

Frogs

by Barry R. Taylor

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What I liked best about my neighbour Lorne was his wife Carmen. She and her husband moved into the rather neglected house next to mine, which stood near the back of a two-acre lot, not far from town. The house had been unoccupied for a while, so it took a bit of work to fix it up. Lorne quickly saw the advantage of having a retired carpenter living next door.

Carmen was a graphical artist. She and Lorne had been married for a couple of years. Lorne installed some new windows in one of the old bedrooms and converted it into a studio for her. Carmen's vivid imagination and consummate technical skills created steady demand for her work. Since Carmen was alone during the day and I spend too much time at home now that Grace is gone, we soon fell to talking over the hedge. Eventually I invited her over for tea.

"As long as it's Earl Grey," she said, smiling.

Carmen was a bright, pretty, lively woman when I first met her, full of laughter and life. Tall and graceful, she favoured loose, flowing clothing in earth-tones and pastels, but jeans and a work shirt were fine for working outside. She had a complicated personality, full of quirks and side-lights that made her interesting company.

One of those quirks was an almost uncanny synchrony with the natural world around her. Carmen talked to the trees. She spoke of plants and wildlife in personal terms, as if they had wants and desires like ours. She told me once that all living things were connected, forming a kind of organic whole, and that the natural world thrummed with moods and intentions that modern humans no longer caught. Not all of those intentions were benign.

Our ancestors, closer to the land, and more attuned to the rhythms of life and death, felt the pulse of nature more firmly. Trying to make sense of these pretranatural energies hovering in the periphery of their awareness, they personified them as fairies, goblins, sprites, gnomes, and all the other denizens of the mythical world. But Carmen said that a fairy was merely a momentary human apprehension of a force too large for us to grasp, rather as a mushroom is a tiny part of a vast, hungry mycelium ramifying through the earth.

I'm a practical person by nature; I dismissed Carmen's philosophy as mere weirdness at first. Artists are all a tad strange. Nevertheless I had to admit that she sensed the world around her with more depth and colour than I had ever done.

Carmen's husband Lorne was a serious, direct man with a strong frame. He ran a landscape business, at which he was singularly successful. Though he lacked a formal degree, he had an eye for design and a knack for making vegetation and built structures work together. Soon after he and Carmen moved in he had all the work he could handle.

Lorne converted the neglected land below the house into a showcase for his skills. Shortly after they moved in, neat lawns began to replace overgrown brambles; trees appeared, evenly spaced and carefully chosen; and gardens sprang up around the house. Lorne and Carmen spent hours working on the gardens together. Lorne even converted a low area of cattails and alders near the road into an attractive pond that captured all the drainage coming down the slope. The pond was soon colonized by water-lilies, dragonflies, frogs, and tiny fish. Lorne laid out a path around the grounds so his friends and clients could wander about while they visited. He hired me to build wooden steps here and there, and walkways beside the pond.

It became obvious soon enough that all was not well between Lorne and Carmen. Our houses are not far apart. Sitting in my sunroom in the evening I could hear the raised voices next door. "He's under a great deal of stress," Carmen said, over tea and biscuits. "He's working so hard. He has so much work he can barely keep up." I said nothing out loud. I suspected though, that Lorne's insistence on orderly and predictable landscapes extended to other aspects of his life as well. But Carmen was not a tree, nor would she be treated as one.

Carmen found succour from her husband's ire in an unlikely place. One night in early June I was sitting in my sunroom, listening to the night, when the frogs stopped croaking. They go silent when something moves in the darkness. A row of fir trees along the boundary of my property screens the view, but through the gaps I saw a figure standing by the pond. It was Carmen. She was standing on a wooden parapet extending from the path into the pond, which Lorne had me build as a kind of observation deck. The night was cloudy. Lorne had installed a set of ground-level lights that glowed along the pathway like a string of pearls. The glow of the lights was enough to reveal Carmen's form, though I could not see her face. She was wearing something long and flowing, perhaps a nightgown. She stood there in the darkness, facing the pond, standing perfectly still. Carmen said once that frogs were the voice of the pond; they spoke

for the collectivity of life within it and therefore for the pond itself. Understanding the will of the natural world required being attuned to the frogs. Was that what she was trying to do?

After a minute the frogs began croaking again. The first croaks were tentative, one at a time, testing that no predator lurked in the night. Then other frogs joined the song, then more and more yet, until the pond was a crowded stage and the darkness was a concert hall. The frogs were loud, louder than I could remember hearing. Through it all Carmen stood motionless on the walkway, perhaps listening for some deeper message in the wild croaks of the frogs.

After a while Carmen turned and left, following the trail back toward the house. I lost sight of her behind the firs. The frogs fell silent when she left, but soon began their croaking chorus once more. I turned toward my own bed. I made a mental note to have Carmen over for tea.

I saw Carmen by the pond three more times in the following weeks. She always appeared there late at night, and always after an argument, or worse, with Lorne. I could tell when she arrived at the pond because the frogs would go quiet for a minute. Their silence seemed almost respectful, as an orchestra stops tuning up when the maestro walks on the stage. If I looked out through the gap in the firs I would see Carmen standing on the platform, sometimes in her night clothes, facing the pond without moving. Once, I could see her cradling her right arm. The frogs would begin croaking again, louder than before, a noisy baseline of animal energy, pumping the darkness with their strange nonmusic. Carmen would stand motionless amidst the din, head high, long hair loose and trailing, seemingly immersed in the cacophony. After a while the frogs would give her silence again as she left the pond and disappeared behind the firs.

“I draw strength from them,” she told me once. “From the frogs.” She was sitting in my sunroom, sipping Earl Grey. “They transmit the energy of the pond, of the whole earth. And they are themselves survivors. Tadpoles are brethren, a cohort facing the same hazards together; only a few of them, wise and lucky, live to become frogs.” She had a bruise on her left cheek.

“Carmen,” I said, “we are not frogs. We are people, and people have options. We can choose how we live. We can change our lives, for the better, whenever we care to do so.” She knew what I meant, of course, although I was being circumspect. I didn’t think an anguished speech about the folly of staying in an abusive relationship would be helpful. It was Carmen’s life at issue, and her decision to make. Couples stay together for all sorts of reasons, and

sometimes the darkest marital clouds still conceal a silver lining. All I could do as an outside observer, and a friend, was to point out alternatives.

Carmen sipped tea. "I know how it looks," she said. "But I . . . I want to make it work. We have come through so much together." She stared into her tea. Over the past few months I had seen the light slowly fade from Carmen's eyes, and the laughter die in her smile. Yet Carmen refused to merely accept the role of victim. She was too smart and strong-willed to be forced into shape as her husband might prune and shape a tree. Even then she retained an element of defiance, even ferocity, which no physical or mental attack could quench. I wondered if Carmen's refusal to be anyone but herself frustrated Lorne even further.

Yet Carmen and Lorne continued to maintain the public facade of a happy marriage. Lorne held frequent gatherings at his house in summer. Friends and clients walked the pathway around the property, sipping wine and admiring the landscaping. Carmen played the good wife, making snacks and refilling wine glasses and never explaining why she wore long-sleeved blouses in high summer.

I said, "Remember you have friends, and family. You are never alone. We care about you, and we will support any decision that you make."

She shook her head. "It's not time yet," she said, enigmatically. "I need . . . to keep trying. The frogs say to wait. The earth is gathering strength. "

I studied her lovely, pallid face for a few moments. It was typical of Carmen to go off on a bizarre tangent like that. I said, "Have another biscuit."

I knew that any resolution to Carmen's situation depended on her. Still, when physical safety is at risk, the matter becomes urgent. I had already had conversations with Carmen's sister, and several of her other friends. We were worried. As it happened, events overtook our concerns.

I saw Carmen down by the pond, drawing strength from the frogs, one more time. I had dozed off in my favourite chair in the sunroom. Lorne and Carmen had hosted a business party that evening, and a screaming argument afterward, which continued in my dreams after I fell asleep. I was awakened a few minutes past midnight by the frogs in the pond creating an uproar. They were all croaking at once, booming and creaking and screeching, talking over each other in a riot of multi-species noise. The sound was almost unbearable to hear, so loud and so discordant it assaulted the ear. I looked out through the fir trees to see Carmen standing on the

walkway, facing the pond, unmoving, immersed in the mad sounds. This time her arms were raised, hand spread, as if receiving a benediction. The frogs raised a horrible, grating sound, full of anger and propulsion. I watched through the fir trees, fascinated and appalled.

Abruptly the frogs were silent. Carmen lowered her hands. Lorne appeared out of the night, presumably having followed Carmen down the trail. Whatever he and Carmen had argued about, he wasn't done with it. Even in the darkness I could see the clenched anger in his poise, the spasm of rage ready to fly out at a touch. He began talking to her, calmly at first, but quickly becoming angry and scornful. Carmen stood her ground. I heard her voice in the stillness, lighter than the basso boom of her husband but still firm, unafraid. He took a menacing step toward her.

Unexpectedly, the frogs began to sing. The whole pond erupted into a chaos of ribbets and croaks, staccato and loud, a machine-gun volley of amphibian rage. Lorne turned toward the pond in obvious surprise. Carmen said something I couldn't hear over the tumult of the frogs, then dashed off up the trail, her nightgown flying out behind her. Lorne stayed behind, seemingly transfixed by the outpouring of furious noise from the night-dark water.

I watched this drama from a distance, through a gap in the foliage, horrified. I would have another talk with Carmen, I decided, tomorrow. Perhaps I would invite her sister to come too. Something had to be done.

I had turned away toward the inner door of the house when the noise of the frogs abruptly stopped. I turned back to peer through the fir trees. The platform was bare. Evidently Lorne had followed his harried wife back into the house.

The frogs had started up again by the time I climbed into bed. I had the windows open. The unharmonious symphony of the pond was audible even there. The frogs' song sounded different now. The frantic, unnatural noise of a few minutes earlier had died away. If the frogs truly were the voice of the pond, the articulation of the living world's energy, as Carmen believed, whatever fury had incited their thunderous song had been quelled. Now they were ordinary frogs croaking in the ordinary way, tossing out love letters into the dark. I let the frogs lull me into welcome sleep.

Yet sleep that night was neither long nor deep. At half-five the next morning I was awakened by my cell phone buzzing on the night stand. The call was from Carmen. "It's Lorne," she said, her voice trembling. "I think he's drowned."

I was fully awake in an instant. “Call 911,” I said. “I’ll be right there.”

It took me less than five minutes to get dressed and make my way next door. I found Carmen standing on the landing beside the pond, still in her night clothes, shivering in the cool morning. I gave her my jacket.

She said, “He – he didn’t come to bed last night. We had a fight. Sometimes when he’s upset he sleeps on the sofa. I couldn’t find him this morning. But look.” She pointed toward the pond. In the grey, pre-dawn light it took me a moment to find the darker shape floating among the reeds.

A wave of shock and horror passed over me. I shouted something. I threw off my shoes and waded into the thigh-deep water, feet sinking into the mud. I approached the body and turned it over. It was Lorne. His eyes were open and staring, lifeless. An ugly gash on his forehead had pink-stained the water around him. There was no question of resuscitation. The corpse was already cold.

The police and paramedics arrived minutes later. The medics pulled a sheet over Lorne’s head and carried him away without sirens. I went home for a shower and a change of clothes before telling the police what I had seen.

Lorne’s untimely death was quickly resolved. The coroner said that Lorne died by drowning. It appeared that he slipped off the parapet in the darkness and fell in. The gash on his head probably came from hitting one of the rocks lining the edge of the pond. Knocked unconscious, he drowned without ever waking up. His death was ruled accidental.

Carmen’s sister came over to stay with her for the next few weeks while the estate was sorted out. Carmen bore the loss stoically, but her grief was deep, and real. Despite everything he had put her through, Lorne was her husband and she loved him dearly.

We shared tea many afternoons during that difficult time, sitting in my sunroom where we could hear the birds singing and the occasional croak of a frog tuning up for the night’s performance. My own loss helped me understand the complex feelings of Carmen’s grief. The bruises on her arms and face slowly disappeared. Eventually, and gradually, the light returned to her eyes.

Still, on sleepless nights I sit in my sunroom, listening to the frogs create their strange and indecipherable music, and I wonder. Lorne could easily have slipped and fallen into his own pond that night, perhaps overwhelmed by the riotous noise of the frogs. But under the cover of

that furious, ear-hurting crescendo, wasn't it possible that someone could have run back down the trail to give him a push? The pond is not deep enough for a grown man to drown in. A push sideways would ensure a blow against the rocks, perhaps enough to cause death before the body hit the water. Carmen said she drew energy and resolve from the frogs, the vocal manifestation of the earth's spirit. Did they incite her to take a final action against her violent and abusive husband? Did their painfully loud song celebrate a retribution, a sacrifice to the spirits of the earth, while also covering the splash of a body hitting the water? Was it even conceivable that a chorus of frogs could instigate a murder? I have no answers to these questions. I know only that the music of frogs croaking in the night will never sound quite the same.