

THE MATING SOUNDS OF NORTH AMERICAN FROGS
a novel about teaching in two first-persons

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Chapter Eight

F-29-Ag-80

I spent yesterday in physics class trying to get the "darlins" to speculate on how physics, as a discipline, might have come into being.

"What might prompt a person or a community to begin to notice regularity in nature?" I asked. Silence. Most of them were staring blankly. Several had pen to paper-- drawing pictures of Harley Davidson's or flowers; writing out hall passes to have ready to ask me to sign when they saw the chance.

A few were waiting for me to answer my own question so that they could write it down. These were the "good students"--they played the education game well, and they knew success didn't come from creating their own answers, but from memorizing the teacher's answers. It's the teacher's answers that get counted right on the tests.

Ips and Clover, in their own ways, looked thoughtful.

There was, however, one kid who looked to be on the verge of articulation. "You look like you've got something to say," I said to him. "What's your name?"

"Um, Mark," he said. Ah, yes, Mark Plumwell, I remembered.

"So Mark, what do you suppose could lead people to take note of patterns, rhythms in nature?"

"So they can tell when the safe times of the month are?"

It was a start. I wanted to be encouraging, yet lead their attention back to physics. So I said: "Well, yes, but before they could tell the safe times of the month, they had to know that there was a fertility cycle at all. Before they knew there was a fertility cycle, they must have noticed that certain symptoms in women were regularly repeated. So the first thing to be said to this question . . ." the "good students" leaned over their notebooks, "is that

some patterns were inescapable. They couldn't help but be noticed. The sun comes up; it goes down. The moon changes shape, then changes back again. Seasons pass--it gets cold, then warm, then cold again. But they couldn't explain why there were these cycles. Would they want to?"

After some re-phrasing and re-explaining, I finally got someone to say yes, they would want to. "Well, why would they want to?" I continued. And so on. I alternated between tooth-pulling and mini-lectures. We had class discussions--me doing most of the discussing, I'm afraid--on early mythic accounts of natural phenomena, how science and religion weren't distinguishable until about Galileo's time. It was about that time in history that science diverged from the understanding of most Our Countians. I came to Newton in my sketch outline of the history of science. In one of the mini-lectures I made a brief reference to the account of the rise of the mechanical (Newtonian) view given in Einstein and Infeld's *The Evolution of Physics*.

After class Ips wanted to know if I had a copy of the Einstein book to which I'd alluded, and, if so, could he borrow it.

"Einstein's my main dude," he declared. He displayed an old clothbound edition of *Selected correspondence of Albert Einstein and Max Born*.

"Where did you get that?" I asked, amused.

"Shelly got it for me. She found it at a second-hand bookstore in Birmingham." Ips answered. "She says it's now probably the only copy in Our whole County," he added proudly.

"What else have you read about Einstein?"

"Well, the biography that's in the school library."

I thought a second. "You mean from that series of biographies with big type, about 100 pages, 80 of which are about the person's childhood?" Ips nodded.

"What a great guy," he enthused. He showed me a photo from his book. "Look at that 'stache. Look at those eyes. The way he holds his hands. This guy knew what was going on."

The tardy bleeper did its thing. I promised to bring Ips my copy of *The Evolution of Physics*.

But this morning I forgot the book. I told Ips I'd try not to forget again. After school this afternoon, however, Ips came to visit me in my small brown apartment--one of four in a small brown building. Shelly was with him.

"I thought I'd come by and get that book, if it's OK," said Ips.

"Sure, sure, come in. And what brings you along, Shelly?"

"Well," she said. "I drove him, and . . . I just wanted to."

I offered them a seat, and some orange juice. They accepted both. Gradually the conversation got less and less formal, more and more personal. At some point I must have crossed the line into violation of The Rule (the one about fraternizing).

I learned that Shelly is a witch. They also told me about Zorch. The Betyse's theory, of which they seem firmly convinced, is that Zorch and Our County occupy the same space and time, but Zorch is one dimension over. It sits like a big ball upon the plane of Our County, but, of course, we can't see it or touch it from our dimension.

W-3-S-80

Today I shall set down Shelly's story. Given how troubled her childhood has been, it is surprising that she's been so open with me in the short time we've known each other. She revealed herself without any unburdening; though she sometimes spoke intensely, she spoke in response to my curiosity rather than from any need of hers.

She came over after school again today. She had her dark brown cloak on, but since it was such a warm day, she didn't wear much else. We sat at my small round brown kitchen table and talked. She pulled a goatskin out of her bag and occasionally sipped from it. I had orange juice.

Ips knows, of course, that his sister is a witch. Firefly and Clover and T and I know, and there's a long-bearded musician whom I haven't met who knows, but that's about it, if I'm to believe Shelly (and I do).

Her witchness is apparently genetic--or some necessary but not sufficient part of it is. The name Betyse, pronounced Buh-TOO-see, is an old Welsh Celtic name predating the entrance of Christianity into that part of the world by millennia. Her mother, too, has ancestry among the Welsh Celts. Through some unlikely combination of recessive genes Shelly was born with special senses tying her to nature and drawing strength from it. When she was a child the platoon of shrinks to which her father dragged her diagnosed Shelly's uniqueness as several rare psychoses, or perhaps a form of schizophrenia. Beginning at age five she was kept drugged most of the time.

"It was hell," she said. "This witchness or magic or whatever was struggling to cohere, to tie into all the other forces of nature, and the drugs kept

suppressing it and splitting it up." The little girl's body and psyche were a battleground. Because the war often left her exhausted they pronounced her lethargic and gave her amphetamines, which, of course, only intensified the battle inside her.

Shelly was twelve when she steadfastly refused to take the drugs anymore. "My father would have given them to me forcefully, the bastard, or put me away somewhere so someone else could," Shelly recalled. "If Mom hadn't believed me I'd be dead now."

But Evelyn Betyse forbade the drugs. There was a big fight. Shelly remembers it vividly. Highly trained psychiatrists had prescribed Shelly's medications, and she needed them, contended Jason Betyse. And Shelly, hiding, crouched in the hallway, realized then that her father feared her and what she would be if freed of chemical suppressants. Her parents' conflict escalated. Voices rose, faces reddened. Finally, Jason, shaking Evelyn violently, yelled that she would not be able to stop him. He stormed off toward Shelly's room.

"Stop!" Evelyn screamed. "I'll call the police."

Jason spun round. "With what complaint? This is doctor prescribed medication."

"Those doctors are wrong!" Evelyn yelled. Jason ignored her, turning back to his hunt. Ms. Betyse gathered herself and played her last card. "For every pill you force down my daughter's throat," quietly now and firmly she spoke, "I will take five."

The gambit had two effects: Jason paused, and Shelly, realizing what that dosage would do to her mother burst from her hiding place and ran to her crying, "Mommy! No!"

Mr. Betyse intercepted her and dragged her by the arm into the bathroom where the medicine chest was. But he didn't go through with it. With a pill in one hand and the other wrapped around Shelly's jaw, he caught a glimpse of the tableau in the mirror: himself bent, prying open a terrified girl's mouth, little Ips now standing in the doorway, wide-eyed, staring, and behind Ips, Ms. Betyse, pale and shuddering. Mr. Betyse let go of Shelly, and she slumped to the floor. He stood up straight and for several seconds the only motion in the room was his heavy breathing. Then Jason Betyse angrily hurled the pill into a corner, stormed past his wife and son, and left the house. Shelly has not seen him since.

"What would that amount of drugs have done to your mother?" I asked.

"I don't know. I mean, the first five wouldn't have killed her. But, if she could have kept it up, it would have done her in before long, if she could've stayed out of the hospital."

"That's a heck of a gamble, if she wasn't bluffing."

"She wasn't," said Shelly.

After her father left, the forces inside Shelly began to exert themselves. But they were chaotic; she could not always control her thoughts. Objects sometimes went flying off shelves, even in the next room. Or she'd find herself leaving her body when she didn't want to and visiting far off places, where she'd be left to find her own way back. But most common were three-to five-minute seizures. Shelly imposed a strict discipline on herself. Taxing mental and physical exercises were repeated over and over daily. Gradually she gained control. She studied and practiced the Old Religion, called variously, correctly or incorrectly, witchcraft, the Fertility Cult, Satanic Heathenism, or Godless communism.

The Old Religion has its origins in the early fertility dances in which bulls' heads, tails and makeshift hoofs were worn. The costume evolved eventually into just the horns. Cerenunnos, the horned god of fertility (hence, "horny," as the urge to be fertile), got his name among the Celts of Gaul. There was a major place of worship to the life force that Cerenunnos represented on the spot where Notre Dame now stands. A relic of that old edifice is to this day a famous part of Notre Dame. "They call it a gargoyle, but you can tell by the horns that it's Cerenunnos," she said, taking a swig from the goatskin.

I don't pretend to understand all that Shelly has said about being a witch. These aren't her terms, but this is what I take her to have meant: There is something inexplicable about life, namely, that there should be such a thing. In a universe of matter and energy and laws of physics there somehow came to be matter that could reproduce itself. Oh, sure, nowadays scientists have a pretty useful handle on most of the conditions of life: given a moist planet with methane, formaldehyde, ammonia, and some usable minerals exposed to lightning or ultraviolet irradiation at the right temperature, life as we know it becomes, in theory, possible. But how the hell did those polymers ever manage to arrange in membranes to give us replication? The Old Religion is a veneration of that capacity for some specks of dust to make other specks of dust; it celebrates reproductive power, fertility. The world's religions today are variations on this basic theme. One of the first things that happened on most of the branches along which the Old Religion evolved was the addition of an extra step: instead of seeing replication itself as being the life force, people interpreted reproduction as a result of an antecedent life force. From there it was a small step to project anthropomorphic characteristics upon this antecedent force, thus producing gods.

"So, Shelly," I said. "If the Old Religion has already been by-passed whenever gods enter the picture, what about Cerenunos?"

"Cerenunos didn't cause regeneration, he was just a way of representing it."

Shelly feels a strong connectedness to witches down through the ages. "I don't know whether past witches could do what I can, or whether they just felt more whole when they tuned into nature, though surely some of them must have had some powers, or I could not have inherited them." These women have filled the gap for Shelly that her father left. "They are my heritage," she told me. "My identify. I am they, transplanted to the twentieth century." So the screams of her foremothers, gentle creatures whose crimes were that they felt in touch with Mother Earth, tortured by the hundred into confessing to sins they could not comprehend, ring always in the back of Shelly's consciousness. She is an intense person.

In school most people treat Shelly the way that persons with a history of mental illness are usually treated. They avoid her, and are ill at ease when she's around. Until she reached eleventh grade Ips was her only companion, but Shelly's discipline had given her the self-reliance to face problems alone. She was not unhappy. She was aloof to most people, although she cared deeply for some of them. Then The Firefly befriended her, and for most of a year she and Firefly were often together. If Shelly was hurt by the estrangement with Firefly near the end of their junior year, she didn't show it; she remained ready to resume the friendship.

Wednesday, February 11, 1981

Kali and Neva live in a large tent that flutters against the Zorchan horizon like a giant butterfly bird. Its gossamer fabric is dyed in every color human eyes can see and several others. It is sunset and moonrise; it is rainbows and dawn; it is Jack Frost and chocolate bars. The fabrics shimmer and billow and change color in the morning suns. It is a spacious tent whose outer flaps can become instantly transparent if you pull a tassel that hangs inside next to the fountain. Kali and Neva didn't feel the need for curtained privacy. Kali and Neva's home exists, not as a monument of suburban achievement, but as a tribute to their love for each other and also to their penchant for bright colors and beautiful objects.

Like all Zorchans, Neva and Kali collect things. Because they love to travel, many of their collectibles are from other dimensions. Take, for example, some specimens of Earth culture. Earth is a favorite antique shop for these two. Inside the wide tent are many Earth stones, some smooth, some etched with fossils of the first Earth; there are Uchee Indian relics and baskets from Jamaica hold brilliant Zorchan blooms. A large red Chinese kite shaped like a

smiling dragon is in one corner, and in another sits an old brass hat- and-coat rack draped with an antique tablecloth and a hat from someone's production of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead."

In the center of the tent is an ornately carved water fountain imported by Kali on one of her trips to India, Earth. They didn't have elephants on Zorch and wouldn't have had ivory anyway because they don't believe in harming creatures. Kali "lifted" the fountain because she heard the voices of ancient elephants singing to her to do just that. It seems Simba and Sheba had always wanted to visit another dimension, and now that their tusks had a chance to go, they weren't about to pass it up. The fountain sang to Neva and Kali, and to whomever might drop over to spend a dilrood or two, songs of the jungle and the cobra and the temple bells. It also gurgled a pale pink liquid called hoolaz which the Zorchans drink, bathe in, and sometimes sprinkle on their zansfara. The zansfara is the sweet/tart pear shaped fruit native to Zorch. It grows on vines and is to Zorchans what the buffalo once was to Native Americans and what the olive is to Greeks.

There are many books in the tent; especially art books. Kali loves the impressionists, Monet in particular, because she feels that reality is often blurred, and also because she is quite fond of water lilies.

A favorite Zorchan hobby is carving. Splooftrees grow everywhere on Zorch and their wood, a marvelously well grained stuff, is used for carving objets d'art and tent poles. None of it is burned because, guess what? The Zorchans don't know how to make fire, and don't care to know. They have even, through their own Zorchan magic, made all things on their planet unburnable. Neva and Kali's carvings include birds of all sorts and a peacock that Kali brushed with dyes to resemble the real thing. A million suns and an million moons. There is also a dolphin with a wonderful dolphin smile on his face and a large splooftree sculpture of kudzu. The kudzu piece is remarkable for its artistry, and also because one can see in it anything one wishes to see. It is also a great stimulant to creative imagination, and, as Neva said, "heaps more fun than those electronic Earth games played on video machines."

There are soft rugs on the blue-green soil inside the tent and fat fluffy cushions woven of the same sparkling fabric as the walls. There are splooftree bowls filled with zansfara, and there is a cuckoo clock. Being in Kali and Neva's tent is like being cradled in a kaleidoscope. All in all the two were as exceptional as Zorchans as the members of our little band were as Our Countians. In Our County, the eccentricities of Clover and Shelly, Firefly and Ips, and N and me are discouraged and denigrated, but on Zorch they were celebrated.

When the seven of us arrived, Kali and Neva were expecting us. •