

The Case of the Traveling Tree Frog



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OUR FAVORITE TREE FROG SITS like a gold Buddha in the blue louvers of a Bahama shutter. His eyes are pale yellow, his mouth is lit up with a beatific smile, and his chubby fingers are neatly folded in front of him. The only thing that is moving is his white throat, and it goes *tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock*, reminding me of my favorite Peter Pan character.

I am enjoying this frog—his artful simplicity—when suddenly our two Great Danes begin barking. Well, not barking, roaring.

“Is it the UPS man?” my wife, Loretta, asks.

“I dunno, I can’t see him from here,” our parrot George answers.

So help me, that’s what he says. This bird can talk—and why shouldn’t he? He’s lived with us for more than 25 years.

On the other hand, why don’t we speak Parrot? Well, we do, if we have to. Thankfully, George likes English.

“Well, is it Ed?” Loretta asks.

“Can’t be sure,” George says hoarsely.

“Yes, you can,” Loretta says; she goes outdoors, and yes, it is Ed with a package for us.

“Ohhhh!” George says cheerily, when she steps back inside.

Our days go by like this; and we don’t always realize we’re talking to animals, not people, unless someone human is visiting, and points it out to us. We’re used to animal interactions, creature con-

versations. It happens all the time. As the comedian once said, it only goes over the top when you fall onto all fours and sniff the electric man as he prepares to read your meter.

We’re not quite there—yet.

Anyway, back to our traveling tree frog...

The other day we were heading north on Burnt Store Road when I see something stuck to our rear window. I slow down and pull over. It’s our traveling tree frog, going for a vacation. His big pulpy fingers are pasted to the glass, and I have a hard time prying him off.

Poor guy. He is a bit gray around the gills, so to say. Well, actually, he’s grayish all over, instead of his usual

gold color, that penultimate look of primal health and well-being that tree frogs have when they're near trees.

I guess he did not like riding in a pickup truck. His startled eyes seem to say, "Where're we headed, Pops?"

Do I really hear that?

Do his eyes really talk?

"We're going to the beach," I tell the frog.

"But I don't need a tan!" he says, so clearly that Loretta comes to the res-

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cue and eases our bewildered friend into a brown paper bag. Then we drive on, briefly stopping at Dunkin Donuts in Punta Gorda, where our little pal hops out of the bag and terrorizes the place.

He's turned brown as toast. It is difficult to pry him off the bottom of the swivel chair, and everybody's looking at me as I am lying on my back like a mechanic inspecting a faulty muffler.

However, once the frog's in the bag, I reassure the customers that my baby Godzilla isn't going to hop into their coffee or devour their doughnuts. They settle down, eyeing the bag suspiciously.

I tell Loretta, "He changes color

under stress—did you see it?”

She nods, “You would too, if someone stuffed you into a bag.”

Well, to make a long story practically endless, as the old storyteller once said, we did bring our little buddy back home to his louvered window seat. The moment he smelled the fragrant humidity of Pine Island, he vaulted out of the open bag.

I watched in respectful silence as our fugitive turned back into a Buddha.

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What repose! What grace!

Why can't humans do that?

When I looked at our traveling tree frog again, he'd gone from gray to green to gold. No doubt, gold is his happy color. And all's well that ends well, they say.

The next time we notice our little friend, we are parked at Southwest Florida International Airport. We're about to board a plane to go to a distant city to talk about—believe it or not—tree frogs, parrots and Great Danes. Not to mention dachshunds (we have one), cats (we have two), turtles (too numerous to count), and the larger animal family that surrounds us and includes everything from Nile monitors to bobcats, owls and saltwater crocodiles.

But there we are—poised to say goodbye to paradise and fly off to

some snow-bound city—when I open the trunk, and there's our traveling tree frog meditating like a gold icon on top of our luggage.

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What to do?

There isn't any time to resolve this sticky dilemma, so we settle for putting our buddy on an oak tree that is growing beside the curb.

When we return one week later, our traveling tree frog is nowhere to be seen. I search the oak, top and bottom. Even climb into it and have a look around, causing no end of parking-lot speculation—but no green, brown, gray, gold little guy!

How sad is that?

However, miracles in nature never end; they surprise us all the time.

When I pop open the trunk to put away our suitcases, guess who's sitting in there with a big golden smile?

Once again, Loretta coaxes him into that familiar brown paper bag; and we go home to Bokeelia.

Driving through the warm with the windows open after you've been fighting the cold for a week is one of the greatest rewards of living in Southwest Florida. It's a dividend that never disappoints the investor.

Home at last, we stand in our front yard under the huge-canopied ear tree and listen to the chorus of crickets singing in the immensity of that tropical tree's shadow. The symphony is cut short, however, when our dogs see us at the window. Suddenly there's a cacophony of bays, howls and roars

that curdle the milk from my last airport café con leche.

So, we let out our furry friends and put our traveling tree frog back on his favorite window seat, and let out a great sigh of relief.

Before going to bed that night, I check the Bahama shutter—just to be sure.

There he is, steeping in the warm, sultry air.

I say, “Goodnight.” But before I turn out the light, I see our traveling tree frog wink at me.

“Just another day in the life,” he says.

And if he didn’t say it, you can bet George did. †

Pine Island's Gerald Hausman has written more than 35 books for children and adults, including The Mythology of Horses (with Loretta Hausman).

JUST THE FACTS



Our traveling tree frog is actually a common Cuban tree frog, scientific name *Osteopilus septentrionalis*. A nocturnal amphibian, this frog measures between one and three-and-a-half inches, the females slightly larger than the males. The gray to tan to brownish-gray skin color varies with stress and environment. The gold eyes of a Cuban tree frog are large; the tips of the hands and feet have sticky cups on them. This frog barks like a small dog and makes a snoring noise, too. Native to Cuba, it’s well-established in tropical and subtropical Florida, eating insects, lizards and other frogs, including its own kind.