

Everybody Likes Pet

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What an animal I am, I know no more. I've been trying for two full years. There isn't a single wildlife documentary that I haven't watched. I have followed doves across rooftops, cats along walls and through alleys, and I have also crawled on all fours behind dogs and donkeys. Yes, I'm persistent. I dare to say I'm an animal by now, all set. Even more than what my Dad is used to call me—"dog's bitch." But I have no idea why Dad's behavior towards me hasn't changed in the slightest even though I'm trying my best. Maybe I should have stayed a dog or become more dog, but unfortunately it's too late. I don't remember what I was before. To make up for it, tonight, when Dad arrives, I'll lick his hands and feet. Everybody likes pet.

Dad gave me a burning slap on the back of my head. He was really mad at me; I did my business in the corner of the yard. That's why. It's not my fault. Never have I seen an animal use a toilet. I tried to hide in a corner to clean myself up by licking, but he came down on me even harder. When I started howling, he no longer recognized me. He kicked me a few times in the side and tossed me into the street. He told me to go to my stray friends. Why on earth is he saying this? I have no friends, I have nobody but him. The more I think about it I guess he's not completely off. After all, perhaps I am really a dog. I have never seen a horse, a cat or even a cow being called a stray.

It's been hours, hunger and thirst are driving me crazy. There's no clean water left in the gutters to drink and thanks to the high price, there are more waste pickers now who don't leave anything for us. I don't want to try hunting either. It's not fair to take an innocent life, for every living life has its own worth, I don't know about mine. I'm looking for some shade to rest in and yet not a single tree in sight. All around me it's hot asphalt, burning my hands and feet. I'm worried this single layer of clothing will fall apart and I'll get arrested for wandering around naked in public. It's not fair. After all, which animal wears clothes.

I was slowly sneaking along the edge of the alley, looking for some shade. When Mr. X, my Dad's opium buddy, turned up with his two sons. I darted under the car, but one of the boys spotted me and tried to grab my leg and pull me out from under the car. I was struggling there, kicking like a wild horse, flailing my arms and letting out a frantic neigh. His father was shouting, "Have you no shame? You, filthy mutt. Why are you dragging your dad's name through mud? He should have cut your head off when you were a kid. I'll have you picked up off the street right now and locked in an asylum, you'll be made to forget such follies..." His other son was taking my picture with his mobile and laughing.

I was lucky that Mr. X's mobile rang and in the hope of a fat deal, they let me go. I felt sorry for whoever was meant to be defrauded by them. As soon as they got to the corner of the street, I scrambled up the wall on all fours using the gas pipe and crouched in a corner. I am not afraid of the asylum, as people like Mr. X never end up there; I'm afraid of needles.

I'm miles away from our neighborhood. I am dead tired. Everyone in their own way, made sure I couldn't get a moment's rest. The boys ganging up on me, the shopkeepers shooing me

out, kids throwing stones... At least I learnt many swear words. Sure, I am an expert at imitating anything animal yet they mistake me for a lunatic who intends to attack (without warning) out of nowhere. So why is it only Dad who knows that I am an animal?

In the middle of the square, amid the crowd, a woman was tossing stale bread to the pigeons. I crept forward slowly, like a cat on the hunt. I stared at her hands as she tossed the crumbs in the air. Ever since I was a child, I could imitate a dove's coo better than any other animal.

"Coo, coo." The woman panicked and started screaming. The more I tried to calm her, pawing at her skirt, the more frightened she became. Others rushed over to help and I got my ass kicked.

What was the problem? Maybe not everybody likes every animal, especially if they start to talk out of nowhere. I love all creatures, and of them all, I wanted to be a mouse; They were small and omnivorous, so they rarely went hungry. If they were careful, the homeowner wouldn't notice them. That way, I could still stay with Dad, under his roof, under his sofa, beneath his bed or beside the litter brazier whose smoke filled the room.

I looked at my reflection in the shop window. My bald head, streaked with tears and soot, gave me the look of one of the mystical gods. I slid under the stairs of a shopping center, where a sign warned that animals were not allowed. Every time the mall door opened, a cold drought slipped out and brushed against me. A scrap of paper lifted by the air from under a passerby's foot and stuck to my face. It was a stubborn one. I tried to free my snout with my hands and feet. Before it could fly back into the air and the sun could glare at me from behind it, I read it: "The Sun Desert Circus is coming to town."

I felt slightly out of place because of my filthy look and torn-up clothes, but I was ready to explain it all to the circus manager. From a few miles away, I spotted a yellow and red circus tent, made even more beautiful with strings of colored lights, glittering brilliantly in the darkest of night. I entered the circus grounds. It seemed that the tightrope walkers, actors, and dancers were resting in their caravans, because almost no one was there. The circus tent stood upright, magnificent, and alluring. The animals must have been under its dome, practicing in the spotlight and showing off. I crept forward to get a look around. It was just as splendid as I had expected, yet still empty. I was delighted by the colorful patterns, the posters and the decorations. I wanted to leap about, run across the platforms and race around the place.

Surely, they would accept me. After all, I was a whole collection of animals. This was exactly the place for me. Suddenly someone cleared their throat, and I was startled.

The manager's tent was much smaller, set up behind the main tent. The floor was covered with a worn red carpet, and a handmade wooden chandelier hung from the scaffold pole in the center.

"Excuse me, sir... Madam?"

"That doesn't matter, can I stay?"

"It's not really about that..."

"No... please! Don't say "no" that quick. You must see what I can do!"

I started to waggle and twist my bottom.

"Just tell me the animal's name. What animal do you want me to be?"

My voice sounded less and less human with every word that slipped from my mouth. The next thing I knew, I was scratching at the red carpet with my nails, racing around the little

room. I barked at a plant by the tent pole, then hung from the scaffold bar and let out a long, braying neigh. The circus manager couldn't take his eyes off me. My last attempt was to fall on my back before him and roll like a donkey. He looked truly impressed.

"So you're saying you're not a human."

"Yes. I'm whatever you want, except a human."

"Well, that's a problem in itself... You may be a very capable creature, but you are not aware of the new law, are you?"

I sat down, staring at him, like a dog. He looked uneasy.

"By the law just passed, no circus is allowed to use animals anymore."

I couldn't help it; A howl tore its way out of me.

"I really am sorry but it's the law."

"Then, what happens to people like me?"

"Do you have any talent other than being an animal?"

"No."

"I can hire you as a manual laborer."

"You don't understand, I'm not a human anymore."

"That's really bad."

I wanted to cuckoo, but only a weak sound came out.

"I am so sorry."

I wanted to thank him, but this time not even a coo would come out.

I was so tired and drained. The flood of my thoughts, without me noticing, had carried me to the outskirts of town, beside the main road. The whoosh of the cars speeding past, overtaking dangerously in the slow lane, made me take shelter on the roadside. It was just before dawn. Piles of rubbish were abandoned here and there. The air was thick with exhaust and smoke, and I couldn't clearly catch the smell of edible garbage. I approached a pack of dogs rummaging through a pile of construction waste. Apparently the presence of a stranger animal didn't matter much to them. They wagged their tails and started sniffing around again. I got closer to see if I could get anything, when suddenly a Nissan pickup truck with the city logo hit the brakes right behind us and a cloud of dust was kicked up. Seven or eight people jumped down from the pickup. Tempted by the food, we moved closer, and suddenly everything happened so fast that with each blink, I could barely recall glimpses of the scene. They had surrounded us. Strikes from shovels and pickaxes fell on us from all sides, pounding our heads and bodies. In the thick dust, I could neither see clearly nor breathe properly. My ears were filled with the sound of cracking bones and moans of pain. One of the cruelest was slicing off ears and tails and putting out eyes. The blow to my chest knocked me down. Then someone attacked me with a shovel and broke my leg. After that, everything went black. So this is what happens to stray dogs in order to control their population. What a law!

My eyelids were stuck together with dried blood and dust. I barely managed to open them. They had piled our bodies at the back of the pickup. A burnt smell hung in the air. I lay on my stomach among the other bodies, some of which were still warm. The skin on my scalp and face was on fire, and I couldn't move my body. The seven or eight men stood in the back of the pickup, holding their shovels upright, their chins resting on the handles, their hands

gripping them tightly. I didn't want to be buried alive. I wasn't afraid of death, but I was afraid of the dark. Despite the pain and agony, I managed to move my body. One of them noticed me and tried to finish me off with a final blow, but he stepped back in fright, and when the pickup truck bounced over a bump, he fell back into place.

No chin, no teeth, no hair, my back hunched and my limbs broken and twisted, whatever I had become, to them I no longer looked like a dog. At the driver's discretion and to avoid any possible legal consequences, they threw me out of the pickup in the middle of the desert. My face was turned the wrong way, pressed against the ground, blood, and saliva mixing and dripping from the corner of my lips onto the ground.

I knew it was over. I surrendered to sleep. It was turning into a good sleep until my Dad turned up. In my dream, I was a human child again, and he was taking me to the zoo. I was starting to feel happy when he pointed to the monkey cage and said, "You look like that monkey." I woke up, and the fact that my Dad had come to save me even here hit me hard. Tears welled up in my one good eye.

It's hard to walk like this now. The best I can do is move in a clumsy crawl. I drag myself forward on one elbow, and my back leg still lags behind. I must get to the zoo, the promised paradise, at any cost. Although it's a cage, it's still a home. As far as I know, zoos are still there, and no one is thinking of shutting them down. The thought of having somewhere to sleep and a little something to eat has really cheered me up. I hope the place where I dump my guts gets cleaned once a week, if not every month. And if it doesn't, that's fine by me. Even food and water don't matter. Being locked up? No, not that either. What matters is that if they find me sick and weak in the corner of the cage, not touching my food, they'll start to worry about me. What matters is that if they find my cage empty, they'll send out a search team.

The thought of people and guards gathering around me, watching me or giving me a passing glance, filled me with joy. At night, I could talk in the silence of the neighboring cages and take their muffled sounds as a two-way conversation. Buoyed by the thought of my new home, the road to the zoo didn't feel so long, and I soon grew used to this clumsy, uneven crawl. The only problem was my burns and wounds. They stung badly and I was afraid they might get infected, but hope could heal even wounds. This time I decided to present myself as one specific animal, not a muddle of many. The circus disaster shouldn't happen again. I didn't want to be rejected once more. Still, I couldn't really blame them. Who would help a creature that doesn't even know what it is, or what it eats, or where it should live.

It must have been the weekend. People were swarming in the car park, spreading their picnic rugs, anywhere a car couldn't fit. I kept close to the wall and crept towards the ticket booth. A large family looked like good cover. They had picnic baskets, and three of them were carrying rugs. They were oblivious to the rug trailing half-unfolded behind them, a perfect place for me to hide.

The children were climbing over one another, and they hadn't even opened their mouths. When they noticed me, they started poking with sticks they had picked up from the ground, and one of them tried to feed me his half-melted ice cream. We reached the entrance. I tucked myself between folds of the rug. We had almost passed through when the man at the booth

called out “Sir, no pets allowed.” The father was ready to scold the poor man for calling his children animals, when his wife started screaming, and all eyes were suddenly on me.

Somebody shouted. Then another.

“What’s this creature?”

“How did it escape its cage?”

“Get back, it can spread disease.”

“It has rabies!”

The kids started crying. Someone threw a stone at me, I howled in pain. The sound must have come out more like a wolf’s cry, because the crowd took a few steps back in fear. I tried to get to my feet to see where I could escape when someone shouted that I was about to attack.

“No! Poor camel! It’s about to die!” A lady said, her voice trembling with pity, but her words were drowned out by the angry murmurs around her. There was no time to waste, I took my chance and dashed forward, crawling through the gap I had spotted between them. Panic broke out. Parents snatched up their kids and ran out for the car park. A few of the zoo guards gave chase. I took a heavy blow to the back of my head, and a jolt of electricity shot through me. My body went rigid and I collapsed to the ground. The guards’ faces came closer to mine, and I couldn’t move a single muscle, let alone escape.

When I came to, I was in the cage and in front of me was a piece of raw liver, a banana, an apple, a handful of seeds and a bucket of water. A proper feast. I had never been that happy. I tried to thank them, but I couldn’t. My tongue had stopped working and my ability to talk was gone forever. All I could manage were strange noises. Still, I wasn’t too upset. After all, a real animal doesn’t talk.

From my gestures, the guards, who had apparently been waiting for me to wake, exchanged glances and went off to fetch someone I guessed was the vet. I knew they would be back soon. I took advantage of the moment and devoured everything in front of me. I shoved so much food into my empty stomach that it didn’t take long for me to throw it all back up. Tears welled in my eyes from the strain; my body ached, and my empty stomach made me long for a blissful sleep.

Lying on my side, I looked around. My cage wasn’t bad. It was probably temporary, since it wasn’t as big as the other zoo cages. It felt like a bedroom someone had squeezed into a thirty-square-meter house. My neighbors were good too. Gorillas watched me from one side, orangutans from the other. Behind me was a bear that didn’t seem to plan on moving. So I was able to watch it properly. I stared at the plane trees lining the zoo walls. It was nice that the motorway noise didn’t carry through the trees. The leaves at the top swayed softly and sleep slowly crept over me.

Half-sleep, I saw them coming closer, with a lady in a white coat walking beside them. Their voices reached me like a soft, musical whisper. Before they started their endless tests on me, I heard her say “keep him under observation, let him stay here for now.”

“For now...”

“For now.” what a lovely phrase. For the first time, I felt like I belonged somewhere. They wanted to keep me, to take care of me, and that felt better than any sedative they could have given me. I wish I could tell them that.