs, and launching frogs down on us ever since Earth cooled and the oceans condensed. I'm sure that when I map all the frog falls and their dates they're going to show an orbit line around the Earth. With that for a clue I can get an observatory to locate the alien satellite in orbit around Earth and get it on camera launching frogs." He spun around in glee. "Ha! On CNN and the cover of *Science!*"

"Why would aliens launch frogs at us?" Laury asked. "Is it an invasion?"

"Calm down, Laury. Frogs aren't going to hurt us. They never have. They're too small. All they do is hop around, swim, lay eggs and eat bugs. They don't live long enough to become civilized and start wars." Denny started a round of throwing little white worms into the glass boxes. The frogs' tongues shot out and yanked the worms into their mouths so suddenly the insects seemed to vanish.

"Some of these are adult males. The green ones that say Peeeep and the big ones that say Reebeeb and Beebeeb are singing to attract females. They mature to be adults in one year."

Laury nodded, "That's their real problem, too much sex at an early age, retards growth, distracts from learning."

The big tan one in the glass case said, "Reebeeb reebeeb," in a deep musical voice, still staring at her.

"You shouldn't have kissed him," Denny said, "Kiss me instead."

"You never know about superstitions until you try them. He didn't turn into a prince," said Laury. "But if he's only a year old he'd make a pretty small prince anyhow, still in diapirs, so it's a good thing it didn't work."

"But he's an adult." Denny moved closer. "I'm an adult too. I'm a consenting adult. Kiss me. Maybe I'll turn into a prince."

"Maybe you'll turn into a frog." She kissed him but his green baseball cap got in the way. He spun the visor to the back, crossed his legs, and tried again.

The big frog sang "Reebeeb reebeeb!" and hopped at them, butting his nose against the glass.

"He's not very smart," said Laury. "No kind of invader from a spaceship can conquer anything being so small and dumb. Maybe they were sent down to be invaders from outer space, but Earth is too sexy for them and they become adults instead of growing up."

"If you put thyroid into the water of the pollywogs they turn to their adult shape when they are really tiny. The tiny females can even lay eggs." Denny said absently, watching Laury.

"That's not the kind of growing up I meant. That's the opposite. I mean—what can you give them to keep them from getting sexy so they can keep on growing and get bigger?"

"Oh." Denny looked at the big pink one. He went to medical reference on his computer and let it search Retarded Growth, Premature Maturity, and Dwarfism, and sat down to read it on screen. "It says it's pituitary hormone, low pituitary hormone," he said. "I can expose some of them to pituitary hormone to increase growth and retard maturity. I'll write it up as another project and they'll grant me more money."

Grantsmanship. Do you know that frogs have more DNA than humans? I could claim it means that they have more shapes available, not just tadpole and frog."

He stayed up reading and typing and did not take Laury on a date that night, or the next night, or any time the next two weeks. She grew angry and when she graduated with her MBA she volunteered for the Peace Corps and went off to balance books for a community improvement incorporation in Mexico. It was easy. She had free time to find a beach and let the students try to teach her wind surfing.

In a hotel bar on a beautiful beach she met a handsome man who owned the hotel. She moved into the hotel for a few years, remaining after the Peace Corps job was over, balancing his books and enjoying water sports in the day, and dancing and lovemaking with the handsome man at night. Her hair sunbleached a brighter blonde and her tan grew darker.

When the handsome man married a girl who had been chosen by his mother, Laury accepted his apology with an inscrutable smile, packed, wiped out all the hotel's financial records from the computer and shredded all the paper records, and caught a plane back to California.

She found out that Denny had been given another doctorate on his frog research and now had a bigger laboratory and some employees, and best of all he was still unmarried. She arrived at Denny's laboratory sure she looked more beautiful than ever.

"Honey, I'm back from Mexico," she called out to the back of a man in a green cap wearing Denny's favorite T-shirt.

The man turned and stood up tall. His face was shiny tan and very wide, his eyes were bright gold and very big, and his mouth stretched almost from ear to ear.

He was surprisingly attractive.

"I've never forgotten you," he said in a deep musical voice. "Kiss me again."

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About the author:

Katherine MacLean entered the science fiction field in 1949 and produced some of the fine hard SF short stories of the 1950s. Like Judith Merrill and Virginia Kidd, she was one of the bright, tough-minded young women who entered the SF scene in the late 1940s and helped change the face of SF in the next decade. She was at her best and most influential in short fiction. Her collections, *The Diploids* and *The Trouble with You Earth People*, are filled with gems but now hard to find. She took a break and then produced some fine work in the 1970s, including her best novel, *The Missing Man*. By the end of that decade, she had left again, moved to Portland, Maine, and only returns to writing SF sporadically, for fun. This story is from *Analog* and shows the lighthearted side of hard SF. It's an interesting contrast to the Landis story.