

The Frog Pond

by Uncle Charlie

Joshua Cross leans forward as his mother plumps his pillows and adjusts them. She knows just how he likes them and how important it is for him to have the perfect view.

At the end of Old Simpson's Road, the street light starts to blink like a sleeping giant waking from a nap. Beneath it, a small pond captures the last goodbyes of the setting sun.

"How's that?" his mother asks, as she sets the last pillow in place; but the familiar look in his eyes tells her where his thoughts are.

Martha Cross gently kisses her son's forehead and retreats to the doorway where she watches over him. Tears fill her eyes as she clutches the bottle of pills in her apron pocket. "We need a miracle!" was the last thing the visiting nurse said before she left, "we need a miracle!"

Around the small pond the evening shadows begin to take shape. A chorus line of dancing silhouettes leap with joy against a background of soft amber light.

"It's the frogs," Joshua says in a voice too weak to be heard. The scent of sweet honeysuckle fills the air as the sound of croaking frogs explodes into a symphony that plays only for him. Joshua smiles, for the rhythm touches his very soul. With all his might he tries to call out to his mother, but his words are without sound. Slowly he drifts off, carried by that music like a leaf on the wind down to the frog pond.

Leaning against the door, his mother reflects on her own childhood, growing up on Old Simpson's Road. There was hopscotch, two-square, and pigtails in her hair ... secrets, promises, and games of dare. Her life as a child ... how simple and free. There were buttercups, dandelions, and a sugar-berry tree ... honeybees, fireflies, and beetles caught in a jar. Lying on her bed at night, she'd make a wish on a star. These memories are so close and yet so far ... memories of a childhood that once unfolded beneath the sycamores on Old Simpson's Road.

Suddenly Joshua stood at the edge of the pond, looking out at all the little frogs he had dreamed of playing with when lying in his bed. "Hello Joshua," said one little frog. "I'm glad you've come to join us."

"How do you know my name?" asked Joshua.

"We heard your mother's prayers, and we know all about you. Didn't you hear us calling out to you every evening?"

"I heard you croaking, but I didn't know you were calling me."

"Come sit with us in the water," said one little frog, "and listen to the song again."

Joshua sat down and all the croaking frogs surrounded him. He could feel the sound vibrating inside his body. Suddenly the words were clear, and he was changed into a little green frog singing along with the rest of them:

Down at the pond, dreams come true,
Promises grow in shades of blue,
Wishes are granted, cups are filled,
Down at the pond, come be healed,
Down at the pond, the way is clear,
Bring your troubles, leave them here,
It makes a difference, you will see,
Down at the pond, love flows free.

"I'm a frog!" cried Joshua as he leaped and splashed, "I'm a frog!" For hours he and his little friends played games of leap-frog and hide-and-go-seek, and the frogs told stories of their adventures while growing up in Rainbow Swamp. There was Jumper the bull frog, Squeaky the toad, and Percy the tree frog. Percy told Joshua about Weeping Willow, the mother of all the trees in the swamp. It was said that her tears could heal every creature.

Joshua knew he had to see Weeping Willow, so he asked his new friends to take him there. "We don't know where she lives," said Squeaky, "and that swamp is no place for frogs to be wandering in after dark."

"I must see her," said Joshua, "it's a matter of life and death!"

"Rainbow Swamp is full of snakes and owls," said Jumper. "We should wait till morning."

"I can't wait," said Joshua, "my mother will be worried if I don't get back by morning."

"There's a full moon out tonight," said Percy. "I can get us there. All we need is a map. Let's go see my Uncle Al. He knows the location of every tree and bush in Rainbow Swamp."

Martha Cross pulls the covers up around her little boy and tucks him in. The sound of croaking frogs and the scent of sweet honeysuckle fill the room. "I'm here, Joshua," she says, "and I'll be right here when you wake up."

At the third maple, next to Old Thurman Mill, Becky the tree frog was putting the final touches on her blue-ribbon winning Shoo-Fly Pie when there was a knock at the door. "Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me, Aunt Becky," Percy answered, "is Uncle Al home?"

"Come in, your Uncle Al will be back shortly. He went to get some sap from the tree down the road. What brings you boys by?"

"We're on our way to Rainbow Swamp to find Weeping Willow."

"My, my," said Becky, "that's no journey for little frogs, especially at night. What if you got lost or eaten? Rainbow Swamp is a dangerous place even in daylight."

"I know," Percy replied, "but it's a matter of life and death."

"That pie sure smells good," said Squeaky, "I'd hate to get eaten on an empty stomach."

"Sit down boys, and I'll give you a slice," said Becky, "I don't know what's taking Al so long."

After the little frogs had finished eating their pie and putting away the dishes, the door sprang open. There stood Uncle Al holding two big bags of tree sap. "Percy, my boy, what brings you by? If you boys are looking for work, I have lots of sap orders to fill."

"Sorry, Uncle Al, but we're on our way to Rainbow Swamp to find Weeping Willow, and we need your help."

"Why in the world would you boys be looking for Weeping Willow? Do you have an invitation?"

"I didn't know you needed one," said Jumper.

"Of course you do," said Uncle Al. "You don't just waltz up to the mother of all trees unannounced. There are protocols to be observed before you get to meet her."

"But we don't have time for all that," said Percy, "this is an emergency. I know she'll make an exception for us. It's a matter of life and death!"

"I see," said Uncle Al. "I wish I could go with you boys, but I have sap orders to fill, and I'm already behind schedule." He retrieved a pouch from the desk drawer: "Here, you boys be careful. Rainbow Swamp is no place for little frogs, even with a map."

Percy gave his Uncle Al a hug and the four little frogs were on their way. Uncle Al stood at the doorway watching them till they rounded the bend. "How could you send them off on such a foolish and dangerous journey?" asked Becky.

"They're not tadpoles any more," said Uncle Al. "They would have gone even without a map. All we can do is pray that they'll come to no harm."

The phone rings, and Martha Cross picks up the receiver. "Hello." It's the visiting nurse calling to check on Joshua's condition. "No change," says Martha, "I gave him the pills, but he still has a high temperature."

"All we can do is wait for the fever to break," says the nurse. "It's in God's hands now." Percy checked the map to make sure they were headed in the right direction. They were

supposed to take the left fork at Oak Tree Grove and follow the road to Chestnut Creek. "We've been walking for hours," Squeaky complained. "My feet hurt and I'm tired. Can't we stop here?"

"No," said Percy, "we can't rest in the open. It's not safe. We'll rest at the Old Beaver Dam when we get to Chestnut Creek." The Old Beaver Dam had long been abandoned. Its ghostly frame stood out in the moonlight like a haunting reminder of the dangers lurking in Rainbow Swamp.

The four little frogs took shelter in a hollow log near the edge of the creek. "How much farther?" asked Joshua, "I've got to get back soon or my mother will be worried."

"It's not much farther," said Percy. "The map shows that once we cross the creek, the field where Weeping Willow lives should be over the next rise."

Suddenly there was a mournful cry for help from the thick brush. "Someone's in trouble!" said Joshua, and without pausing to think, he ran toward the sound before his friends could stop him.

"No, Joshua!" screamed Jumper, as the other two frogs ran after him. By the time they caught up with him, Joshua was standing next to an owl who was caught in a snare.

"Release me," said the owl, "and I'll tell all my friends about the brave little frog who saved my life."

"No, Joshua," said Squeaky, "he'll say anything to get loose, and then he'll eat you."

"I won't eat you, Joshua," said the owl. "You have my word. You are a wise and kind frog, and I'm an honorable, yet humble owl who just wants to get home to his family."

"Will you swear that you won't eat me?" said Joshua.

"I do swear and cross my heart," said the owl.

"You can't trust him," said Squeaky, "owls are sneaky."

Joshua ignored the warning and set the owl free. "Thank you, Joshua," said the owl, "I shall always be grateful for your kindness." Then without hesitation he grabbed Squeaky in his claws. The little frogs were frozen with fear.

"What about your word?" asked Joshua.

"I kept my word," said the owl, "I promised I wouldn't eat you. I didn't promise not to eat your friend!" The owl smiled and took off with Squeaky dangling from his claws.

Back inside the log, the three little frogs grieved over their lost friend. "It's all my fault," Joshua cried, "I should have listened."

"You didn't know," said Percy. "Rainbow Swamp is a dangerous place, and we must be more careful now, or we'll never get to see Weeping Willow. When we cross the creek, stay on the lily pads. There are some big fish there who would love to make a meal out of us. Jumper, you lead the way. Joshua, you follow. Remember, no noise till we get to the other side!"

Crossing the creek was easy until they heard a big splash. "What was that?" Joshua asked. Before Percy could warn him again not to speak, a big fish leaped out of the water.

"Look out!" screamed Jumper. The fish knocked Joshua into the water, and Jumper quickly dove in after him. "I've got you," said Jumper as he pushed Joshua back on top of the lily pad.

"Are you all right?" asked Percy. "Where's Jumper?"

"He was right behind me," said Joshua. But Jumper had vanished and so had the big fish.

"Hurry," said Percy, "we've got to reach the other side fast!"

"What about Jumper?" asked Joshua.

"We can't help him now," said Percy. After crossing, the pair walked quietly to the top of the hill. Tears filled Joshua's eyes as he thought about his two fallen friends. In the middle of the valley below, they could see Weeping Willow glowing in the moonlight.

"We made it!" said Percy, but Joshua was silent, his heart full of sorrow. Percy put his arm around his friend and told him to close his eyes. "Can you hear them, Joshua?"

"Hear who?" asked Joshua.

"The frogs," said Percy, "can you hear them singing?"

The distant sound of croaking frogs echoing through the valley made Joshua smile. "It's Squeaky and Jumper! I can hear them singing!"

"You will always be able to hear them singing, Joshua, because they live inside your heart. That's the secret of the frog pond."

At the bottom of the hill, the two little frogs made their way to the place where Weeping Willow stood in a shroud of morning mist. Buttercups lined the path to the mound that was her throne. "Go away!" said a voice coming from the mist.

"I must speak to Weeping Willow," said Joshua.

"Do you have an invitation?"

"No, but it's a matter of life and death."

"I'm sorry then," said the voice, because Weeping Willow won't wake till the next full moon."

"But we traveled so far and lost so much! I must speak to her!"

Out of the mist an old grey squirrel appeared. "It's just not possible. Nothing will wake her, not even a matter of life and death." Joshua sat down under the tree and started to cry.

"There must be some other way," Percy said. "We can't give up now! You've got to have faith."

"I do," said Joshua, "but time is running out, and I need to get back home."

The two little frogs were getting ready to leave when Percy noticed the old grey squirrel was collecting the dew from the buttercups beneath Weeping Willow's branches. The shimmering dew was dripping from her branches like falling tears and filling each and every buttercup.

"That's it!" shouted Percy, "Weeping Willow's tears!" He quickly ran over to the old grey squirrel and grabbed a ladle full of the precious liquid. "Drink it!" he told Joshua, and instantly, a rainbow of twinkling stardust and the scent of sweet honeysuckle surrounded Joshua and filled the early morning air.

"It's a miracle! It's a miracle!" cried Joshua. "I've got to get home to tell my mother!" The two little frogs ran up the hill toward Chestnut Creek. Quietly they crossed the lily pads and followed the road to the Oak Tree Grove. A big shadow flew overhead. "Hide!" said Percy. They took cover in the brush beside the road. "Joshua," whispered Percy, "where are you?"

"I'm down here," said Joshua, who had taken refuge in a hole. Percy knew immediately that Joshua was in danger. He ran down the hole just in time to see his friend standing not far from a large snake.

"Come closer," said the snake, "so I can get a better look at you. I rarely get visitors down here in this lonely hole, and I do so enjoy making new friends." The snake hissed as it moved closer to Joshua, asking, "Why don't you stay for dinner?"

"Run, Joshua," said Percy, but it was too late. The snake was ready to strike. Percy jumped between the snake and Joshua, pushing his friend out of the way. But the snake caught Percy, and there was nothing Joshua could do. Percy just managed to say, "Hurry, get back to the frog pond, and don't stop for anything!"

Tears poured down Joshua's face as he ran from the hole. "It's all my fault!" he cried. "How can a miracle cost so much?" The frog pond on Old Simpson's Road was just around the next bend, but in Joshua's heart it was a thousand miles. "What will I tell the other frogs? How can I give them the terrible news?"

When he stepped out of the brush, all the little frogs were standing at the edge of the pond cheering and welcoming him back. "I have some terrible news," said Joshua, "Squeaky, Jumper,

and Percy didn't make it back, and it's all my fault." The crowd of little frogs stopped cheering and stood there looking at him. Then one by one they stepped aside, and there in the little pond sat Squeaky, Jumper, and Percy.

Joshua couldn't believe his eyes. He ran and jumped into the water to join his friends. "How did you get away?" he asked. "I saw all of you get taken."

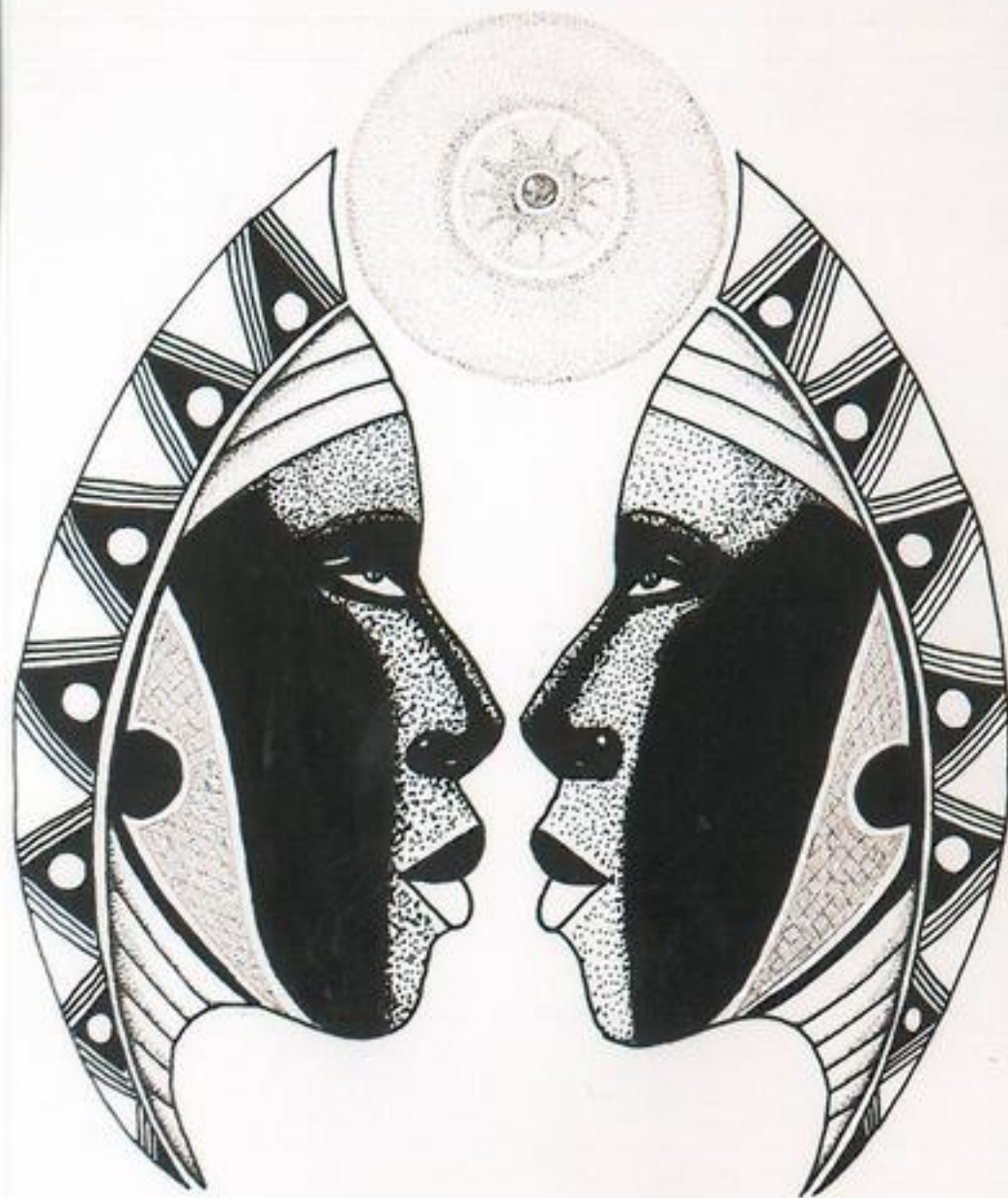
"We were saved by our faith," said Percy, "and so were you. True miracles don't end in tragedy. It was our job to get you to Rainbow Swamp, Joshua. The miracle was for you to get back on your own, because when you walk in faith, miracles do happen."

All the little frogs gathered around Joshua and started to sing. He could feel the rhythm touching his very soul. "Will I see you again?" he asked. "Just look out your window," said Percy, "because wishes are granted and cups are always filled down at frog pond."

"Good morning," said Martha Cross, as she plumped her son's pillows and adjusted them. "How's my little miracle?"



C. FINNEY



C. FINNEY