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# The Value of a Life, Though Toxic and Tiny

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Private Lives: Personal essays on the news of the world and the news of our lives.

DALLAS — I waited in the car outside of the school, knowing it was The Day, The Very Momentous Day. She appeared on the sidewalk, holding the box in both hands. Look what I have.

Bringing home a toad from the science fair, I think, must feel like getting a sister and having a baby all at once — something ritualistic, something that transforms your role and your view of yourself. That is, if you are 11. If you are not 11, bringing home a toad from the science fair is something you'd rather avoid doing, especially if you've just buried the fish from the carnival. In the backyard, with a headstone. Here lie Leila and Lu.

He was glistening and green, hot orange underneath.

"Look at his stomach," my daughter said from the curb, lifting the box to the car window. "Fire-bellied. Look."

"Wow," I said. "What a color for a belly. Very exciting."

"You have to spray him with this water bottle and feed him crickets," she explained, raising up the bottle and arranging herself and her new companion in the back seat. "Ten a week."

"Ten, really," I said, calculating the mileage to the pet store.

"Ten live ones. They don't eat them if they're dead."

She named him Skip. Short for Skipper. He was a cute fire-bellied toad, just about an inch long, with those froggy eyes and froggy feet. Skip would live on the oak table in the sunroom, in the gerbils' old spot, next to my desk. The rodents did not like it when I interviewed people on the telephone. Every time I dialed, they hopped onto the running wheel and made a racket. During the three years that they lived, they could have run to Bangkok. Skip seemed serene. He would be a more suitable office mate. The people on the phone wouldn't ask about the noise.

After school the next day, my daughter got into the car with news. "So, guess what?" she said. "Skip is poisonous. You have to wear gloves if you want to touch him. Latex, like from the doctor's office."

"The school sold you a poisonous frog?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Did they know he was poisonous when they sold him to you?"

"Mommy, I don't know. Do you have the gloves?"

"I do not have the gloves that you need to wear to touch a poisonous amphibian."

"So, I can't touch him?"

"Do you want to touch him?"

"Well, not really ... now."

Just like that, we didn't love Skip so much anymore. He was not responsible for his genus (Bombina) and its accompanying toxicity. He was the same Skip with the sweet face and the acrobatic hop. But we stepped back. We slid the crickets from their bag through a hatch in the top of the box. We watched him eat, and then, we didn't. We made fewer trips to the insect aisle. The water bottle took longer to refill. The droplets dried on the walls of the box; the peat moss curled at its edges. Skip disappeared for days under his slice of bark.

We were aware of his existence in our house, and our responsibility, yet we

failed to take care. I walked past him each morning and sat down at my desk. In my peripheral vision, I saw the box, as arid as the Mojave. I knew when he last ate. "Buy crickets," I wrote on my errand list, but it snowed, or the editor was waiting. He might die under his bark, I thought, stunning myself. He might have, already. I wouldn't lift it up to see but one day, maybe in a week, or a month, or when my daughter was 37, we would. We'd lift it up to see.

One morning, though, I saw movement in the box. I jumped from my chair to look. Skip had crept out from underneath his cover, and was attempting to climb on top of it. A leg stretched up onto the wood, but could not support his body. He flopped sideways before landing on the moss, seeming woozy and delirious. I pressed my eyes against the box to see if his throat was expanding and contracting. For a second, there was nothing. But then, a breath.

I snatched the water bottle from under the table, tore to the bathroom and filled it. I doused him on his head; he could have used an IV. Then I grabbed my wallet and coat. I was still wearing the shirt I slept in, and hadn't brushed my teeth or hair. My keys were on the table by the door; the car was out front. In seconds, I had backed into the street. The trip would take eight minutes each way, another 10, perhaps, in the store. I sped, gliding past stop signs, accelerating through the yellows.

I had let a creature suffer, I admitted to myself behind the wheel. Without much consideration, I determined that his life, though toxic and tiny, was less worthy than another's. I felt really bad. It is not who I am. It is not what I've taught my kids. We've rescued cats from under cars and blind dogs from traffic. Wayward spiders get an escort back into the wild. Yet I'd neglected Skip, until he showed me what I'd done. Had the responsibility that fell on me, the head of household, become too much? Was Skip the scapegoat for everything that hopped through the front door, needing sustenance, support, enthusiasm?

"Fifteen small crickets," I yelled to the cricket man.

"How many?"

"Fifteen. Fifteen."

The cricket man was busy talking with the hamster man. He peeled a plastic bag off a roll, but before he extracted the bugs from the tank, he followed the hamster man to the door, chattering and laughing, waving the bag around. It is always this way. Skip would be dead when I got home.

I plucked the bag of crickets from the cricket man's grip, finally, and cut in front of a woman at the checkout line. Skip would be dead, but I would buy the bugs anyway. It would show intention, and remorse.

I raced to the front door of our house, key in one hand, bag clutched in the other. Inside, I found him where I had left him, wet, his throat pulsing. A second chance, for both of us. I snipped the corner of the bag and poured the crickets into the box, aiming for a spot near his mouth. Immediately, he lunged and caught one, then two. He missed a few, out of practice. But he ate, and ate well.

"I am truly sorry," I said to Skip, kneeling down by the table. When he had finished, he sat for a moment and stared at me, before creeping back under the bark.

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