

Chapter Eleven: Mealtime Again

By Sherrie Theriault

“I think I can sneak you all in for an early breakfast,” Cedric announces.

“Is there anything for a growing toad to eat?” I ask.

“Do you actually want to eat, or do you want to hunt?” asks Imogene.

“One following the other is my guess,” says Humphrey, “You know toads. They never hunt for sport.”

“True as that may be, I have nothing for him to hunt. I shooed all the flies out of the building yesterday. I think you’re going to have to make do with gruel,” Cedric rattles on as he leads our motley group to the dining room.

“I think the toad turned pale on that one,” says Glory Ann who is twirling as she walks.

“I’m sure we’ll find you something,” encourages Shrigley as she follows the rest.

The pale light at the windows seems to hesitate before entering the room. I know just how it feels. Thoughts of gelatinous glops of cooked wallpaper paste fill my heart with dread. This cannot have become my life. I will be honest: when thinking of the perils of questing I imagined having to catch my breakfast on the wing—or is that by the wing? I never feared being mired hip deep in porridge.

We settle at a table, waiting as Cedric rolls out a teacart that appears to be prehistoric and is stacked with bowls and a steaming caldron.

“Who is hungry?” he asks, holding the ladle aloft.

“Cut the pageantry, Ced, we have a starving toad in our midst,” instructs Mr. Jennings.

“No rush,” I chirp from Shrigley’s shoulder, “no rush at all.”

“He thinks you’re trying to poison him,” says Shrigley in her best undercover confidential voice.

“Why in the world would he think that?” asks Glory Ann in genuine shock.

“Oh, it’s a long story of broken-down cars, ruthless witches and a whole family of

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charming toads lost,” breezes Shrigley. “Could I have some of that? I think if I eat, Jeff will eat.”

“Yes, young lady, you can have as much as you want,” says the caretaker, filling a bowl and handing it across the table to her. Without hesitation she dips her spoon, blows on the contents and fills her mouth. A look of surprise crosses her face and then she removes it.

“What is that?” I ask, standing inches from her profile, scrutinizing Shrigley.

“Vanquished expectations is all,” she says. “Are you ready for a taste?”

“I don’t know,” I mutter and squirm around in my toad throne. That was a crazy look she had on her face, but she hasn’t fallen down or turned puce and I am starving. I’ve been checking and there is nothing creeping, crawling or flying about in this sanitized sepulcher. Well, that is unfair. There is plenty alive here, but nothing I can fit into my mouth—so it's eat gruel or die.

I open my mouth to the spoon she is holding up to me. Instantly I am filled with warm hope and feelings of good will. I swallow deeply. “May I have a bowl of my own?” I ask Cedric.

Cedric serves me a bowl and I leap down from Shrigley’s shoulder on to the tabletop and leap into the bowl, feel the scalding porridge and jump back out.

“Wasn’t that a fancy dance!” comments Glory Ann, as Mr. Jennings scoops me into his glass of water to cool. “Impetuous toad,” coos Imogene.

“Would you blow on that for me?” I grumble to Shrigley. She tries but can’t make much progress due to her uncontrollable laughing.

“All right, all right,” I say, “so it was better than I expected. It’s not that funny.”

Now that breakfast is over and everyone has stopped marveling at how I scarfed down two bowls of gruel, it is time for us to be heading out. At the mirror, Glory Ann hands Shrigley a handled bag whose end is drawn down and tied with a bow.

“This bag can be full but appear empty. Use it wisely,” says Glory Ann.

To be continued...

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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 simultane