

Croaker



By Chris Garson
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Chapter 1

“Ribbit,” said Croaker, a big green frog with a yellow throat. Croaker was sitting on his favorite lily pad. Nearby a hummingbird hummed.

“What’s the matter, Croaker?” asked his mother.

“I want to play with Thump-Thump, Mama.” Croaker lived on a big lake where there were many other frogs. “I want to jump.” Once, he had jumped from his favorite lily pad all the way to the shore, where mean Mr. Alligator lived. The other frogs hadn’t thought he could jump that far, but he had. He was the best jumper.

Croaker on his favorite lily pad

Mama’s tongue snapped at a fly that came too close.

“Okay, Croaker, you can play, but only if you promise that stay away from the shore. I don’t want mean Mr. Alligator to eat you.”

“I won’t Mama, I promise,” ribbited Croaker. He jumped off his favorite lily pad



and swam towards a broken tree sticking out of the water, which had been there since the big storm. When Croaker was a tiny tadpole, lightning had flashed across the sky and struck the tree. The top of the tree had toppled into the lake and now it was Croaker’s favorite place to play. Covered with green moss, it was perfect for hide and seek and its branches were fun to climb. When Croaker reached the tree, his best friend, Thump-Thump, named for his big back legs that went Thump-Thump when he walked, was waiting for him.

Thump-Thump on the tree



“Hi, Thump-Thump,” said Croaker.

“Hi, Croaker. Catch me if you can!” Thump-Thump’s big back feet went Thump-Thump and he jumped away.

“You can’t get away from me, Thump-Thump. I’m the best jumper,” Croaker jumped behind Thump-Thump and snapped at his back with his tongue.

They played until it started to get dark. “It’s time for dinner, Thump-Thump.”

Thump-Thump shook his head. “It can’t be, Croaker. We just had lunch.”

“But look at how dark the sky is.” The clouds were very dark and the wind had picked up.

A loud clap of thunder boomed across the lake and it started to rain. Lightning flashed, just like when the tree had fallen, followed by more thunder and then the wind knocked Croaker off the tree.

Croaker splashed into the lake. The storm made it hard to swim. “Thump-Thump, help!”

“Where are you, Croaker? I can’t see you.”

The rain falling on the lake made it hard to hear Thump-Thump. Croaker paddled towards the tree. “I’m over here, Thump-Thump.”

“Where? I can’t see you.”

Croaker could see Thump-Thump. His friend was perched on the far end of the tree. “I’m over h—.”

Chapter 2

Croaker had a headache when he woke. He was lying on a branch and floating down the river. The last thing he remembered was Thump-Thump calling to him in the storm. He had never been so far from home. Mama had told him to stay away from the

river. She'd said that things scarier than mean Mr. Alligator lived there. He wanted to go home. He was hungry and he missed Mama and Thump-Thump.

The log floated farther down river, taking Croaker farther and farther from home. Soon he'd float all the way to the ocean. He took a deep breath and jumped very high, over the rushing river and landed on the riverbank. That was his best jump ever!

"Hello there," said a strange looking creature lumbering slowly out of the reeds growing on the riverbank. It had four short legs, a big shell on its back and a funny looking head that reminded Croaker of a snake.

Toby the Turtle

"Hi there. My name is Croaker. What's yours?"

"I'm Toby the Turtle."

Croaker's throat bulged as he let go a deep breath. "I've never met a turtle before. Where do you live?"



Toby's eyes darted from side to side. "In the ocean."

"I know where the ocean is," said Croaker. "It's where the river ends, but it's very far away. Say, are you lost too?"

Toby lifted his head high, laughing. "Of course not, are you?"

"Yes," Croaker sniffled. He was homesick. "I fell asleep in the storm. When I woke up, my head hurt and I was here."

Toby waved his left front paw. It looked better for swimming than walking. "You can come to the ocean with me if you want. I'll let you ride on my shell."

Croaker blinked. "That sounds like fun, but I want to go home. My Mama doesn't know where I am. I don't want her to worry."

Toby nodded. "One time I came home very late and my Mom was so mad. She made me hide in my shell for days."

"Hide in your shell? What's that?" asked Croaker.

Toby smiled. "Watch."

Toby lowered his stomach to the ground. Then he pulled his arms, his legs and finally his head inside his shell. Toby didn't look like a turtle any more, not at all. He looked like a big bumpy rock.

Croaker ribbited. "That's cool, Toby."

Toby's head came out of his shell. "Thanks. It's a good way to hide." He stuck out his arms and legs and started walking slowly towards the river. "It's been nice to meet you Croaker, but I should be going. I don't want my Mom to worry either. Where is your home?"

"At the lake. It's that way, I think." he snapped his tongue upriver.

"Be careful Croaker. There are lots of snakes there."

"Oooh. I don't like snakes." Croaker trembled. "They eat frogs."

Water Snakes

"Good luck, Croaker," said Toby, still walking very slowly towards the river.

Toby hadn't moved very far. Croaker hoped that the ocean wasn't too far away. "Can't you go any faster?"

"Not until I get to the river. I'm not a fast walker, but I'm a very fast swimmer."

Croaker waited until Toby reached the river, which meant waiting a long time. He could have swum from his favorite lily pad to the tree and back in the time it took Toby to reach the river

"Bye, Croaker," said Toby. The turtle slipped into the water and swam out of sight.



Chapter 3

Once again, Croaker was alone. Even though they'd just met, he missed Toby. He didn't like being alone so far from home. Croaker started to jump towards the river, but then he remembered Toby's warning. He didn't want to get anywhere near the snakes! Instead, he jumped into the bushes where he'd first seen Toby and found lots of bugs crawling in the dirt. He snapped his tongue caught a big, juicy beetle that he swallowed in a single bite. Snap! His tongue struck again and caught an earthworm, one of his favorite snacks. Croaker downed a fly, three ants a second beetle, and then, with a full belly, set off on his journey home.

Croaker jumped until he was too tired to jump. He found a tree with moss covered roots and decided to sleep there for the night. The woods were noisy. Croaker heard crickets cricketing, owls hooting and a dog barking in the distance. Tired after such a long day, Croaker fell asleep the moment he shut his eyes.

In the morning, Croaker ate two centipedes that he found crawling in the tree roots. They weren't as good as Mama's breakfasts, but would have to do. After finishing his meal, he started jumping towards home. He was looking forward to seeing Mama and playing with Thump-Thump.

Hacklepuss the Hedgehog

After jumping until lunch time, Croaker stopped for a quick rest and a snack, but before he could find any bugs to eat, he heard something coming towards him. He hid against a tree, just as he did when he played hide and seek.

A big hairy hedgehog crashed through the bushes. It was bigger than Croaker, had brown bristly fur, beady black eyes and a mouth full of sharp teeth. The hedgehog scrunched its nose and sniffed.



Croaker didn't move. He remained perfectly still and hoped that the hedgehog didn't find him. Just then, a tasty-looking fly buzzed past Croaker's head. His tongue shot out and caught the fly. Croaker knew that he shouldn't, but he couldn't help himself. The fly was too tasty.

The hedgehog turned and looked in Croaker's direction.

"Heh heh heh, little frog, I've got you now," said the hedgehog. "You'll make a nice lunch." It bared its teeth and inched forward.

"Please Mr. Hedgehog, don't eat me," said Croaker, breathing in.

"The name's Hacklepuss. Hacklepuss Hedgehog. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't eat you."

"Because I'm lost and I want to go home," said Croaker, breathing out. A big air bubble formed in his throat.

"That's not good enough, little frog. You're in my home now and that makes you mine." Hacklepuss licked his lips

"Please, don't hurt me," pleaded Croaker.

Just then, a shadow loomed over the both of them and a loud booming sound echoed in the wood. The shadow grew closer and the booming grew louder. The ground started to shake. Then, a boy walked into view. Croaker's mother had told him that the people who lived near the lake were dangerous. Now he knew why. The boy was huge. His tennis shoes, white with red stripes, were taller than Croaker. His blue jeans would cover most of the tree that he and Thump-Thump played on. His t-shirt had a terrifying picture of a giant bird, several times Croaker's size and over it the boy wore a pocketed plaid flannel shirt.

The hedgehog backed away. "You're a lucky, little frog, Croaker. I'll have to eat you another day."

Hacklepuss disappeared into the woods.

Chapter 4



The boy squatted a few feet from Croaker and held out the palm of his hand, “Come here, little frog, I won’t hurt you.”

Mama had told Croaker to stay away from the people by the lake, but the boy seemed nice.

“Hi there. What’s your name?” he croaked, deciding to take a chance. The boy had scared Hacklepuss away.

“Wow!” said the boy. “A talking frog! My name’s Peter. What’s yours?”

“I’m Croaker.” He expanded his throat and then ribbited loudly.

“Croaker. That’s a good name for a frog,” said Peter. “Do you live here?”

“No,” sniffled Croaker. “I live at the lake, but I don’t know where it is.”

“I do,” Peter smiled. “It’s not too far from here.”

Croaker thumped his back leg like Thump-Thump did. “It’s not?”

Peter stood tall and looked down. Croaker felt very small. “Well, it’s not too far for me. It might take you a bit longer.”

“I can jump pretty far, Peter. I’m the best jumper there is.” Croaker jumped high into the air to prove his point.

Peter nodded his approval. “I’m impressed. You are a good jumper.”

Croaker snapped his tongue towards the sun. “Told you so.”

Peter shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand and looked toward the lake.

“Even so, jumping home will take you a long time.”

“Oh,” said Croaker, disappointed.

Peter folded his arms across his chest and chewed on his lower lip. “Unless ...”

“Unless what?” Croaker really wanted to go home.

“Unless I took you to the lake.” Peter stooped and held out his hand. “Hop on. You’ll be home soon.”

“Okay. Thanks Peter.” Croaker jumped onto his hand.

Peter put Croaker on his shoulder. He looked down and saw Peter’s t-shirt.

“Ribbit! Ribbit!” he croaked.

“What’s the matter, Croaker?” Peter picked him up and held him in his hand.

“Your t-shirt. It’s scary.”

“It’s just a picture of an eagle. My Dad won it for me at the fair.”

Croaker reminded Peter. “Eagles are scary. They eat frogs.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that. What if I put you in there?” Peter pointed to a pocket on the flannel shirt.

The pocket looked cozy and he wouldn’t see the eagle from there. “Good idea. That looks nice.”

Peter dropped Croaker into the pocket. “If you stand, you can see where we’re going. That way, if you get lost again, you’ll know how to get home.”

Croaker was amazed at how fast Peter could walk. Even on his best day, he couldn’t have kept up. The woods flew by. Birds sang from tree branches. Squirrels scavenged for nuts and a dog barked. It sounded like the same dog that barked the night before.



Peter’s House

Soon Peter came to a big clearing where there weren’t any trees. A building rose from the ground.

“What’s that?” he asked Peter.

“I live there. That’s my house.”

The back door opened and a woman much bigger than Peter stepped outside. Her long, brown hair blew in the wind.

“Uh oh,” said Peter.

Croaker crouched down in the pocket. “Who’s that?”

“My Mama.”

Peter's Mama called from the door. "Lunch time, Peter! I made you blueberry pancakes."

Peter started walking toward the house. "They're my favorite."

Croaker stood on his hind legs and snapped his tongue at Peter's chin. "Peter, you said you'd take me home."

"I will, but we have to go to my house first. I'll get in trouble if I don't. You can have some pancakes, too."

"What are pancakes?"

"You'll like them. I'll take you home after lunch."

As they came into the backyard, a sheepdog bounded over, jumped up and put its paws on Peter's chest. Croaker slunk to the bottom of Peter's pocket, but it was too late, the dog had already smelled him.

"Get down, Wagger." Peter pushed the dog away. "Don't worry, Croaker. He won't hurt you. He just wants to play."

Wagger

Croaker peeked at Wagger. The dog barked and his tail wagged from side to side.

"Wagger! Get back over here," called Peter's neighbor.

Wagger barked louder and his tail wagged faster. Croaker curled up in the bottom of Peter's pocket. Mama was right; there were lots of scary things down the river.



"Wagger, come here!" said the neighbor, more sternly and after a final wag of his tail, the dog ran back to his yard.

Chapter 5

Peter's Mama was watching. "Hurry up, Peter. Your lunch is getting cold."

"Coming, Mama." Peter ran across the yard, tossing Croaker from side to side. The centipedes he'd eaten for breakfast were bouncing around in his stomach. He thought he might get sick.

Peter sat down at the kitchen table and Croaker rolled to a stop in the corner of the pocket. He squirmed to his feet and peered over the edge. Peter's Mama sat directly across from Peter. A plate on the table held a stack of golden disks smothered in sweet smelling blueberry syrup.

"What do you have there, Peter?" she pointed to Croaker's pocket.

Peter stared at his food. "Nothing."

"Something's moving in your pocket. And whatever it is, its round, black eyes are staring at me."

"Oh, that's my new friend, Croaker the frog."

"A frog?"

"Yeah, he's green and slimy and he's a really good jumper. Croaker, say hello to my Mama."

Croaker stood up in the pocket, after all the nice things Peter had said, it was the least he could do. "Ribbit!"

He would show Peter's Mama what a good jumper he was. He flexed his legs and sprang on to the table, landing between a stick of butter and a candlestick.

"See, I told you he was a good jumper." Peter held his pocket open, "Come on, Croaker. Jump back in."

"Ribbit, ribbit," he croaked and then he jumped back into the pocket.

"That is an amazing frog," said Peter's Mama. "Where did you find him?"

Peter took a bite of his pancakes. "Down by the river. A hedgehog was about to eat him."

In the pocket, Croaker shuddered at the memory of Hacklepuss. "Ribbit!" he croaked. "Ribbit! Ribbit!"

Peter gobbled some more down. "He's lost. I'm taking him home after lunch."

"Really? That's very nice of you. How do you know he's lost?"

"He told me. He's been gone since yesterday and his Mama's worried about him."

She reached out and grabbed Peter's hand. "I would imagine so. I would be very worried if you were missing that long, Peter. Where does he live?"

"In the lake in the park," Peter mumbled between bites.

Blueberry Pancakes

“He told you that too?”

Peter sighed, “Yes. I told you, he talks to me. Say something Croaker.”

“Ribbit! Ribbit!”

She leaned forward. “Did he say something?”

Mouth full, Peter nodded. A stain of purple covered his lips and his chin.

“Ribbit! Ribbit!” Croaker repeated.

Peter’s Mama tilted her head. “What did he say that time?”

Peter chewed and swallowed. “He wanted to know if the lake was close.”

She handed him a napkin. “Really? A talking frog, you say? That’s simply amazing, Peter.”

“These pancakes are great, Mama! Can I give some to Croaker?”

She leaned back in her chair. “He likes pancakes?”

“I’ll ask him. Do you want to try some pancakes, Croaker?”

“Ribbit!”

“Was that a yes or a no?” asked Peter’s mother.

“He said yes. He’s never tried pancakes before but he want to. He wondered if pancakes with blueberry tastes like bugs.”

“All that in one ribbit? Your frog is quite amazing, Peter.”

“I know.” Peter dropped a piece of pancake into the pocket and Croaker sniffed it. It didn’t smell like any bug. He touched it with his tongue. The syrup was sweet and sticky, like tree sap. He took a small bite.

“Ribbit, ribbit,” he croaked.

Peter smiled, “He says he likes it.”

“I’m so relieved,” said Peter’s Mama.

Croaker ate the rest in a single bite. “Ribbit, ribbit.”

“What did he –” began Peter’s Mama.

“He said that the pancakes are so good that he may never eat bugs again.”



Peter's Mama laughed, "I suppose I should take that as a compliment. Counting you and the frog, that's two who like my cooking."

Chapter 6

After lunch, Croaker said good-bye to Peter's Mama. She said that he could come back for more blueberry pancakes whenever he wanted. After making sure that Croaker was safe in his pocket, Peter climbed onto his bicycle. He pedaled to the park and came to a stop when he reached the lake.

Croaker could see the tree that he and Thump-Thump played on, his favorite lily pad and his Mama. He was almost home! All he had to do was jump to the shore and swim to the lily pads. Croaker jumped out of Peter's pocket and landed on the ground. "You've done it, Peter. You've brought me home!"

"Goodbye, Croaker," said Peter. "I'm going to miss you."

Croaker hopped around in circles, happy to be back at the lake. "We can still be friends. Now that you know where I live, you can visit whenever you'd like, but if you do, be sure and bring some of your Mama's blueberry pancakes!"

"Okay," promised Peter. "Can I come back tomorrow?"

"Sure. You can meet my friend Thump-Thump. You'll like him."

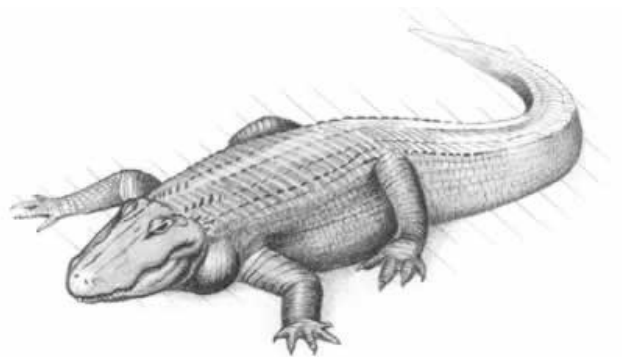
"Then I'll see you tomorrow." Peter got back on his bike and rode home.

Croaker hopped towards the lake. Not too far from the shore, a log floated in the water, drifting slowly towards him. Croaker thought that the storm must have broken another tree, but when the log was only a few feet from Croaker, it opened its eyes.

"Oh no!" cried Croaker. "That's not a log, its mean Mr. Alligator!"

Mean Mr. Alligator climbed ashore and waddled towards Croaker.

"Not so fast, mean Mr. Alligator. You're not going to get me, not when I'm almost home." Croaker tensed and jumped



harder than he ever had before. He flew high into the air, past mean Mr. Alligator, and landed on his favorite lily pad, right next to his mother.

“Croaker, where have you been? I’ve been so worried about you.” Her wet tongue licked him with a big frog’s kiss. “I’m so glad you’re home. Did mean Mr. Alligator hurt you?”

“Of course not. I jumped over his head before he could get me. After all, I am the best jumper! Oh Mama, I’ve been on such an adventure. I went down the river, met Toby the Turtle, Hacklepuss the Hedgehog, avoided some snakes, ate lots of good bugs, met my new friend Peter, a boy who lives by the lake, and his neighbor’s shaggy dog Wagger.”

“A boy from the lake! Coming here? Oh no! Haven’t I told you that the people who live by the lake are dangerous?”

“Don’t worry, Mama. Peter’s a nice boy. He saved me from Hacklepuss and, best of all, he gave me some blueberry pancakes. They taste even better than bugs!

The End