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## Street Cuisine

The way Carlotta described the man chilled Donald. That he willed his transformation was the most frightening part to both of them, though she wasn't as shaken as he would have expected.

"You know in those werewolf movies," she said. "The way the monster is kind of helpless, he can't really *do* anything about it, so you feel kind of sorry for him? Well, this one was in control. I could tell. It was deliberate."

"But he didn't turn into a wolf," Donald mused.

"A tiger," she repeated, chopping a radish into the salad. "A big, hungry tiger."

Donald did not doubt her story for a minute. It was difficult for her to lie, she looked squeamish when she attempted it. Plus, she had a distant, uncomprehending look in her eyes which she couldn't have been faking. She'd seen the man turn into a tiger and go bounding off after some street kid. The kid had been eaten quickly and neatly; Donald couldn't believe she'd watched the whole thing.

"First question," he said, trying to grasp it all. "Why didn't he go after *you*? You were standing right there."

“He already had his eye on that boy,” she said. “He *did* see me at the last second, but he’d already decided on the boy. It was dark,” she added, for no apparent reason, perhaps only to further describe the wickedness of the scene.

“Foolish to cut through the park at night,” he commented. “Second question. Is this creature man or beast? Is he a man who turns into a tiger or a tiger who turns into a man?”

“Man into tiger,” she said, setting the table.

“You’re sure?”

“How would he get along otherwise?” she pointed out. “He must be a man most of the time, a tiger occasionally. The other way around he’d have been noticed long before now. Besides,” she said, looking at him. “I’ve seen him around.”

“No.” Donald was shocked. “Where?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “On the train maybe, or the store. But his face was a little familiar. Before he changed. He’s probably someone I pass on the street at different times, something like that.”

“Now the major question,” Donald said steadily. “What to do about it?”

They were both silent. They sat down to the dinner she’d made and ate moodily. Carlotta had prepared them a nice meal, but they had trouble concentrating on the food.

“I say forget the whole thing,” Donald finally ventured.

“I say go after him,” she said.

“Go *after* him?” he gawked at her. “The alternatives I had in mind were forgetting about it altogether or reporting him to the authorities. Going after him wasn’t a consideration.”

She didn’t say anything.

“One,” he told her, “how would we do it? Two, to what purpose would we do it? Three, is it really our problem?”

“By going after him, I don’t mean actually capturing him,” she explained. “I just want to follow him. Out of curiosity. Aren’t you curious about this?”

“I’m concerned for our safety,” he said seriously. “I’ll admit, I’m curious, but I don’t see a good reason to pursue it. You saw the man turn into a tiger and hunt down a young street kid. You described this to me in detail. What will we gain by following him and watching him do it again?”

“Well, *I’d* like to find out *why* he does it.”

“Communicate with him? Out of the question.”

“I just can’t leave this thing alone.”

“Something occurs to me,” he said, snapping his fingers. “You saw him change into a tiger, but does he *always* change into a tiger? It’s possible he can change into *anything*. Is he limited to tiger/human form, or can he be anything he chooses at any given time?”

“There you go,” she said. “That’s something we could find out from him.”

“Far too dangerous,” he said. “Actually, to be honest, I wish sincerely that you’d never been witness to this thing. It could lead to a lot of trouble.”

“He likes being a tiger.”

“What?”

“When he chased down that boy. He looked happy. He was purring.”

“I say we don’t get involved.”

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She did not let the matter rest. Two days later she called him.

“I know who he is,” she said.

“In that case,” he told her, “give his name to the police. But tell them you want to stay as clear of the situation as possible.”

“I don’t actually know his name,” she admitted. “But I know why he seemed familiar. He drives my bus in the mornings. The 8:06.”

“A *bus* driver?” he asked, surprised. “That’s pretty mundane for someone who can transform at will into a carnivorous beast. I would have expected a more exotic occupation.”

“I know it’s him,” she said. “This morning I happened to look straight at him as I was getting on the bus, but I didn’t let on I recognized him from the other night.”

“Did *he* recognize *you*?” Donald asked. “That could be a big problem.”

“I’m not sure,” she mused. “He was absorbed in the newspaper and just glanced at me. He’s a competent enough driver.”

“I suppose it’s safe,” Donald thought aloud. “It’s too bad you have to be so close to him every morning, but then again, he certainly can’t transform in front of a busload of people. I’m sure even *he* has to keep a job.”

“Come with me tomorrow,” Carlotta asked. “I want you to get a look at him.”

Donald felt uneasy. “I don’t want to get on the bus with him,” he told her.

“We don’t have to,” she said. “I can wait for the 8:22. There’s a diner right in front of the bus stop. We can have coffee and watch him. He usually gets there at 8:00, then pulls out at 8:06. We’ll have six minutes to watch him. Then I’ll just take the next bus.”

Donald had to think about it. “We have to make sure we’re inconspicuous,” he cautioned. “I don’t want him knowing that *we* know, or even *suspecting* that we know.”

“He won’t know,” she assured him.

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They met at the diner at ten minutes before eight the next morning. They made sure they had seats at the big front window and ordered coffee. At the stroke of eight she said, “Here he comes.”

The big yellow and white bus pulled up to the curb directly in front of them. The door popped open and about six or seven people who had been waiting got on.

“So that’s him,” Donald said thoughtfully, sipping his coffee and staring from the corner of his eye.

They could see him clearly, slouched down in the driver’s seat, reading the morning paper. He was fairly young, blond and lanky with a thick mustache. He glanced up occasionally as passengers boarded the bus.

“He seems pretty unassuming,” Donald noted.

“I know,” agreed Carlotta.

The man glanced at his watch, stuffed the paper down next to his seat and closed the bus door.

“Right on schedule,” she remarked.

The driver looked in the rear view mirror and they saw him suddenly smile voraciously at his busload of passengers. It was the first time, thought Donald, that the man had looked at all tigerish.

“There he goes,” he said, as the bus pulled away from the curb.

“Wait a minute...” Carlotta said, surprised. “He’s going the wrong way. He’s supposed to take a right and it looks like he’s going straight.”

They both leaned closer to the window to keep the bus in view. Donald glimpsed the faces of the passengers looking startled, their mouths moving in a confused babble.

“Where’s he taking them?” Carlotta pondered. “He’s gone off in a totally different direction. You can’t get downtown that way.”

They paid for their coffee and hurried outside. They saw, in the distance, the bus disappearing around a corner.

“Want to get your car and try to follow?” she asked.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “We don’t want to get involved in this. And I suggest that just to be safe, from now on you take the 8:22.”

“I want to find out more about him,” she said.

“I think we know quite enough as it is,” he told her. “I don’t want to bring attention to ourselves by following him around. We’ll just pretend we don’t know what he’s doing.”

“What if we *confronted* him?” she speculated. “We could tell him right off we’re not going to turn him in, we just want to ask him some questions.”

“Not a chance,” said Donald. “I don’t want to talk to him because I don’t want to give him the impression I approve of what he does. I *don’t* approve, and I won’t have him feeling like a celebrity with two avid groupies trailing him around.”

“Well, *I* might give it a try,” she said. “I mean, talking to him. I’ll do it carefully.”

“You’re asking for trouble,” he said. “Do what you want, but don’t expect any cooperation from me. I’m adamantly against it.”

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“*Why* do I do it...?” mused the bus driver. “Ah, there’s the question. I suppose I do it simply because I *can*.”

He was sitting comfortably, arms stretched out along the back of the sofa, his legs thrust out before him, ankles crossed casually. “No one’s ever put their foot down about it,” he continued. “And I’d simply eat them if they did.”

His smile was benevolent and expansive.

“Did you eat the whole busload of people?” asked Carlotta, putting a rum drink in front of him.

“The whole lot,” he confirmed. “They didn’t look too excited to be heading in to work anyhow. It was a crazy impulse, I’ll admit.”

Donald stood stiffly in the kitchen doorway, watching the man, his face carefully neutral, though his disapproval was easily sensed. He’d been outraged when he’d come over to Carlotta’s for drinks, at her invitation, only to learn that she’d also asked the beast to join them.

“I refuse to stay,” he’d told her firmly, and would have left right then, but a knock on the door caused him to hesitate.

“It’s him,” said Carlotta, hurrying to answer the knock. “Try to be polite.”

Donald still considered leaving. But he wondered if the sight of a weaker being in the act of fleeing could prompt some instinct to pursue in the beast. So he stayed, standing rigidly in the doorway, contributing little to the conversation.

“How long have you been doing this?” she asked, perched on the edge of her chair, leaning forward.

The beast sipped his drink, then closed his eyes briefly in appreciation.

“How long?” he pondered, addressing the question seriously. “Ages,” he said. “Or should I say, I can’t remember when I *haven’t* done it. Just like I’m sure you can’t recall the first time you got up in the morning to brush your teeth or the first time you took a step on your own. Certain actions are so inherent in our daily routine, are such a part of our personal patterns, that they cease to be conscious acts. It’s the deviations from the routine that we look upon separately.”

“In other words,” said Donald, in a controlled voice, “you’re saying that what you do is *not* a deviation? It’s *normal*?”

“For me, certainly,” said the man, sipping his drink.

“Aren’t you afraid of getting caught?” asked Carlotta. “Aren’t you afraid of a Van Helsing, like in Dracula, or... or peasants with torches, like in Frankenstein?”

“Or the nemesis that seems to ultimately befall every ‘monster’ in every horror flick,” said the beast. “Well, the ‘heroes’ in those stories are just as fictional as the ‘monsters,’ may I remind you. They too are products of the imagination. Maybe even more so; the hero who puts a stop to the monster’s rampage is necessary to the reader or movie-goer so that he or she can believe the story is really over when it says ‘The End.’ He’s a necessary invention.”

Donald was greatly irritated at the way Carlotta was hanging on the beast's every word. The day before he'd said to her, "Is it the danger that appeals to you? Is that why you're so determined to pursue this? Because I'll tell you, I'm not impressed with thrill seekers. I don't find them exciting or heroic. They're just neurotics, trying to fill some sick need in their lives."

"I'm just curious," she insisted resentfully.

Now she'd gone and invited the beast into her private residence to share drinks. It was madness.

"A lovely home," nodded the beast, glancing around.

"Oh, thank you," she smiled. "Each month I save money to add something new. Nothing expensive. Last month it was that watercolor landscape." She pointed.

"Tasteful," approved the Beast.

Donald poured himself a drink, finding it increasingly difficult to mask his disgust at the situation. What added to his quiet fury was that Carlotta in turn seemed increasingly indifferent to his dissatisfaction.

"It was lovely of you," smiled the Beast, "to invite me here for dinner."

Donald looked at him, flabbergasted, then at Carlotta. "Drinks!" he reminded her, clenching his jaw. "You said it was just for drinks. No mention of having him to dinner!"

Carlotta started to speak, but the Beast held up a hand, palm facing them.

"My mistake," he said, still smiling.

“Let me get more ice,” she said, as the Beast slipped off his jacket. She brushed past Donald and went into the kitchen, closing the door behind her. For a while she stayed there, staring from the window, humming absently to herself. She gazed at length at her reflection in the side of the toaster, wondering if it was time to trim her bangs. Then she glanced at her watch and returned to the living room, not with ice but with a large tray of fragrant spice cookies.

“Dessert!” she chirped merrily to the Beast who was settling back down on the couch, putting his jacket back on.

“You’re too kind,” he said, taking a cookie. “I’m very full, but this is nice.”

“Not at all,” she said. “By the way,” she giggled, “where’s Donald?”

They both laughed.