

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

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Chapter Nine

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"I loathe assembly programs," Clover said as we marched down the hall toward the gymnasium. At O.C.H.S. assembly programs are of two types: 1) pep rallies to boost the flagging spirits of the sports teams, and 2) thinly disguised "speaker programs" whose unflagging purpose was to convert or welcome the student and teacher body to the Realm of Eternal Salvation. There were lots of flags present at both types of assemblies: The American flag, Our State flag, the school flag, the Christian flag, and a few unidentified flags. Clustered in the four corners of the gymnasium, they stood at attention, silently barking their subliminal orders.

She and I found seats at today's particularly versatile assembly: it had, in a burst of inspiration, attempted to combine the Big Three: sports, patriotism, and religion. Clover had just turned to the beefy senior jock on her right and politely remarked, "Get your goddamn sweaty hand off my knee," when the O.C.H.S. band plunged into a stirring, if somewhat off-key, rendition of the "Star-Spangled Banner." The speaker emerged from behind a giant arrangement of chrysanthemums and babies' breath, gilt-edged Bible in hand.

Together we watched the football, basketball, tennis, golf, wrestling, track, gymnastics, bowling, baseball, water skiing, and skateboard cheerleaders bounce onto the gym floor. As one organism, the girls began urging their pubescent throats and bodies to perform impossible feats of daring-do. Ditties and titties jerked in counterpoint:

O.C.H.S. O.C.H.S  
Is the Best  
The very Best!  
Rompe 'em, stomp 'em  
Mash their heads!  
Mangle them til  
They are dead.  
Stomp their guts out

Make them bleed  
Make 'em wish they'd  
Never tee'd!

Other eloquent songs of war and glory followed this anthem to the golf team.

The speaker slipped his Bible under an elbow while he, too, contributed to the mass hysteria by smashing his palms together in acclamation. Here, clearly, was the Ultimate Assembly: one could get saved, salute the flag, and look up the dress of one's favorite cheerleader all at the same time.

Assistant principal Donald Decker's voice cracked through the intercom. "Ahem," he croaked.

"Aaaahhhh," moaned the beefy senior jock who had just jerked off into his red and white letter sweater--an accolade due, doubtless, to the charms of the cantilevered cheerleader legs and warm, nude Clover knees.

"Ahem," repeated D. Decker into the microphone. "This assembly is to commemorate the passing of our beloved principal. What finer send-off than this could there be for our dear friend?" he asked rhetorically. (Aside to media specialist, "Is this thing on?") "Ahem, we all know that Mr. Blankenshield was a former football coach and encouraged all students to participate in physical activities." Clover giggled, the beefy senior jock blushed and tried his best not to look damp. "We also know," the assistant principal continued, "what a fine Christian Mr. Blankenshield was, and we rejoice that he has found his final Home, the heavenly palace of Our Father. We must continue, we must increase our school spirit and our devotion to the Lord. He would have wanted it that way. Now I would like to present to you the reverend Bobby Sunday!"

There was much palm smashing and a roar tornadoed its way heavenward as the cheerleaders rocked out a chorus of:

O.C.H.S., You may be the Best

But Jesus is

All the Rest!

The cheerleaders then returned to the sidelines to kneel, skirts smoothed over dimpled knees, to await the message of preacher Bobby Sunday.

Sunday was a tall, impeccably dressed man in his mid-forties. He had obviously spent hours learning to blow-dry his brown, shining hair. He smiled a lot and could have been a movie star if he'd tried. He used his hands a lot

in his "message." His hands were home to ten highly buffed glittering nails which, if glimpsed with his highly buffed, glittering teeth in just the right light, could blind you. (Though a wave of those same glittering hands would, of course, restore sight instantly, even better than it had been before.) Here, in digest, is what he said:

"Friends, I've been called here today to bring you a very special message. We all deeply feel the loss of our principal. He was a fine man, a worker, a Christian. He was our pal. He has been taken from us--God's will be done--and in this moment of grief we find ourselves all too often open to temptations to ease our pain. Beware these temptations of the devil! Your indulgence in cheap thrills will not really ease your misery, nor will it bring back our beloved pal. Turn your eyes to Jesus! . . . To make up for the emptiness inside you, you may turn to the evil satan's weed, marijuana. Stay clear or you are halfway to hell already. You don't need drugs, you need only the Lord . . . Steer likewise clear of the lusts of the flesh. That cute boy or girl who sits in front of you in homeroom might fill your emptiness for an hour or two, or maybe even three or four, but it is fleeting. . . . Turn your eyes to Jesus; only He can see you through this difficult time. Until another leader is sent to us we must accept Christ as our saviour. . . . Remember God is pleased when we accept His Son and when God is pleased his glory shineth down upon the football, basketball, baseball, tennis, golf, and wrestling teams." There was a hushed pause. "But I look in your eyes and see the light of God shining there. I know you will not let it dim so we may all expect to be led not into temptation. We may expect a Christian brotherhood, and a winning season until we are called up yonder to that final goalpost in the sky. Thank you, and Amen."

It required a major effort to remain seated during all the commotion. I wanted to jump up and run away, particularly when, at the end of Sunday's message, little white cards were passed around that instructed the student to answer the following questions: Are you saved? If not, why not? If so, at what time, date, and place were you saved? How many times have you witnessed before the multitude? What is the name of your favorite gospel group? But I just sat there sinfully thinking how tasty a cool Bloody Mary would be about now and fervently hoping no one could read my mind. It would have resulted in numerous black marks on my Performance and Conduct File. When the address was over Clover said she was glad Shelly and Firefly hadn't been there.

"Uh huh," I nodded.

"Perhaps Shelly would have made all his teeth fall out, or Firefly might have summoned the Zorchans to teach him the five-finger exercise. Can you just see his teeth clattering around on the gym floor and his fingers twitching madly?" Clover giggled.

The band flung their hearts and souls into the last number. It had been especially arranged by Mr. Dozo, the band director, and was a medley of "Onward Christian Soldiers," "American the Beautiful," and the theme from "Rocky." The cheerleaders bounced once more to their feet and led the O.C.H.S. body in a group sing of the first two songs. On the "Rocky" part everyone just kind of stood there looking real butch and hoping, no doubt, that Satan would get kayoed in the third round. Fortunately, the bell hummed in the middle of the second verse, and, released from mother, god, country, football overkill, we clamored down the bleachers, and marched, like obedient Christian soldiers, off to third period.

It is a Byron night tonight. ["The moon like a flower in heaven's high bower, with silent delight sits and smiles on the night."] I have pulled my old wicker rocking chair in from the porch, for it is cold outside, and I am slowly rocking now as I write in front of my living room window. A small lamp lights the page; outside, the moonlight dances where Jack Frost has passed. It must be late, but my brains aren't in the mood to do sleep. I have not written about Clover much, so let the blank potentiality of these next pages be given over to her song . . .

Clover first entered Our County's educational system in the ninth grade, a transfer student from Barbados. She has slender, golden, almond shaped eyes and chocolate skin. She drives all the boys crazy. The black ones hover around her constantly, her type of natural sophistication a foreign intrigue to the young men of Our County. The white boys are more careful but nonetheless persistent. They apparently decided, en masse, as teenage boys do, by some mystical exchange of brainwaves, that it was OK to be friends with Clover because her hair was straight, and she didn't sound like a "nigger." Clover treated them all with equal politeness and refused to put out.

Clover had been surprised to hear the popular slogan, "Black is Beautiful," when she arrived in the United States. "What does color have to do with it?" she started in one afternoon when she and the Firefly and I were gathered on my front porch. "The inside is what makes beauty. It's not race or country or religion. Beauty is an open-ness; an acceptance of individuals and of nature. Dogma and bureaucracy," she continued, having gotten on a roll, "destroy beauty because they leave no room for creative thinking and sensitivity."

"You're absolutely right," The Firefly had chimed as only she can. "Absolutism sucks."

Barbados is a lovely little bit of green island in the West Indies north of Venezuela and south of Key West. It is a mystical place where fish become mermaids and multicolored clowns beneath a mirror of blue water. Clover

says that if you look long enough into the clearness of the Caribbean, you can find your soul down there. Calm and unruffled as it hovers over sprigs of coral and whispers secrets to the sea grasses that grow there.

Clover is a water-child who grew up in uncluttered island surroundings, and was guided and guarded by parents who were only mildly abnormal. They loved her and she loved them, and also they all liked each other. Clover became an intellectual, a philosopher in the Oriental sense as she roamed the shaggy white sea caves and dived deeply into the blue waters. Like Shelly, however, Clover is acutely conscious of the cruelty in her heritage.

Her mother was French, a white skinned, emerald-eyed piece of gorgeous who had told them all to cram it when she eloped with Clover's father, a West Indian black man whose mind and body she could not live without. Daniel St. George was no ordinary mortal, as Clover was quick to explain. Barbados, in the old days, was a notorious and wealthy island. It's dubious fame was built upon the well-oiled profits of the slave trade. One Sam Lord, a dashing and unscrupulous man, accumulated wads of money this way: He would hang lanterns in palm trees which fringed the beach below his castle, a cheery signal of safe harbor to the slave traders whose ships sailed into his cove with their black human cargo, and often, pirated treasure. But Sam's harbor was ringed by deadly coral reefs which made short work of the ships who blundered through, and wrecked vessels were easy prey to Lord's slaves. They had been specially trained to swim through the coral reefs, board the ships, butcher the crew and steal the cargo. Tra la. What a tribute to human ingenuity and depravity. Of course, the poor slaves who swam the gauntlet had no choice in the matter whatsoever, though the irony of their situation must have been as painful as the frequent lashings they bore.

Daniel St. George's grandfather chose to remain on his adopted island long after the remains of his black countrymen had been beaten to bones, dissolved in oil and washed out, variously mutilated, into the peaceful blue sea.

Our Clover remembered all these things at least twice a day during the tourist season when she served as tour guide for raucous Yankees, Germans, and Canadians who unflappingly visited Barbados' most important historical landmark; the white, sphinx-like Castle of Sam Lord. Oh, yes, Clover learned the facts of her life and heritage. And yet somehow our sea-child learned not to hate, learned not to reject, but instead to love and grow wise. Perhaps, like the ancient Mariner, the very telling of her history, over and again to the snowy tourists who flocked to her island, purged her of hatred, made it all seem bearable, made her learn to be at one with the other, different kinds of humans who share this planet. I don't know.

It was inevitable that when Mr. and Mrs. St George moved to O.C.H.S. that

she and the Firefly would meet as they did and would talk and dream and know and cherish each other. •