

Ryobi the Toad

About a month before Hurricane Jill I nicked a toad with my weed whacker. Sad part is I know to look out for them. And they know to look for me. I was daydreaming. They're easy to avoid if you watch for them and I do. I do. They know you're coming and hop away in plenty of time. And she did, I saw her but didn't. I was on auto pilot. Daydreaming.

It was around five. She was sitting under a large rock's overhang. I daydreamed about the daydreaming frontrunner. That subject men think about every six seconds? I wasn't concentrating for that sixth.

I was swinging the cutter head pretty good and grazed her. I dropped the tool, knelt, and saw how bad. Her side was lacerated. She was on the plump side, brown, with darker brown spots. Red marks scored her side and one uglyed the top of her head, just missing an eye. She hyperventilated and her mouth uncommonly opened.

She'd die if untreated. She didn't bleed, it was more a seep. I had to do something, so I slipped off my mud gloves and slid my hand under her. She squirmed so I put my other hand on top of her and carried her in the house.

Clean the wound. First thought. I went in the kitchen and ran warm water over her side. My wife came in.

"What're you doing, Richard?"

I showed her the toad. "I hit it with the weed whacker."

"Richard!" She ran to the sink. "Do something!"

"What's this look like?"

"Stop the bleeding!"

"I'm trying."

"Richard the water is too much! Too much! Turn it down."

Water tinted red ran down the drain. Maybe Gretch was right. I eased the pressure.

Still her mouth gaped open, her fat body seemed more deflated. Her flesh-colored tongue appeared.

“Toads are good luck, Richard. We can’t let it die!”

“Gretch I’m trying! I’ll take it to a vet, okay?”

“Wait a minute.” Gretch dashed off in the direction of the bathroom. In short order she returned with scissors, gauze, tape, and Neosporin.

“Stick out your fingertip,” she said. I did, and she squeezed a dollop of Neosporin on it. Gretch loves toads but isn’t about to touch them. I rubbed the ointment in. Gretch cut the gauze to size and I set it in place. Next came two lengths of tape which I fit around her girth. Finally a small patch on her head.

“How could you do this?”

“It was under a rock, I didn’t see it in time.”

“Didn’t it hop away? You told me they hop away!” Full disclosure would have been tough.

Walnut Hills Animal Clinic is five minutes from my house, we’d taken Shylock our Sheltie there and we knew they handled emergencies. I put the toad in a bowl, piled in my car, and off I went, promising to text Gretch.

The waiting room is these padded seats semi-circling a reception counter. There were more than several pet owners already there, all with animals on leashes and none seemed distressed. In fact it was crowded. Behind the counter sat an older woman who seemed none to in tune with efficiency.

“I have an emergency,” I said. I tilted the bowl so she could see.

“Is dat your pet?” Her voice was completely ghetto.

“No.” I explained what happened.

“Is a hun’red twenty five dollahs plus what drugs and procedures are provided.” She looked at me. “Yo sure you wants to do dis? Is a toad.”

I find them as road kill all the time and I’m sure I’ve flattened my share. This was different. I got out my credit

card and said, “This *is* an emergency. I’m not going to have to wait, am I?”

“I’ll see if we can move you up.” She went in the back.

A man with a very old Husky overheard. He got up and approached. He was ten years my junior, the Husky stayed on the floor. I suddenly realized I’d seen the guy and the dog out on walks near my house. I live in the woods amidst these old winding roads; not exactly a cookie cutter subdivision so my neighbors are oftentimes on the obscure side. “Buddy,” he said, “I’ve been waiting an hour.” The tone wasn’t immediate confrontational but you knew his impatience and I’m butting in line.

“Look,” I said, “I hurt this thing.”

“It’s a frickin’ toad.” He looked in the bowl. “Wrapped in Johnson & Johnson.”

“It’s an *emergency*.”

The guy looked at me as if my emotional investment was bipolar and I was in a manic stage. “Whatever,” he said, and sat back down.

“I think what you are doing is noble,” said a woman with some little mixed breed on her lap. Definitely part Chihuahua. It sniffed at the air in the direction of the toad.

“They’ll put it down,” said Husky guy. “Of course you could have done that yourself. When I was a kid I knew this sadistic kid who injected a frog with whiskey and put it back in the creek. Frog swam around in circles and just rested on the bottom. We watched it for a while and came back later on. It was dead.”

“That’s terrible!” said the Chihuahua woman to the Husky guy’s crooked grin.

“Just saying. Guy,” he said to me, “That thing looks beyond repair. At least the frog didn’t suffer.”

“It probably drowned,” said another guy as he restrained a badly behaving Shepherd. It, too, must have picked up on the toad’s scent and you could tell by its triangle ears it wanted at it.

“Uh, we didn’t do an autopsy.” The Husky guy campaigned for his point of view. “Did anyone else see the thing?”

The *entire* circle of pet owners shook their heads no. As if a rebuttal was called for I made the rounds and showed everyone. I veered away from the Shepherd but still it reared up.

“Poor thing,” said a very old woman with a white cat.

I returned to the counter, credit card still in hand. The receptionist had returned and said, “Dr. Mendes will see you right away but first I got to get some information. Is da toad male or female?” A pen readied over a clipboard.

“I don’t know.”

“Name?”

I looked at her. “Sir,” she said apologetically, “I’s didn’t make the submission form.”

“I don’t know. Call it...Ryobi.”

“Ryobi?”

“Yeah, my weed whacker is a Ryobi.”

I watched her write it down. Ree-o-be.

“Any allergies, diseases?”

“Put down don’t know and run a continuous arrow.”

The receptionist, a hefty woman, did not argue. On the bottom she wrote ‘wild animal.’ She swiped my card and I signed.

“Whys don’ts you have a seat?”

The old woman with the cat shuffled sideways. I sat next to her and not just the Husky guy shook their heads with little exasperations. “Look, I’m sorry,” I said.

The Husky guy said, “I knew you looked familiar. Don’t you walk a little Collie?”

“It’s a Sheltie,” I said. “I live on Winery.”

“I’m over on Cascade. We get plenty of toads in our yard. In fact the other day I came across a white one.”

“An albino toad?” said another guy, part of a couple. They had a boxer.

“Probably. It wasn’t *chalk* white but it was light.”

“That’s extra good luck,” said the guy’s wife. “Toads are good luck,” she informed everyone.

“My yard is full of them,” said the Husky guy. “Maybe I should round them all up and head to Vegas.”

I think the same thought passed through everyone’s mind: All the toads in the world wouldn’t get him a blackjack.

Through a door leading from the back came in a young veterinarian. Spectacled with extremely early male-patterned baldness, he looked wise beyond his years. “We have a toad?” he asked.

I stood and tilted the bowl.

“Come on back,” he said with a wave.

I followed him into a cramped examination room. He slipped on the gloves and picked up the toad.

“Female,” he said. “And unless I miss my guess, pregnant. See how the abdomen is distended?”

“Uh, yeah.” I wouldn’t know a distended toad abdomen from an anorexic supermodel. And I might be putting a dint in the next Eastern American Toad generation.

“What’s your name?”

“Richard. Rick. Rick Cottell.”

“Rick. It does not appear any organs are damaged but these lacerations are quite deep. I could put her down. I can’t guarantee she’ll survive these wounds. I’d have to sedate her, stitch her. Danger is infection.”

“What are the odds?”

“Poor.”

Had to give him props for honesty. I texted Gretch. At once she replied: *‘Don’t put her down!’*

“Get out the sutures,” I said.

“All right. If you’ll take a seat in the waiting room, this will take a few minutes.”

I returned to the group holding my bowl. There was a newcomer, a fiftyish woman dressed in an ankle length white

skirt and black tank top. Her graying, back length hair featured a tightly twisted braid on each shoulder. She had no pet. She took up the space next to the white cat lady, so I was left to stand.

“Let me guess,” said the Husky guy. “The guy’s operating.”

“Stitching,” I retorted, knowing what came next.

“Did they put the thing under? Novocain at least?”

“He said he’d sedate her.”

“Her?”

I explained the gender. “She’s probably pregnant.”

“What do toads have?” he mused. “Tadpoles? Aren’t they terrestrial?”

“Toads are oviparous. Ovuliparity specifically.” The answer came from the new arrival. “The female lays eggs externally and the male fertilizes them.” Her self-assured, unassuming way left little doubt she knew what she talked about.

“Hey,” said the Husky guy to the receptionist, “How many vets are on duty?”

“Just Dr. Mendes. Dr. Cathcart is due in soon.”

“Great.”

“What is wrong?” said the well-informed woman.

Husky guy answered before I could. “We’re stitching up a toad that my neighbor here mauled with his weed whacker.”

“I didn’t maul it. I accidentally grazed it.”

The woman’s brow worried. “Did you bring it in your house?”

“I did.”

“That is good. They bring wisdom and good luck. *Keeping* them in your house is not. Wild animals stress out when not in the wild. The best thing is to do what you’re doing, bring it home, and release it.”

“What if it needs care?” I said.

“Put a GPS on it so you can change the dressing once a day,” said Husky guy.

The guy with the boxer gave a snort at the humor but shifted. It was the body language of a reserved guy mustering a public proclamation. He said, “I don’t know. Seems like a lot of trouble but I understand the righteousness. I don’t know. Dead toad could feed a lot of God’s creatures. Live toad could be great redemption. Tough call.”

“Indeed,” said the newcomer. “Very well said. The Earth Mother could easily champion both points of view.”

“Earth mother!” said the cat lady. “You are Wiccan?”

“I am.”

The newcomer’s assumed academic credentials popped away and those folksy braids took on new meaning. Plus her contribution about taking a toad into the home. It wasn’t just me who put new stock in the urban legend.

“What’s with your husky?” I asked him.

“Annual checkup. Blood work, bortedella shots. We have to put him in a kennel when we go on vaca. I have an appointment.” He picked on the contrarian newcomer. “You’re pet less? So far?”

“I’m here to pick up my parrot. He has an eye infection and they held him overnight.”

Through the front entrance bustled in a woman who gave everyone a glimpsing smile as she went straight to the back. The receptionist confirmed what everyone wanted to hear: “Doctor Cathcart. Things should start moving, peoples.” She consulted her computer and printed something. “Megan Boa?”

The Wiccan stood, went to the counter, and paid her bill. She sat back down. From the same door I went through emerged a young, nurse-attired girl carrying a cage containing a large blue parrot. It squawked upon seeing its master, its neck all kinds of which ways because of the eye patch and the neck restrainer.

“Wicket!” said Megan Boa. She rushed to the cage and put her fingers through. The parrot seized them with its beak and this little licking tongue came out of nowhere. It lasted but a moment until Megan took control of the cage. “Good luck everyone,” she said as she gripped it with both hands. “Caretakers all.” Husky guy rolled his eyes. Megan stopped in front of me.

“If your toad lives, let it go.”

A short time later the same young girl appeared.

“Mush?”

With an about time look Husky guy stood. The dog did not. “Come on buddy,” Husky guy said gently. “Come on.” The dog gamely worked its way into a stand, the skim of cataracts a sad omen to its journey. “Arthritis,” he explained. A compassionate tug on its leash prompted the animal to a tottering walk. If it had another year in it then canine elder care reached new heights.

It was a full turnover of patients and two phone conversations with Gretch before Doctor Mendes finally came and got me. Husky guy had left, telling me he’d see me around.

“Rick,” said the Doctor. He waved me back.

Ryobi rested comfortably in a plastic tub, her eyes closed. Stuff like that plastic skin covered a line of stitches and you could notice the swelling more now that the skin was mended. Her one eye really looked bad.

“She did well,” said Mendes. “Her eggs are intact. I would suggest leaving her a couple days for safety’s sake.”

“Don’t wild animals stress out in captivity? Won’t she due better if released?”

“Geez. You’d be taking a chance. They are dissolving sutures. But to answer your question, yes.”

Something about the rectitude of the Wiccan woman moved me to say, “I’m taking her home. Gonna release her.”

Mendes sighed. “Your call.”

I had an issue. If I called Gretch she’d say damn the wisdom of the wise and keep Ryobi at Walnut Hills. A little

selective memory loss blunted the issue. So I went to check out, plastic tub and Ryobi in hand.

“How’s da patient?” said the receptionist as she peeked in the tub.

“Alive.”

“Da’s good. Mis’tuh, you done good. Loss’a people, they be like ‘Oh, it’s jus’ a toad’ but it be one a God’s creatures like da man said. If’n yous was small and it hit yous wit a weed whacker den yous would be most appreciative. Yous would find a way to return da favor. There be some toad love. Somewhere. Someday yous can say ‘here boy’ and your pet toad come runnin’. Unconditional like.” She lowered her voice so the new round of patrons wouldn’t hear. “Like dat asshole wit da old dog.”

Fist bump. We touched knuckles.

“Ons to business. Lessee, your total is \$688.77.”

With Ryobi still in the plastic tub, I put her in the front seat. It was like when my daughter was pregnant, I felt like buckling the seat belt around the precious cargo. Short of that, I drove home slowly, with my right hand free to check the tub from shifting. Nary a bump or pothole did I hit. I got to thinking about the God angles. I’m not a religious guy, but something out there has always worried me and I suddenly felt that whatever odds were in play canted my way a little better. When I got home around 8:30 I’d been gone nearly three hours. First thing Gretch asked:

“Are Ryobi’s eggs okay? Did they say it’s okay to bring her home?” She liked the name.

“Eggs are fine. They said wild animals will do better in the wild, get stressed in captivity.”

“Yeah, if they haven’t been hit by a weed whacker. I can’t believe they said that.” She saw right through me. “We *are not* putting her back in the yard.”

A man has to pick his battles, and I was war weary. “We’ll talk about it. I’ve had a long day.” There was more than a modicum of truth in that. I put Ryobi on the kitchen countertop and went to bed. And set the old internal alarm clock a few hours early.

2AM. I got up for an ostensible piss and turned the kitchen light on. Ryobi had come around, her eyes opened and her respiration was rapid. I snuck out the back door and deposited her next to a downspout where I knew insects gathered.

6. Up before Gretch and out the door to check. Ryobi was gone.

6:30. "Richard! Where's the toad?"

Invoking majority opinion seemed logical. She wasn't having it so said, "I told you we're keeping Ryobi in the house!"

So she has me hunt the yard for her.

Fast forward to Hurricane Jill. The storm, just as wicked as the argument after the unsuccessful search, tore through on a Tuesday night, knocking out power and downing trees galore. The forest looked like a war zone. An oak barely missed our house and we spent a day chain sawing it up. That was the good karma. Gretch and I drove around to see the carnage, Shylock along for the ride. Over on Cascade stood Husky guy and his wife in observance of the towering pine crushing their roof end to end. Mush lay at their feet, panting. I had half a mind to ask Gretch to pull over for a gloating commiseration but we ooh'd and ahh'd our way on.

So we get home and I kick back with Shy. Gretch goes outside to pick up debris. Shy's a cool little dude, a little big for lapdog size but we let him play the role. I was fingering his ears when I hear the door open and Gretch yell, "Richard, come here! Quick!"

I shoved Shylock off and hustled to the door.

"You *have* to see this."

I was barefoot but she tugged me out. I tiptoed around a minefield of leaves and branches until she brought me to the downspout where I'd left Ryobi.

There she was. Next to her, in an attendance sort of way, was an Albino Toad. *That* Albino toad, I'd like to think. Quite the migration. You can imagine the imaginations. Ryobi was thinner, he was smaller. The unguent had worn off, the swelling gone, and the lacerations were almost scars. The

two didn't move a jot as we approached and I crouched down.

Motionless, eyes fixed in their heads, they might have made a nice Hallmark card and a cup of tea. They wanted us there, we sat in *their* living room.

"Did you have your babies?" I asked. I touched Ryobi's head. Her throat bulged a little and I'd like to think it meant yes.

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