

Mutants

by Marko Fong

Mutants

"We'll croak on 'til our throats wear out. We'll croak all day."

Arisotphanes, *The Frogs* 405 B.C.

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Annika, my nineteen year old daughter, appears at my door with a box of green bean bag mutants. "Mom wanted these out of the garage."

"She could have thrown them out."

"She says she wants you to do it so you don't try to blame her for it."

Elin and I had religious differences about the garage. To her the garage required regular sweeping and organization--it was an extension of our house. Elin believed dust and mold to be manifestations of inner sin. I insisted that they were agents of evolutionary process.

To me the garage existed as an enchanted wilderness from which banished items would magically reappear after cats chased unseen rodents across randomly piled possessions--it was our shared unconscious. Too often my discussions with Elin about the state of our garage went like this, "You're sick."

"You're smiling."

"I am not smiling, I am dead serious. If you don't do something about the garage, I'm getting a divorce."

When Elin and I separated, it wasn't over the garage. We were miscut pieces of some jigsaw puzzle. Neither of us ever seemed to know what the puzzle was intended to look like only that the pieces were expected to fit together somehow. At some point, Elin stopped smiling even during our sillier arguments.

"Nothing we do ever goes smoothly. We're just too different," she would lament.

I never knew what this meant for Annika. She grew up hearing from us that she is a perfect blend of her parents.

Annika is a stylish young adult. Her bright red top gets casually echoed in a pair of white socks tinged with a blush of pink. In high school Annika would spend fifteen minutes every morning in her room as she figured out ways to draw out subtle connections between the items she was wearing and her half Elin, half me self. One result was that boys called constantly. The other result was that I found myself bewildered by Annika's hormone driven embrace of the Elin paradigm. Our conversations got shorter as Annika spent more time in her room whenever we were all home together.

Annika drops the box on a clear space on my kitchen table, rescued from a garage sale of remarkably tasteless furniture. At the garage sale, each item had a tag with exorbitant original price taped to it and "Make Offer" written over that in black felt pen. It was as if the items had no intrinsic value other than the fact that they had once cost too much. I had this fleeting vision of filling my new place with garage sale furniture until I glimpsed the couple selling the furniture. The wife was reading a book from the Left Behind series. The husband was complaining to a buyer that now that professional wrestling had gone corporate, it wasn't dirty enough. Elin's belief in Feng Shui counted for something, and I couldn't let too much of their energy into my studio apartment. My only souvenir was this thirty one dollar-oval table with a three by three square of inset tiles to keep pots from burning its surface.

I cut the tape on the box with my front door key, and Annika reaches in. First out of the box is Kermit, the three-eyed frog with human toes. She drops Kermit into the upper right tile of my kitchen table. To outsiders Kermit is a lime green bean bag with three buttons sewed to one end and a picture of a foot glued to the other. To us he is the Adam (or is it Lucy?) of Beanie Mutants. For three days, we tried to convince Elin to kiss Kermit so we could see if he'd turn into a prince, but Elin refused.

"If your Dad wants you to have his warped sense of humor, he can go ahead. It's just that I'm not going to be a part of it."

I reach into the box. The fabric feels like a favorite blanket, soft and heavy at the same time. I pull out Michael the Cane Toad, an

olive green sack with a picture of Jude Law on it. Next to the picture is a tag that says "Poisonous, victims will say "Blimey" and start singing songs from the musical "Oliver"."

Elin kissed this one.

"Eww, you kissed a toad," Annika and I squealed.

"No, I kissed Jude Law, I should have married him."

"You're going to get warts, " I warned.

"Why is it if you kiss a frog, it becomes a prince and if you touch a toad you get warts?"

It was Annika's question. For a wondrous three weeks, we devoted a part of each weekend to trying to figure out the difference between frogs and toads, butterflies and moths, mice and rats, men and women. Why should two such similar creatures evoke completely different reactions from humans?

We went to the Monterey aquarium. The docent there explained the difference between dolphins and porpoises. She also explained that amphibians fall into a nether world between zoos and aquariums. "Maybe, try a reptile house," she told us.

The rest of that afternoon, the three of us wandered neighborhoods in Carmel looking for homes whose occupants laid eggs and periodically shed their skins. I insisted that we check all homes with Bush-Cheney signs. As we strolled hand in hand, Elin extolled the intricacies of paint trim, the importance of window coverings, and the virtues of rose bushes. Perhaps because of that weekend, she let Annika and I design more mutants for another four weeks. Eventually, we had a shoebox of rodents and this one big box of Salientia. Elin even named one herself. Creme Brulee was a frog that was a perfectly normal chartreuse beanbag except that it had mutated to taste like its name instead of like chicken.

Annika learned to sew and we discovered that amphibians make for the best mutants. This is partly because it's the one order whose developmental stages resemble mutation--egg, to tadpole, to froglet, to long jumping-bug eating-celebration of all that is green. I've since wondered if we might better understand teenagers if they were tadpoles instead of versions of ourselves with hormones, acne, and

better hair. We also learned from a video from the Discovery Zone that pollution was filling the earth with actual mutant frogs and toads. Because they are equally at home in air and water, amphibians are the creatures most sensitive to environmental change. In one Great Lakes park, pollution from iron tailings helped produce three legged frogs who became so numerous that they frightened off all the picnickers. Perhaps like Exodus, a plague of frogs were serving as a warning from God.

I drop Michael the Cane toad into the center square only to be interrupted by Annika, "Dad, that's Paul Lynde's spot." For some reason, Annika and I had decided that the center square from the Hollywood Squares reruns looked like a bullfrog. That was how we started playing tick tack toad. During the Beanie Mutant era, Annika and I played the game at least five times a night. Each night we would introduce a new sub-species to the game. It was much better than bedtime stories and almost as good as reading Harry Potter together. Then one night, Annika had a nightmare about our bedroom closet being filled with toads.

"Enough is enough," Elin warned me.

"All kids have nightmares once in a while. She used to have them about Hippogriffs."

"Last week, she wanted to bring two of her toads on an overnight. Can you imagine the calls we would have gotten from the parents?"

"Mutation isn't gross. Without mutation, there can't be evolution."

I meant it as a joke, but it just made Elin even angrier. I realized then that I could never tell Elin that the Beanie Mutants had actually been Annika's idea.

The next day while Annika was at school and before I got home from work, the toads and rodents disappeared into unmarked boxes in our garage. Within six weeks Elin had Annika collecting American Girls for which I would write new backstories based on Howard Zinn, but it was never as fun.

In my kitchen, Annika and I play tick tack toad for three hours because neither one of us can get three in a row. At one point she

looks up at me and says, "Dad do you remember when you insisted on teaching me how to win at tic tac toe?"

I nod.

"I wouldn't let you do it and you couldn't understand why."

"You said, "I want it to stay magic. I play to make friends not beat them." And for three months I bragged about your saying it."

"And I hated your telling that story over and over."

Annika paused before speaking again, "Did you ever notice I always started in corner squares after that?" I did notice. After all, the vast majority of children instinctively seek the protection of the middle square. I nod.

"I never lost again, but the game was never any fun again either. I just wouldn't tell you that I had listened to you the whole time."

Not long after this confession, Annika and I start putting our Mutant Beanies back in the box. One of us gets out the duct tape, but I'm not even sure which of us did it. This was, by an hour, our longest visit in the last two months. It was a few minutes after I hugged Annika goodbye that I remembered my last phone call with Elin, "You can't just take her to a movie and go to dinner. You need to talk to Annika. That's why she's not wanting to visit."

This is the other conversation my daughter and I had that evening.

"I'd forgotten about Mutant Beanies."

"Me too," she said softly.

"Are you doing okay? I mean really?"

"Yeah. Tonight was fun.... Dad, I'm not a tadpole anymore. Couldn't you just have talked to mom, I mean seriously talked to her? You just wound up chatting on the internet all the time with strangers instead."

We put the Beanie mutants back in my storage closet in the garage downstairs and stack them neatly on a shelf. It wasn't true that I'd forgotten Mutant Beanies. It was just three weeks earlier that I'd seen an article online, something about a pond in Germany with hundreds of toads who were exploding spontaneously. Scientists couldn't solve the problem. Religious zealots were starting

vigils by the pond because they were convinced that the explosions were a sign of the End of Days. It hadn't seemed to occur to them that if this really were the beginning of Rapture, why was God taking righteous toads before taking them? I was going to e-mail the story with all my thoughts about it to Annika and maybe even to Elin, but I stopped myself and asked, "What is it I really want to say to them?"

In our last argument, it was Elin who started crying. "I don't care if you're weird. I care that you'd rather make jokes than tell me what you're feeling."

For weeks, I wrote myself a reminder "Make connections not deflections" on a little green pad I bought at Long's. They were three dollars a pad, but I couldn't resist the fact that they were labeled "Lilly Pads--a place to rest your thoughts."

Until tonight, it hadn't occurred to me why I couldn't resist buying them. In some corner of my garage, I barely see it - what I want to tell them.

When I was six years old, my older neighbors told me they had a surprise just for me if I would tell them a secret. I revealed that I liked a girl in my class. They took me out into the garage, blindfolded me, dumped a bucket of tree frogs over my head, then ran out of the garage and held the door. I was terrified, humiliated, I peed in my pants, and pounded on the door until I collapsed in exhaustion. Somewhere in the hysteria, I smashed all the frogs. The whole time, I could hear their laughter just outside that door. I was so ashamed that I never told my parents.

It was a mean trick, but my neighbors were just kids too. They meant no serious harm. After that, for some reason, I didn't wind up afraid of frogs. I wound up afraid of talking to girls instead.

The only problem is that this may never have actually happened at least I have no certain memory of it. I make the story up in my head so Elin might let me come home, so we can lie together the way we once did, the way a small child hugs a teddy bear.

11 fat and plump frog legs, cleaned and skinned
Water

½ cup or so of lemon juice or vinegar if you have it

Salt

Pepper

2 or 3 eggs

Seasoned fish fry batter mix, or mix 50/50 flour and cornmeal

Cooking oil

In a deep skillet or kettle over an open fire, add enough water to completely submerge the frog legs. Add about a half a cup of lemon juice or vinegar and about a teaspoon of salt to the water. Bring the water to a hard boil for approximately 5 minutes, scalding the frog legs, and then carefully remove the frog legs from the water and pat them dry with paper towels.

Carefully dry out the skillet or kettle and fill with cooking oil. Place the kettle back over the heat and bring the oil to a crackling, frying temperature, as you would do when cooking French fries.

Beat 2 or 3 eggs in a small bowl.

Pour the fish fry batter onto a dish, plate or pie pan.

Season the frog legs with salt and pepper and then dip the frog legs in the beaten egg bowl.

Roll the frog legs in the fish fry batter, and then carefully drop the frog legs into the boiling hot oil.

Fry the frog legs until they are golden brown and then remove them from the oil and drain them on paper towels.

