

Frog

Emma Doolan

‘But why did you do it? Did he say something? Did he touch you?’ Your knuckles are white on the steering wheel, and Shelley is slouched in the backseat like you’re her damned chauffeur. She doesn’t even look at you – just pulls her headphones from her bag and puts them on, stares out the window.

Unbelievable. You flick the indicator savagely and take the turning lane towards the main road. The afternoon traffic is sluggish, the road potholed from the recent storms. At the lights, you pull to a gentle, deliberate stop and breathe, yoga-style, through your nose. In. Out. In. The humiliation of the meeting you’ve just endured clings like humidity to your skin.

It was a different guidance counsellor this time at least – the last was a young man, barely older than the students, and slimy-looking. The new woman was around your age, smile lines creasing the corners of her eyes. She introduced herself as Debbie and shook your hand. You were painfully aware of the clamminess of your palms, your limp, trembling fingers, but she held on and squeezed firmly, not quite reassuringly but as if to say, ‘Brace yourself.’

In the traffic ahead, there’s a ute with its indicator on, hoping to push into the turning lane when the lights change. Typical. You inch your bumper closer to the car in front. A few drops of rain shatter against the windscreen. Half the sky is heavy with cloud, a divider line drawn in the heavens – your side, my side.

‘It’s quite serious this time,’ Deputy Principal Heaslip had said, in the meeting room at school. ‘There are grounds for exclusion.’

‘Exclusion?’ You’d been distracted by her wrinkled apple of a face, which reminded you uncomfortably of your eighth-grade home-ec teacher, the one who liked to run her finger around the rim of your mixing bowl to taste the batter. But the word – heavy, sombre, *exclusion* – yanked you back to reality. ‘Surely that’s extreme. Don’t we need to understand what happened first?’ When you’d pulled up outside the school, you’d seen the ambulance leaving. It seemed impossible that your own daughter, sweet gap-toothed Shelley, was responsible.

Your gaze drifts to the rearview mirror. Shelley’s still got her face turned resolutely to the window, and you can hear the beat of music escaping from her headphones. She’s in her own world, unreachable. Later in the week, maybe tomorrow, you’ll have to meet the boy’s parents. A weight settles in your stomach.

The lights change. A car in front lets the ute slide in, and you make the turn towards home. More rain is on the way. In the opposite lane, the cars driving towards the storm have their headlights on, so you turn yours on too, even though the sky you're driving towards is blue. Only your rearview mirror reflects the heavy-hanging clouds. And in the backseat, your daughter's profile, jaw set.

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At home, there's a dead frog on the kitchen floor. No – nearly dead. It twitches feebly as you approach. Shelley appears not to notice, stalking right past, and you hear her bedroom door slam shut. So much for sending her to her room. Should you confiscate her phone? Her computer? Ground her for life? Your limbs feel heavy, waterlogged, and you dump your handbag on the bench.

The frog is not a usual one – at least, not the bright green tree frog you picture when someone says 'frog.' This one is darker, a muddy green-brown with a black-striped back and mottled legs; you wonder if it's some kind of toad, actually, and that makes your stomach turn. You hate toads. Hate them.

You look around the kitchen. How do you get a frog out? A spider you'd trap beneath a Tupperware container, then carefully slip a magazine underneath, release it into the garden. A cockroach, of course, you'd just spray and flee while it went through its unpredictable death throes. The geckos you've long given up on, even though their translucent, hairless bodies give you the creeps and you hate finding their little poos scattered everywhere. There's no keeping them out, especially not with the recent rain sending vines twining round the verandah rails and branches dense with new growth thrusting beneath the eaves.

For long months there was only drought, the lush fields crisping brown as if they'd been seared under a grill. Even the skins on the limes growing in the back yard had burnt. But now, with the sudden deluge of the past weeks, everything has come back to life. The rose bushes have burst into thick foliage and tightly furled buds. The grass is going wild, weeds springing up everywhere. It's too much, this sudden abundance. Overwhelming to the eye after the months of dry, bleak heat. But you can't stop looking, storing up your memory so that if – when – it goes away again, you can remember that it's like this, and that it will be like this again. That it only takes a little rain for it all to come back.

You get the broom from the hall cupboard. There's no sound from Shelley's room. What's she doing in there? Why did she have those scissors today, in the school toilets? How are you meant to talk to a moody, resentful teen who, after all, would rather be with her dad?

You try ringing David but he's not picking up, of course. He'll be at work. You can picture him with his afternoon stubble, tie askew; you can just *see* his mobile ringing on the desk and him looking down, reading your name, and quietly slipping the phone in the drawer.

With the broom, you gently tap the ground near the frog. Maybe you can startle it into hopping away, herd it to the open back door. But the frog just sort of squirms, gives a half-hearted flop. You crouch to inspect it, wary of putting your face too close. There's no sign of injury.

Shelley's door opens, so suddenly you nearly lose your balance. You steady yourself with your fingertips against the ground, careful not to touch the frog. She stalks past, eyes dead ahead as if you're not even there, and goes to the fridge. The bottles in the door clink.

'Would you look at this?' you try, waving at the frog. 'How did it get in here?'

Shelley, pouring juice into a glass, looks over. Her nose wrinkles. 'Gross.'

'I'll put him outside, then we'll get started on dinner, huh? Lasagne?' The note of false cheer makes you wince, but maybe if you can get Shelley to loosen up she'll tell you what's going on.

'I hate lasagne,' Shelley says. Which is completely untrue. Then she marches across the kitchen and the bedroom door shuts. It's just you and the frog again.

You sit back on your haunches. One black eye sizes you up. The eyelid flickers, creepily, bottom to top, but otherwise the frog doesn't move. What's wrong with it? After all this rain it should be bursting with energy, with joy. In the evenings now you can hardly think for the noise of frogs singing in the garden, a medley of mismatched croaks. You have a vague idea that in hot, dry months frogs go underground, bury themselves in leaf matter and loose soil, and hibernate. Then, in the wet, they come back to life, as if emerging from a fairytale spell. Probably this isn't correct – it's just one kind of desert frog that does this or something. But then, what do the rest do when the air is so hot you can barely breathe, when the earth is baked dry and there's no rain in sight? Just endure? Endure or die?

The frog twitches, as if it wants to jump. Or maybe it's in its death throes – it's been so long without rain that it's just too late for it to recover. The legs look withered, almost dried up, but the frog's sides are pumping frantically, in pain or fear. You feel sorry for it, but it's horrifying all the same, like hair caught in a drain. You don't want to touch it, don't want it to

touch you. You remember that the oils – or is it the acids? – in human skin can harm frogs. You have to wet your hands before you touch them.

The washing-up gloves are hanging on the towel rack by the kitchen sink. You put them on, rummage in the cupboard for the dustpan and brush, take a deep breath and turn back towards the frog. You can do this. No one is going to do it for you. Tears spring to your eyes, and you shake your head. Yes, it would be nice if there was someone else to deal with it, but there's not. Shelley isn't going to help, is she? And David... Six months in and you're already so tired of having to do everything. No one to rely on. No one to back you up. No one to hold your hand while the deputy principal berates you for raising your daughter so badly that she stabs some footy jock in the thigh with a pair of scissors when he – what? – in the corridor outside the girl's toilets.

You don't want to sweep this dying frog into a dustpan – it seems so disrespectful, really wrong, to do it this way. But it can't just stay here, gasping on the kitchen floor. So you crouch, nudge the frog with the back of the brush – the bristles would hurt, surely – towards the waiting dustpan. The frog scrambles a little, but it scrambles towards the pan so that's good. You prod a bit more. There's a sickening, rubbery feeling to it, like it's stuck to the floor, and your stomach turns again. You're going to throw up, or cry, or both. Then the frog is over the lip of the pan and it's just one last nudge. You hurry to the door, the dustpan held at arm's length because what if the thing jumps now? What if it – Christ – leaps towards your face?

At the edge of the lawn there's a clump of overgrown agapanthus, the purple blooms going wild in the sudden wet. You bend down and tip the pan towards the grass at their base. The frog tumbles out, springing at the last minute, a sickly, uncoordinated jump but at least it lands right-way up. It sits on the grass, as if disoriented. You can hear other frogs croaking all around. You wait, and after a minute the frog hops, then hops again, and then it disappears beneath the leaves. You let out a sigh. It's back where it belongs, at least. Whether it makes it now isn't up to you.

Inside, you strip off the gloves and put the dustpan and brush away. From down the hall comes the pulse of music. At least Shelley's still there, hasn't crept out the window or slit her wrists. You stifle a semi-hysterical laugh. You should go in. Tell her to turn off the music. Tell her she's grounded. Ask again what the boy did. Deputy Principal Heaslip said the police would be involved. This was a serious assault. The boy's parents might press charges. Probably would. How would Shelley explain herself?

There's a bottle of shiraz open on the bench and you pour yourself a glass. It's too early, but so what. Outside the rain starts, just a drizzle, and the chorus of frogs picks up the volume. You wonder if the striped frog is singing, too. It's possible.

Your phone, on the bench, has the flashing light that means you've missed a call. You check. Not David. You dial the message bank, put the phone on speaker.

A female voice, faintly familiar.

'Ms Reynolds. It's Debbie Slater. Shelley's guidance counsellor. I wondered if we could make an appointment to speak again next week? About Shelley's behaviour and how we might manage it. I know she's been through a hard time lately; you both have. There are some strategies we can put in place to help her through. Give me a ring back and we'll work it out.'

You stand at the sink and watch the rain drip off the eaves, drip off the long spear-shaped leaves of the agapanthus. What a difference a week of rain makes. You sip the wine, roll it around in your mouth like you learned at the tasting course you and David took, aeons ago. You swallow, and there's something like relief when it eases down. Outside, the frogs are still croaking. The rain is still falling. The drought has broken, like you hoped it would.

From Shelley's room, the music stops. The silence is a new sound of its own. In a minute, you'll go in. You'll sit beside her on the bed. You'll pick up the ratty stuffed bear, and lightly touch his loose eye, think about repairing it.

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You wake disoriented, couch cushions lumped beneath your back. It's dark in the living room, but the curtains are edged with light. You've fallen asleep, failed to make it to bed, failed to make dinner, failed to talk with Shelley. Failed. You struggle up, plunge your fingers through your hair. Coffee. Breakfast. School run.

In the kitchen, you splash water on your face, then, turning off the faucet, go still. Somehow, you can tell from the very air in the house that Shelley isn't here. She's not inside. Your heart seems to stutter, an engine about to give out. But then you catch movement beyond the kitchen window. The rain has eased overnight, and in the weak morning light the trees drip onto the shining grass. Shelley crouches at the garden's edge, intent. Relief flushes through you. You slide the window open, and she turns towards the sound.

'What are you doing?'

'The frog,' she says. 'The one from yesterday. I can see it. It's this one, right?'

You come round to the door, cross the wet grass. Mud thrusts itself between your toes, slides coldly beneath your soles. By the agapanthus, you crouch beside your daughter, steadying yourself with a hand on her back. You can't see, in all that lush greenery, the black-striped back, the mottled legs, even when Shelley points, when she insists the frog's right there.

'See?' she says. 'See?'

Still, you can't. But you can hear it – a rhythmic croaking, steady as the rainwater dripping from the eaves.

Emma Doolan's work has appeared in *Island*, *Overland* and *Geek Mook*, among other places, and been shortlisted for Hachette's Richell Prize and the Text Prize for Young Adult and Children's Writing. Emma researches Gothic literature and teaches creative writing at Southern Cross University.