

**The First Two Pages of “What’s a Little Murder Between Mammals?”  
by Rosalie Spielman**

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An Essay by Rosalie Spielman

My story, “What’s a Little Murder Between Mammals” features a species of supernatural creature. While I invented a fancy name, *Transfigurateur* (or “Tfig” for short), it’s not a new idea by any means. There are myths from many cultures describing them—shapeshifters, Skinwalkers, glamours, metamorphs, or therianthropes, or if you’re a fan of *Calvin and Hobbes*, someone using the Transmogriifier. In short, a human that can change appearances or into different forms at will by magical or paranormal means.

After a mild and non-creature specific beginning, I introduced the readers to the paranormal aspect with a comedic jolt.

He ignored me and dug in. By the time I changed clothes, he had finished and moved to the couch.

“All right, sweetie, now that my hunger is satisfied, how was your day?” Frank asked. He gracefully lifted his leg and began licking the back of his thigh.

Frank, to the readers, is now an oddly flexible man with strange grooming habits. Zoey then informs us that he is not just a talking cat, but a Transfigurateur, and I introduce the species from there.

There were old stories, and the results of those were bad enough. Werewolves? Yup, that’s us. Vampires turning into bats? Yup.

Shapeshifters, golems, Bigfoot—a guy named Cletus who got stuck halfway during a change.

My characters are Zooley the Tfig (her name being a play on zoo or zoology, of course), Tera, her human roommate (Terra, or earth), and Frank, the feline ex-boyfriend. His name, honestly, was inspired by Major Frank Burns from *MASH*, the whiney but loveable pain in the tuckus.

Though he isn't the main character, Frank was the impetus for the whole story concept. When my family adopted a cat a few years ago, I was perplexed when he would sit and watch me in the shower. Instead of just assuming (like a normal person might) the cat was fascinated by the water drips on the shower door, I decided he was a pervert—perhaps even a perverted human in cat form. But for the purpose of the story, comedic and plot-wise, Frank needed to stay a cat and *not* be able to change, so I came up for a reason for this:

Unfortunately for Frank, sometimes when a T-fig has a traumatic experience while in another form, they can get stuck. A traumatic experience like, say, being held off a balcony by the scruff of their neck.

*Fortunately* for Frank, I felt responsible for his getting stuck because I was the one who held him off the balcony by his scruff.

Zooley supports herself (and Frank) with her natural abilities as a “temporary personal assistant.” Her skills are useful as a private investigator, though her line of work is certainly hazardous.

It wasn't the safest line of work, but then again, the life of a T-fig isn't safe to begin with. The list of things that could happen was

endless, like being hit by cars, sucked into jet engines, eaten by other animals. That happened to my uncle Ernie, who'd liked to annoy his wife by leaving snail tracks on their house's big picture window. He was on one of his cross-window trips when a bird surprised him. Or at least that's what my aunt said.

Zooey's life experiences have made her jaded, as I felt a proper PI should be.

Most clients didn't ask how I did what I was hired to do. I dreaded the day when I met someone who would pry into my methods. Leverage is always on the menu though, and I always manage to collect a little info on my clients in case anyone did ask questions. In the case of the fancy lady with the missing ring, it was that her husband was a bit of a deviant with a penchant for nannies. And they didn't even have kids.

In the story, Zooey is hired by a man to find his missing brother, who just happens to be Tera's boss. Frank's cat-ness becomes useful when Zooey goes to investigate the wife, a veterinarian.

Unable to leave this world alone, I've written a prequel of Zooey and Tera in high school, conducting their first investigation. "Of Mice And (Murdered) Men" will appear in the next Chesapeake Crimes anthology, *Chesapeake Crimes: Three Strikes, You're Dead*, coming in 2024.

### **The First Two Pages of "What's a Little Murder Between Mammals?"**

When I walked in the door, Frank was waiting on a chair in the dinette, with a sour look on his face.

"Did you get it?" he asked.

"Yes, Frank, I got it." I dug in my messenger bag and plonked a can of tuna on the table.

He looked from the can to me imperiously. “Well,” he said in his annoyingly appealing baritone. “Open it, would you?”

I sighed as I stuck the can of tuna fish on the can opener. “And how was your day, Zooey?” I mocked as the opener whirred the top off. “Oh, that’s nice. And thank you for the tuna.” I glared while I put the open can in front of him. “I thank *you* for reminding me why you are my ex-boyfriend.”

He ignored me and dug in. By the time I changed clothes, he had finished and moved to the couch.

“All right, sweetie, now that my hunger is satisfied, how was your day?” Frank asked. He gracefully lifted his leg and began licking the back of his thigh.

This is probably a good time to mention that Frank is currently, or perhaps permanently, a cat. We are both *transfigurateurs*, quasi-human beings with the ability to turn into pretty much any organic lifeform at will.

Unfortunately for Frank, sometimes when a T-fig has a traumatic experience while in another form, they can get stuck. A traumatic experience like, say, being held off a balcony by the scruff of their neck.

*Fortunately* for Frank, I felt responsible for his getting stuck because I was the one who held him off the balcony by his scruff.

A few weeks after I’d broken up with my tall, dark, and handsome ex, a cute tuxedo cat had showed up on the doorstep of the house I shared with my roommate, Tera. Being suckers, we kept him, despite the cat having the odd habit of watching me shower. I didn’t figure it out until I caught him using the toilet like a human and dangled him until he fessed up. A silver lining was I didn’t have to pay for kitty litter anymore.

“My day was okay,” I said, plopping onto the couch. “I’ve got a potential client, a guy who wants me to look for his missing brother.”

“Sounds like an easy job.” Frank resumed his grooming, shifting to a more personal area.

“Dude!” I grimaced, turning my face away. “Come on. We’ve talked about this!”

“I have to clean, Zooey!” he mumbled between licks.

The longer we stay in one form, the more like that animal we become. If Frank was unable to ever change back, he would eventually lose any human traits.

“Did you try to change today?” I asked him, starting our daily ritual of mistrust and assumptions.

“Yes.” He stopped grooming to look me in the eye. “Of course, I did. You think I want to stay a cat?”

“Well, seeing you get everything done for you and live here scot-free, yes.” I raised my eyebrows. “Don’t get me wrong, I fantasize about being someone’s pampered pet too. But you can’t tell me you’re trying if you’re not.”

“I am trying, I promise you.” He stood with his paws on my arm so he could look me in the eye. “I’d pinky swear but you know, no pinkies.” He held up a paw to prove it.

The front door opened, and Tera called, “Who all is home?”

“In here,” I answered. Tera was a normal human and my best friend since forever. She was the only human I ever told about me being a T-fig, a huge no-no for my species. Presumably (and if asked) I kept her around as a friend in case I’d need to silence her, but really, we were partners in crime. That had especially been true when we were teenagers—her sneaking me in mouse form into the movies and me occasionally providing the answers to our math tests.

Tera walked in carrying a pizza box. “My turn to cook, right?” She laughed at her own joke and turned to Frank, her long ebony box braids swinging around her. She narrowed her eyes at him. “Cat.”

Frank stared back at her with his yellow eyes. “Theresa.”

She frowned. “Damn, I keep hoping I’ll come home one day and he’ll just meow.”

I laughed and followed her into the kitchen, where we sat at the table to eat. Tera had texted me earlier that her boss, John Brody, hadn’t showed up for work for the second day in a row, so I asked, “Did Brody ever show?”

“Nope. How was your day? Find the ring the fancy lady lost?”

I nodded and swallowed my first delicious bite of anchovy pizza—the things we did for Frank, who’d get a few of the toppings before the meal was done. “Yep. No problem for a bloodhound. It was under the couch in this deep-pile rug that smelled like . . . ugh, I don’t even want to think about it.”

I used my abilities to support myself. The official job title I claimed for my freelance work was “temporary personal assistant.” I could find lost things, get information, those kind of jobs. Most clients didn’t ask how I did what I was hired to do. I dreaded the day when I met someone who would pry into my methods. Leverage is always on

the menu though, and I always manage to collect a little info on my clients in case anyone did ask questions. In the case of the fancy lady with the missing ring, it was that her husband was a bit of a deviant with a penchant for nannies. And they didn't even have kids.

It wasn't the safest line of work, but then again, the life of a T-fig isn't safe to begin with. The list of things that could happen was endless, like being hit by cars, sucked into jet engines, eaten by other animals. That happened to my uncle Ernie, who'd liked to annoy his wife by leaving snail tracks on their house's big picture window. He was on one of his cross-window trips when a bird surprised him. Or at least that's what my aunt said.

Our species could have it much worse if humans knew about us though. There were old stories, and the results of those were bad enough. Werewolves? Yup, that's us. Vampires turning into bats? Yup. Shapeshifters, golems, Bigfoot—a guy named Cletus who got stuck halfway during a change. So if humans, with their penchant for cutting up and weaponizing things, found us out . . . things could be so much worse.

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Rosalie Spielman is a mother, veteran, and spouse of a recently retired career officer. After moving eleven times in twenty-four years, she and her family currently live in Maryland. After discovering that she could, in fact, make other people laugh with her writing, she began writing in earnest. She finds joy in giving people a humorous escape from the real world.

The first in her Hometown Mysteries series, *Welcome Home to Murder*, featuring a recently retired Army officer who returns to her hometown, was published in 2022. She also has made several contributions to the multi-author Aloha Lagoon series from Gemma Halliday Publishing.

You can learn more about Rosalie and her books by visiting her webpage at [www.Rosalie-Spielman-Author.com](http://www.Rosalie-Spielman-Author.com), or joining her Facebook readers' group, [You Know The Spiel](#).