

To Catch a Toad

A short story by
Mary Wildfire

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Teresa dreamed she was walking in the rain in an unfamiliar neighborhood, enjoying the pattering of rain on her umbrella and the sloshing of her small red boots in the gutter. She paused to watch a golden maple leaf sail by on swirling grey water, only to circle twice and disappear down a metal storm drain. A passing car splattered her raincoat, but she didn't care.

At the corner, after making sure no one was watching, she cut between two houses, over lush grass tipped with shining grass, to the creek. It was only a little creek, but it was interesting. She spied a newt hurrying along, its red spots glowing. Then a toad hopped into her path, startling her. She tried to catch it, but just when she thought she had, it squirted between her hands and dove into the creek, leaving only a big circle among the small ones caused by raindrops. Now the rain picked up, a roaring of rain...

--that turned into the ringing of an alarm clock. Teresa groaned softly as she sat up, fighting sleepiness and the remnants of the vivid dream. She could still see the rain-dimples in that creek, felt almost as though, if she just reached fast enough, she might yet catch that toad. Had she ever actually been in

that neighborhood?

And when would she stop having these strange dreams? She hadn't had a normal, symbolic dream in weeks, at least not one that she could remember.

Roberto grinned at her from a few feet away. He was already dressed and his curly dark hair and silky goatee needed no combing. "What did you dream this time?" he asked.

Teresa sighed. "I was a kid, walking in the rain in some suburban place. Tried to catch a toad."

Athena, sitting up in the cot on the other side of Teresa, laughed. "Did you succeed?"

"No. It got away in the creek." Again she saw the rain-guzzling stream, the wet brown leaves on either bank, the yellow palms of buckeye leaves; but she didn't want to talk about her dream. The other members of her cadre were already beginning to see her as peculiar. "What did *you* dream?" she countered.

Athena, brushing her thick, dark-blond hair, tossed it way from her freckled face to reply. "Oh, just a dream about Imam." Imam was her boyfriend in NewTerra.

"Pretty racy dream?" asked Roberto, leering. "Care to give us any details?"

Athena scowled. "It was just a sexual fantasy."

"So you say." He grinned mischievously. Too bad he was so handsome, thought Teresa; a man like him didn't deserve to attract women.

"Oh! You are so irritating!" exclaimed Athena. "To hear you talk, all women think about is pregnancy. Actually, it's all *you* think about." Snatching her worksuit, she stomped off toward the kitchen attachment to the yurt. "My turn to cook breakfast, fortunately," she snapped before disappearing.

Rick asked Roberto, "Why do you so enjoy steaming the women? Seems like you pick on at least one of 'em every day." Teresa could barely see Rick's dark beard and bulky figure across the sleeping section of the yurt. The sun hadn't risen over the mountains to the east yet.

"Because I'm annoyed that they won't all grope with me," replied Roberto. "I want a harem."

"You do well enough on weekends in New Terra." Rick made his usual mistake of taking Roberto seriously. Actually, Teresa figured, Roberto resented women's legal right to one child each while men had to be chosen by a

woman to become fathers. Or maybe he just had a hangup on his mother or something, who could tell? At least the conversation had turned from her and her dreams.

She pulled on her worksuit, laced up the boots, and brushed her unruly hair, legacy of the same ancestors who'd given her the brown skin and black eyes that drew admiring glances.

She thought about the dream again as she brought her oxygen mask to the electric light to examine closely. Two weeks ago, she'd asked the psychocounselor in New Terra about it. He'd told her not to worry. "It's just a compensation because you miss Earth so much. Growing up in the wilds of West Virginia, where there are more trees than people, and wild animals, left more of a mark on you than you realize. So, you need nature more than most people do. I'm afraid coming to Mars wasn't a good choice for you. But you'll get through it." He'd smiled reassuringly. "You're all right. You aren't going crazy."

She should believe him and stop worrying. But it seemed so abnormal! Other people had dreams like those *she'd* had before coming here: dreams full of symbols and peculiar happenings. Dreams that didn't make

much sense, but were therefore *normal*! Not these vivid, realistic images of Earth, in such endless variety. Some she had no referent for, like the jungle one, or that undersea one. She had no way of knowing whether she'd gotten the details of those right, as she'd never been to either place. But she thought the desert one was accurate, even though she'd only been there once, as a child. Consciously she'd forgotten that trip, but in the dream it all came back: the sharp scents of creosote bush and sage, the stark shapes of whiplike ocotillo and stately saguaro, the huge empty silence, the baking dry heat, the quick dart of a lizard moving into shadow. That was memory, not fantasy, though it was long buried under more recent data.

After breakfast Teresa packed her Marsbuggy with the morning's load of oxyplants, topped up her tanks of oxygen and soil conditioners, and checked the buggy's voltage. Then it was time for the morning solidarity ritual.

The seven members of Terraforming Cadre #659 formed a ring and held hands silently. Teresa knew some considered this a silly waste of time, but she loved it. She couldn't have said why; it just felt good. The

sun was up now, casting seven fuzzy shadows on the rocks and sand.

Those rocks were as red as they'd been for billions of years, Teresa thought as she drove to her morning planting site. But now the sky was blue instead of pink, thanks to the carbon dioxide atmosphere generated by Phase One. Streams shimmered in the crevices of the Asimov Mountains to the south, thanks to Phase Two. Now all Mars needed to be Earthlike was a lot more oxygen, and that's where she came in, because the little plants stocking a thousand buggies like hers were the main tools of oxygen generation. Unfortunately, Phase III was the slowest part. Less than a century from the first Mars landing, she could stand outside in a simple cotton suit with bare hands (in summer, anyway) and a wide variety of plants could survive. But no animal could yet live here without an oxygen mask, and the experts expected this to be the case for hundreds of years. Mars was still "bare, barren and boring," its unbreathable air full of the silence of myriad animals that didn't exist—yet.

As Teresa tested the soil of her first section and began planting, she amused herself by imagining what this area would look like in a thousand years. The shape of the land wouldn't

change significantly, of course, and according to Mrs. Olivetti, her cadre's supervisor, the rising ocean might approach but would never cover this land.

Maybe that creek below to her left would swell; rainfall was supposed to increase. She wouldn't need this mask. Probably there would be other people around. Maybe this area would even be crowded in a thousand years. Would forest cover these low hills, or would it be brushland? It could be cultivated, or even settled with dwellings, or...she abandoned her attempt at realistic prediction to let her mind play on one possible scenario.

Her hand pulled another seedling from the bag and inserted it carefully into the Martian soil, then another and another till she'd done all fifty and it was time to give them each a shot of mineral-spiked water...but her mind wandered in a forest.

It was winter here. Snow drifted down between dark green hemlocks to fill the furrows in the black limbs of an oak. A tiny, yellow-crowned bird twittered and eyed her from the smooth grey branch of a graceful beech whose buff-colored leaves still clung, rattling in the cold wind. Teresa shivered. The bird's beady eye shone. From a ridge half a mile away came

the echoing report of a pileated woodpecker knocking on a tree. Soundlessly, steadily, the snow fell. She looked up to see the grey dots of distant flakes between the nearer ones, and tried to see the still tinier, more distant ones... but here was something on the ground. Was it a red fox, with a line of snow down its back to match the white tip of its tail? No, it was—

--it was her Marsbuggy, waiting as she sat on her heels with half a dozen oxyplants wilting in her hand, while she was lost in daydreaming! Thinking of Earth was *not* all right if it led to abandoning her work!

For the two hours that remained until her lunch break, Teresa worked industriously. She returned to the yurt with no seedlings, which only happened on her most productive mornings. She was equally attentive after lunch, and pleased to see a thunderstorm building. That would ensure a good start for the seedlings.

She was on her way to the ridge to collect "mollymoochers," as the old people called the delicious morel mushrooms that grew only on ridges, and only in April. Out of breath, and reflecting that she was clearly out of shape, she rested on a mossy rock under a redbud tree. Its flowers were already opening, turning from

purple to pink. Nearby mayapples spread their mottled, umbrella-like leaves. Signs of an early spring—surely she'd find some mushrooms.

And look! At the foot of that rotten stump, a box turtle, the first she'd seen this year. It poked its head into the spongy, root beer-colored stump...looking for insects with which to break its winter fast, she supposed.

She got up to inspect it, but it retracted its head as she picked it up. A scaly hind foot withdrew and it closed its shell tightly. She admired the crispness of its black-and-yellow pattern, only to be distracted when a butterfly landed on her wrist, one of those big black and blue kind. It quivered its elegant wings and flew away.

This log looked so rich she almost wanted to eat it herself. She set the box turtle down and bent to sniff the crumbling mass, held together by a lacing of roots. If the turtle ate the bugs that ate this stump, would those bugs taste like oak?

A gust of wind carrying a drop of rain lifted her hair, urging her to hurry onward. By the time she crested the ridge, she heard thunder—or was that the throbbing cry of the peepers in the farm pond way below, cheering the rain? Rain...

Teresa moved reluctantly into consciousness. Roberto and Jolen murmured together, Athena

stirred, Doris' cot was empty. It was raining hard. After breakfast they'd have to pack together into the rover for the trip to New Terra, masks on because the rover's bubble had a leak.

The first week on Mars Teresa had thought that wearing an oxygen mask for so many hours, for two whole years, would drive her crazy. Now she hardly noticed it.

But she'd been wrong in thinking she was a good candidate for this job, which demanded three years away from Earth with no possibility of early return. True, she'd had no strong attachments; she was between boyfriends and considered herself at twenty-four too young to apply for her motherhood permit. She was not close to her parents, self-sufficient types who'd chosen never to join a molecular family—so she had no molecular siblings to miss either. Her parents had liked the isolation of the relatively unpopulated West Virginia hills. And there was the source of her problem, as the counselor had said—she did have a strong attachment after all, to wild places, to life forms other than her own kind, to the Earth itself.

Oh how I love you, Earth, Planet of my birth

As the words to the old song popped into Teresa's mind, tears pricked her eyes. A furtive look around showed her that no one had seen, however. She controlled the emotion with a deep breath.

That psychocounselor was right. She did miss Earth with an intensity she'd never anticipated. But she'd get through this, and feel good about it too. Because only through the work that she and the others were doing would Mars someday be another Earth.

Maybe that's where yesterday's dream came from, she thought suddenly. Maybe that suburb was yesterday's planting site...in a thousand years. And someday a Martian child would chase a toad into that creek...or catch it.