

## Chapter Eight: The Vegan Witch's Toad

By Sherrie Theriault

### CAPTIVATED

"Where do you want to go?" I ask avoiding her question since there is a tiny dark place in my head screaming that if I were a real toad, a normal toad, I would have succumbed to the witches at the Dodge and would never have been lured into a moldering swamp by that old gargoyle and therefore would have never caught the fancy of this fresh-faced young witch.

"I don't care," Shrigley murmurs, and resumes stroking my back.

"Then why go anywhere?" I prod. "Why not stay home, stay here, stay still, whatever?"

"Why didn't you stay under the Dodge?" she asks with one eyebrow raised.

"I didn't feel like I was here to be someone's lucky charm," I answer.

"I don't feel like I am supposed to be a do nothing daughter," Shrigley retorts.

"Touché," I say. A breeze is coming in off the water and I look up to see a series of rocks, some wrapped in ribbon, some in twine, hanging from an overhead spar. They sway and I feel odd, a little giddy. Shrigley's gaze follows mine.

"Yes, it is an up-ended sensation isn't it?" she comments.

"Who? Why? What?" I stammer.

"Oh," she laughs, "Grandmother, of course. She says it's to show how the world is full of possibilities, but I think it is partially to justify her taking up residence here."

"Swinging stones, novel, I have to give her that, quite novel," I say, rearing back to gain a better look.

"Yes, I think they're lovely," she says. "She has a way with things. I sure wish I did."

"I thought your hut was really nice," I tell her.

"Not magical, though, not like this; walking into my hut doesn't make you tingle with delight," she frowns.

# Writing Raw

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"I can't say that. I was covered in bloody puss filled boils and I still thought it nice. I think that is high praise indeed," I say, bobbing at her. I can see a flush rise to her cheeks.

"Do you think I should go into the toad repair business?" she asks with a grin.

"Well, if you want to do that you're going to have to move because you cured the only toad left...but that does give you a hundred percent success rate," I say, looking deeply into her eyes. They're nice—a flecky gold. They suit her.

"Hmm, good point," she says. "Plus that's not what I want to do anyway."

"So what do you want to do?" I ask, hopeful.

"I don't know," she says putting her face in her hands. "I wish I knew. I wish I had any idea."

"At least we know something you don't want," I say, trying for enthusiasm, "Maybe we should keep a list." Shrigley wriggles my skin in a playful move and stands up.

"Do you want to go for a swim?" she asks.

"Not a frog," I reply.

"But you fell asleep in your water dish," she protests.

"That's little water. Toads don't do big water."

"Oh," she says. "My mistake."

"Not to worry," I say, wondering if she will go without me as I watch her shed her dress to reveal her swimsuit.

"Okay, jump in," she says, holding a bowl out to me.

"You're imprisoning me til you return?"

"Nope taking you with me," her retort.

In no mood to hesitate, I jump without looking and land on a wet sponge sitting in a pool of water in this nice big bowl.

"Well done," she says.

I just love a witch who is easy to please: kill a centipede, eat a housefly, jump in a bowl.... Shrigley is a low expectations kind of witchlet if there ever was one.

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She carries me with her across the patio/piazza or is that piazza? I'm not sure how tropical to go with my vocabulary, though I'm pretty sure we're south of Miami. She's climbing down stairs cut into the stone wall, and I am feeling very much like an offering to the sun gods. But as quick as that she's in the water, and I am floating in my bowl, and Shrigley, her face wet, is smiling down at me.

How funny life is! I always thought intelligence could overcome fate and here I am a toad captivated by a witch; helpless in her aura and I have to wonder am I a fool or a genius?

"Why don't you simply stay here? I know you don't want to be a do-nothing, but couldn't you do something here? I mean the queen is here and Stanley. Couldn't you just help her do whatever it is that she is doing?" I ask as she steers my bowl with her through the water and toward a waterfall.

"I have to find my purpose," says Shrigley. "Mine and no one else's."

"Isn't being young and beautiful enough for now? Can't you find your purpose when you're old and have frittered most of your life away?" I bait.

"Why in heavens would I do that, Jeff? Why wouldn't I want to embark on my journey while I am young and strong and can make good headway? Do you want to stay here? Do you not want to go with me? Is that what you're trying to tell me?" she asks.

"Shrigley my dear, you don't even know what you want to do. How could I reject what hasn't been offered? This might sound crazy, but I feel like I am being blackmailed for something I haven't done yet, but it is hoped I will do—something for which I'll be richly rewarded. Sooo, I am simultaneously repelled and attracted by the whole prospect of going with you, of being with you at all, for that matter. I'm not saying that I won't complain, but what I am saying is that wherever it is that you are going I'm pretty sure I am going with you. You took me in when I had no one and eased my pain. I still have no one, but what I am is pain-free and, since I have no one I am also free of obligations—other than the obligation I feel to you. I would like to help ease your pain my dear, dear Watson and if you're still willing to give me that chance that is what I intend to do," I say, raising myself up to my full height for as much

drama and effect as I can get.

I am content to be here with Shrigley, but feel incompetent to design an adventure or some witch-girl conquest. The Queen said Shrigley had found her familiar and it was clear she was referring to me. I know what a witch's familiar is. It's like the cats the witches near the Dodge kept, creatures who are like them.

But I, I don't feel like Shrigley. She is kind and I am cranky. I am disgruntled and she is sweet, patient even. Possibly being a familiar could mean being a counterpoint, a syncopation, maybe, that would make more of a fit to this puzzle. She is the yin and I the yang or she is the yang and I the yin. Who knows? But why would she need to travel with the voice of dissent? My inventory is clear to me. I lack the true cool reptilian rudeness to be a villain but also I lack Shrigley's sincerity and warmth. It is tough, this border life of an amphibian—neither fish nor fowl. I am more, and less than I seem to myself and I cannot imagine what she sees in me. No! Wait! Ambivalence! That's what this girl witch sees in me. I can't go and I can't stay and neither can she!

"It doesn't matter where we go. Let's flip a coin. It doesn't matter, really. Everything is a mixture. Let's just make a start," I tell Shrigley, seeing clearly for the very first time that relativism is freedom. Actually I have no idea what relativism is, but the statement rings true in my head and isn't that what actually matters? I think this is an example of rationalization, but she's a witch. If I'm wrong won't she just magic us out of trouble? What if she needs to kill me to make that happen? Maybe it does matter what we do!

"Well," says Shrigley, and I interrupt her.

"No! I'm wrong! I'm wrong! It does matter! Let's just stay here!" I shriek at the top of my lungs, the strain of which forces my vocal sac to protrude and I sing for a second or two.

"Jeff, what in the world?" asks Shrigley. "You seem awfully upset over what is mostly the truth and a good idea, I'm sure."

"Now, now, just because I got caught in a moment of antediluvian optimism doesn't mean you should go off halfcocked, taking action I might not be prepared to die for," I say in a

pant, envisioning myself floating low in some potion bottle or other.

“Why are you so death fixated?” she quizzes. “I’m not looking to go off and tame tigers or anything.”

“Tigers, I’m not so worried about,” I answer, stopping just short of saying the truth she doesn’t need repeated, which is: I am more afraid of her—though she has never done a thing but help me—than I am of a wild animal with big teeth and razor sharp claws. As I think on this it does seem a bit unreasonable of me, but there it is. I am an unreasonable amphibian, the unfeigned shame is that I believe I am also at my prime. All downhill from here I’m afraid.

Desperate to change the subject I ask, “What did you want to be when you were little? There must be some childhood reverie, some aspiration we could fulfill for you now and call it a quest and then...move on to a quiet happy life in the swamp with your trusted toad?”

Shrigley frowns at me and gives a pull to the edge of the bowl, sending me spinning.

“I’m going to blow papaya chunks if you don’t stop this bowl from spinning,” I scream. The world blurs past me at the speed of nausea.

“Sorry. I didn’t realize you have motion sensitivities,” she says and slows the bowl then stops it.

“Okay,” I say, persisting in my attempt to be helpful to Shrigley’s need to find a quest while manipulating a way for us to have a safe, happy, peaceful life near the swamp. “The Queen obviously has gone through this process. If we can’t simply tag along with her why can’t we at least mimic her?”

“My grandmother may seem like a queen to you, Jeff, but I must warn you, she has the smile of a pirate and will use it to get you to do anything she wishes,” says Shrigley.

“Sounds like every witch I have ever known,” I tell her.

“Oh, no, I don’t mean it in that way. Grandmother won’t hurt you or harm you. She will merely raise one eyebrow and flash her smile and you will turn yourself inside out just in the hope that you might please her,” splutters Shrigley.

“Oh, I see,” I say nodding my head toward her.

“What? What do you see?” she asks.

“I see where you get it from,” I murmur.

“Oh,” she says and blushes to the top of her head and drags my bowl closer to her. “Are you sorry that you came with me?”

“No, not if you are glad I’m here.”

“I am glad,” she says and pets me in my bowl. “I couldn’t do this without you.”

“Well we had better figure out what THIS is that we are doing, because you’re right. I don’t want to risk disappointing her and I refuse to live a life where I’m disappointing you. Plus which I’m hungry, and if we make a plan we can go in and tell her and she will feed us,” I say, leaning into her fingertip as she rubs my side.

“She’ll feed us no matter what,” Shrigley says.

“Yes, but I am pretty sure you won’t take us in until you have a plan,” I respond.

“Wow, you have my number!” she says.

“I’m not your Familiar for nothing,” I crow and arch my back, wiggling, trying to work her fingertip into my skin. “Now, let me see if I understand what we are looking for. We are searching for the linchpin that holds all the trouble in the world so you can pull it and set the world free from misery.”

“When you put it like that you make it sound crazy,” says Shrigley, pulling her hand from my bowl, standing up and climbing out of the water, lifting me and my private pond along with her.

“So, tell me the way to say it so that is sounds sane, plausible,” I say.

“Oh, well, I like the linchpin idea, it sounds impossible, but wouldn’t it be great to make everything better,” she says water streaming from her as she ascends the stairs.

“Is the Queen making the world all better?” I ask.

“Well, no, just her little corner of it,”

“Okay then, I say we go for that. Which little corner do you want to start in?” I ask, swaying in the slosh of my bowl.

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about that. You know what my problem is: I think too big, too small,”

“And what do you mean by that?” I ask.

“Oh, just that there is so much to do and I feel so inadequate to do much of any of it,” Shrigley answers.

“I’m here to tell you that anyone can unravel a sweater if they know the right thread to pull,” I say with a confident blink of my eyes and bob of my head.

“Can anyone knit a sweater?” she asks.

“No, it takes a knitter to knit, I’m pretty sure,” I answer.

“Does it take a knitter to keep a sweater from unraveling?” she continues.

“I’m not much for fiber craft. Maybe you would have done better with a bird,” I say, lowering my head.

“No, no, I would never be better with anyone but you, Jeff. I’m not looking to knit or anything like it. I feel like the world is coming apart, and I should somehow be smart enough to keep that from happening; to keep the whole thing from unraveling,” Shrigley says in little more than a whisper.

“Oh, well if that’s all you want to do, no problem. Why didn’t you say so? We could have that done by lunch if not sooner!” I almost shout in frustration—the last word coming out in song, the frustrated excitement filling my vocal sac.

“If I can’t save the world what is the point of doing anything?” she asks.

“I know it must seem like changing chairs on a sinking ship, but how do you unsink a ship? I’m not sure it can be done. My grandmother Cedric used to say that life is hardest on the young, because they think that anything is possible. Being the precocious toad that I am I asked her if anything was possible and she said yes, anything is possible but it’s not very likely, and that’s what the young haven’t learned to live with yet.”

“I don’t want to learn to live with it,” says Shrigley. “I want to do something. I want to do something that actually makes things better, not just makes me feel better or look better to

others.”

“Oh, I see. You want to turn the tides,” I say. She looks at me and nods. “Well then you had better talk to the moon.”

Shrigley sighs, but I see water seeping from the corners of her eyes.

“Oh, Shrigley, it will be okay,” I say, not believing a syllable.

“I feel so foolish for not knowing what to do,” she says, wiping her tears with the back of her free hand. “I mean I can do whatever I want. No one is making me do a thing and I am at a total loss.”

“No one else is making demands on you, but you are measuring yourself against an impossibly high standard. Maybe if we could put an upper limit, a cap, on this thing we might make some progress. You know, take the ball from the air and make this a ground game,” I blither at Shrigley. Why is it that a crying witch turns me into a metaphor-making, sports-analogy crafting, idiot? Also, I want to know why sometimes it works. Shrigley takes a deep breath and straightens her shoulders. Now she is looking at me.

“Okay, where should we start?” she asks.

Here we go! This is my area of expertise, guidance counselor for witchlets. This will be perfect.

“What is the coolest thing you can think of that someone did?” I ask.

“Hmm, I’m not sure. Well, I heard a beautiful story of some guy planting a whole forest over his lifetime. That was pretty cool. Do you think we could do that?” Shrigley asks.

“Don’t know—anything is possible. Is there something you always thought should be done, but isn’t being done yet?” I continue, not knowing what I’m doing but feeling fairly confident that she’s not aware of that... yet. She is pondering my question and tilting her head back and forth in the sweetest thinking dance.

“I think degradable paper should be made from fallen leaves,” she says. “You know, like paper towels and disposable table cloths.”

“And confetti,” I add. Shrigley grins at me.



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“Yes, and confetti,” she says, taking a cloth from a slender set of shelves, putting my bowl on the table and twirling herself into the fabric and tucking it in so she appears to have put on a dress. “Let’s go eat.”

To be continued...

**Sherrie Theriault bio:** I do not believe that I became an autodidact because I was raised by wolves, but surely it was a contributing factor. The years I spent in the waters of the Outer Banks, afforded me a mainline infusion of chaos and tranquility. The simultaneous discovery of my ability to write and the secret meaning of my desire brings fire to pages I hadn’t expected to burn down. I write villain free fiction for children. I embrace contradiction and try to illuminate the dark without losing the shadows. I work daily to give voice to diversity, for isn’t that the gift beyond measure? Please visit my site to the books I’ve written and the artwork I produce: [www.SerendipitousGallery.com](http://www.SerendipitousGallery.com). Here is the link to the books Amazon page: [http://www.amazon.com/Vegan-Witches-Toad-Sherrie-Theriault/dp/1496190890/ref=sr\\_1\\_8?ie=UTF8&qid=1423835627&sr=8-8&keywords=Sherrie+Theriault](http://www.amazon.com/Vegan-Witches-Toad-Sherrie-Theriault/dp/1496190890/ref=sr_1_8?ie=UTF8&qid=1423835627&sr=8-8&keywords=Sherrie+Theriault)