**The Shattering**

Kelli Short Borges

The boy is yanked from a fog of sleep, heart quickening as he hears a voice, low and deep, the dream of catching tree frogs under rocks slick with moss fading. He turns toward his bedroom door, listening, the patter of the northwest rain a backdrop to the rhythm of his heart.

*A man.*

He and Mama live alone, they have since he was just two. He had a daddy once, he knows that, though he doesn’t remember. Some of them just don’t stay, like the frogs with their babies, which are left alone to survive the herons and water moccasins that would swallow them whole if they found them hiding. Some daddies are like snakes, Mama says. They might come back to find you later, so it’s better that his daddy is gone, anyway. Mama frogs leave their babies too, but his Mama hasn’t left, so he knows he’s lucky to be a boy, not a frog.

They’re in a new house again. They only leave when they need things like milk or Spaghetti-o’s, his favorite dinner. He's still getting used to the thick woods surrounding the little cabin. Douglas firs line the Willamette just behind it, its muddy banks home to the baby frogs he loves to catch and keep in the aquarium on his desk. He feeds them ants and earthworms and flies, gives them fresh water from the river every day. He keeps them *captive*. It’s a word Ms. Peterson taught his kindergarten class last year when he was still going to school, and even though she said it’s bad to keep something wild behind glass he thinks that maybe it’s okay if that something would be eaten otherwise. That being captive is better than dead.

The voice again, closer. His mother’s higher one, pleading, her pitch drowned out by an uptick in the rain. A flick of light, shining beneath his door.

The boy covers his mouth with his hand so he doesn’t cry. He tiptoes barefoot across worn oak planks, careful to step over the one that needs fixing. He slips into the closet hiding place where he and Mama practiced being still as baby frogs. His pale stomach contracts and expands as he pulls his knees to his chest, makes himself small, smaller, smallest. He reminds himself that he’s brave. He knows this because Mama says so, says they are brave *together*—but they aren’t together now, and he’s swallowed by the murk of the closet, black except for narrow slats in the door where the moon peeks through, allowing a glimpse of the frogs on the desk.

The light from the hallway shifts. Widens. A *thud* as the door to his room slams open, and he can see Mama, the man’s ropey arm coiled around her neck, squeezing so tight that her face is all wrong. It doesn’t look like Mama at all, her mouth twisted, skin purpling. The boy bites his tongue hard, tastes something like pennies smell. He doesn’t cry out. He knows the plan. Mama warned so many times, not to cry—no matter what happens. *No matter what.*

“Where is he? Where’s my son?” the man’s eyes narrow, search the room, and the boy sees he has the same eyes as the man, ‘blues-y green,’ Mama says, and he wonders how eyes that look like the cool pond in the meadow can be so ugly.

Mama opens her mouth, but the man who must be his daddy is squeezing so hard she can’t make a sound. Her eyes are closing but she isn’t sleeping, the boy knows that, and he promised Mama, he did, but the daddy man is hurting her and he’s bad and the boy is good, he *must* be a little bit good because he’s half of Mama too, and the boy hears a scream and it’s coming from his own mouth and he’s out of the closet and running to Mama —he’s wearing his race car pajamas so he knows he can go fast, he *has* to go fast—and the daddy man lets go and Mama falls to the floor, a funny sound coming from her mouth like when he was little and trying to whistle.

The daddy is big and scary but the boy is all she has, she *needs* him, and he’s almost there, almost to Mama, and he reaches for her but now he’s up, his feet lifted off the floor and the daddy is hugging him so tight and it doesn’t feel like a happy hug it’s a hurting hug, it hurts so bad, and Mama is standing, somehow she’s up and standing, and her arms wrap around the boy and she’s pulling him to her but the daddy pulls harder and the boy cries out and they crash back, back, back onto the desk.

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The boy opens his eyes. They feel heavy. He’s lying on his tummy on the floor, his cheek pressed sideways, something sharp beneath it. Glass. It stings a little, and his pajamas are all wet, like when he’s standing in the summer rain with Mama, face tilted toward the sky, pretending to be something free.

The man is lying near him, his head bleeding like in a movie the boy saw once before Mama made him turn it off. His eyes are open, but they aren’t moving, they don’t blink. Blues-y green, the same as his own. They just stare, empty, at the glow of stars on the ceiling—the Milky Way he and Mama glued on so he could imagine they were camping again, looking for the Big Dipper.

*Mama.* He turns his head, sees her lying on the other side of him, her own eyes shining and wet. She pulls him to her, curls around him. He feels her heartbeat, warm and safe.

All around them, baby frogs leap, scatter like stars.