

Bat Boy

a short story by Patrick O'Leary

Until the day the boy brought home the bat, he had never surprised his father.

The boy hadn't been exactly dumb before. Not exactly. But -- why not admit it? -- he hadn't sparkled, either. He hadn't shone. He hadn't punched his way outside his ordinary mind. True, he could sing at will any number of TV theme songs, and he displayed a scholar's rigor in the way he examined, plucked, jarred and observed insects. He had an eye for detail. He might someday make a scientist, his father hoped.

He hoped.

"Where'd you get the cage? Where'd you get the bat?" he asked the proud boy.

The bat had been winged, the boy explained. He had found it flopping on the sidewalk. He had secured a golden cage from a garage sale down the street. He had trapped the bat. He had brought it home to show his father -- interrupting as he sat smoking and reading the important new voice in fiction in the lawn chair in the backyard with the leaves still unraked.

"What are you going to do with it?" the father asked reluctantly, sensing obligations.

"Keep it," the boy said determined. "Feed it liver like the polliwog we grew in the plastic cube."

My life, the man thought, will not work as a story, he thought.

No one would believe it, he thought, remembering how he fed it with a toothpick, the green frog lunging eagerly at the shit brown flecks of liver, his face becoming mostly mouth.

See, this was the problem.

Having grown a frog in your kitchen, what do you do with it? What then? That was the difference, he concluded, between children and parents. With children there are no third acts. There is Polliwog. There is frog. And who cares after that? It's time for a commercial. They don't think about -- ohhh -- entrance exams. Wisdom teeth. Tuition payments bigger than a mortgage. What happens when sex stops? When you forget how to love?

What had they done to the frog? He couldn't remember. Had they left on vacation and forgotten to assign a caretaker? Had the frog leaped out of his safe cube and perished on the tasteless linoleum? Anything can happen to a frog. They're like children. They don't think. They don't know about...things.

He remembered his birth day -- the day he brought his father tools into the Birthing Room: the stopwatch, the bottle of Mateus, and the

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