

Donkey

Short story from 'Trains and Rooms'

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Donkey

'Speaking for myself, I am devoutly grateful to the ass that I once was, for it was he, when I was concealed under his hide and was buffeted by so many tribulations, who rendered me, no wiser, I must admit, but very widely informed.'

Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis, *The Golden Ass (Metamorphoses)*

'She went to the donkeys and was transformed; she stayed there braying.'

'Fari the Donkey', West African folktale

'I'd better not say,' the Togolese woman had mumbled. We looked at the shiny little shells she'd scattered several times now in front of us on the hot sand. The cowries looked like tiny vagina dentata. Some lay in little heaps, while others formed a short line. This throw was more important than the previous one, it would seem. The woman had taken a long time to read it.

'We've paid for this,' had been my response. Even in French I used the authoritarian tone I was making my own in those days, eight years ago now. And when Luc pulled out his wallet I pushed it and his hand away from above the shells.

'It's not about money.' The woman briefly frowned, two quick wrinkles finding an old wound between her eyebrows. 'It's not about me.'

The shells in the sand were silent along with us. A dwarf goat gambolled past as if each of its legs was trying to go in a different direction. Luc brushed the dust the goat had kicked up from his sweaty clothes for form's sake. In the distance, audio feedback squealed from a loudspeaker.

The woman made a clacking sound with her tongue. 'Alright,' she said. 'I'll try it once more. For free. Sometimes the result is different the second time.'

She picked the shells out of the sand, threw, looked, hovered her finger over a couple of constellations, mumbled a thing or two in her language and repeated it all a number of times. I hadn't known beforehand that this was what Luc meant by 'soaking up local colour'. When we travelled we would each make a bucket list. Something for everyone, was our approach. Usually with satisfying results, although this time I hadn't much confidence in the outcome. The woman stared sombrely at the shells between us and said, 'The same. I'm sorry.'

'Just say it, then,' I urged, no longer sounding particularly friendly. At that the woman looked at each of us in turn, then back at the shells and sighed. 'You will lose all faith in humanity and become animals. As humans you'll be nothing but the living dead.'

Without looking our way again she got up in one supple move. She retied the knot in her pagne and flip-flopped away from us.

‘Ouch,’ said Luc, before giving me his supposedly disarming smile. ‘That was more of a curse than a prediction.’

‘Ah, right, now it’s ouch,’ I answered. ‘Mr local colour.’

I have to say, I wasn’t at my best even before we left for Togo. Grumpy, nervous, experimenting with an assertiveness that was verging on aggression. Tired but sleepless. It was busy at work, chaotic. Four colleagues had taken maternity leave at the same time – so those children must be eight too by now – and their projects largely ended up on my shoulders. In my lap. In my shoes. If there was a problem, then according to my boss it was inside my head. He thought I ought to go and play squash now and then; between six and seven in the mornings, he proposed. Oh yes, he certainly did know a gym that was open that early and he immediately sent me the address. Unpleasant aspects of his personality and those of my remaining colleagues were presenting themselves to me with increasing insistence. In that same period many of my friends and relations seemed intent on discovering where my boundaries lay. And Luc, ah yes, Luc with his rose-tinted spectacles. There were moments when I wanted to knock them off his face and crush them under my heel.

But how does that go in life, as long as you believe yourself to be a human being? You resolve to cool it a little, to step up a gear. You try. I sometimes saw a film I thought was good, paid visits to people, listened to assertions and asserted this or that myself. When I felt like sending an angry email, I held off for a day. There were weekends when I even gave squash a chance. And Luc, ah yes, on the other hand, Luc was an absolute treasure, wasn’t he? The rest of our stay in Togo went smoothly.

The change occurred only when I was told, on my first working day after our travels, that as a result of restructuring there was no longer a place for me in the company. The company for which I’d been a tower of strength, for which I’d summoned a flexibility that tied me in knots. There was anger, certainly; for the first few seconds after being let go I considered fetching two rakes from somewhere, binding them to my arms and then, sweeping and swirling, moving through the office scratching cheeks open, destroying files and laptops. But that urge soon gave way to the realization that life as a human just wasn’t for me. Never had been, in fact. My memories demonstrated as much now with painful precision. One big escape room, that’s what earthly existence was. I didn’t necessarily want to give up on life as such, but as a person: no, thanks very much. Hardly a devastating insight, all things considered. I even felt something like relief and a thrill of anticipation when I flopped down onto the sofa at home and resolved never to speak again and barely to move. Only when my mind slipped out of me, only when I saw myself from above, sitting in solitude on the sofa, did the woman with the shells flash through my head. After that there was the meadow.

Practically everything about being a donkey is fabulous. Okay, over the past decade I’ve sometimes been annoyed by the weather – we wear coats when it rains, or stand in the barn; our fur isn’t up to it – but even then to a far lesser extent than when I was a human. One surprise was that the food tastes so good. Grass is fine, and what the boy and the old woman bring us is even better. The care we receive is excellent. Hay, wheat straw, apples, carrots, sometimes a bit of sugarbeet pulp, barley. Mmm, barley. Or the salty mineral lick that I’m lapping at right now: delicious. Never would have thought it. Never stopped to consider.

But the best thing about being a donkey is braying. I can’t get enough of it. I’ve sometimes had feedback, from passers-by – humans, naturally, and the occasional dog. The things they hear in it. And none of them ever suspects my euphoria, the poor souls. Braying. It’s singing and screaming and orgasming and praying; it’s every emotion in one. There’s no way to explain it, nothing compares to it. I can show you. I’ll take a run around here and hee-haw, run and hee-hee-haaaaw, you’ll soon see-hee-hee-haaaaw!

I’ve shown you, I’m tingling with pleasure; you’re not, you don’t feel it, I pity you.

Braying together is great as well, although we do that rather less often. There are six of us, and we have diverse characters and don’t feel the need to interact all the time. But there’s solidarity too, and respect. I fitted into the group right away, became family, added two foals myself; they’re over there grazing, minding their own business. Of the original population of our meadow several are no longer with us alas, including

the sire of my progeny, but death is part of life, we deal with it easily. There's no earthly point in fighting against it.

I was very close to it once, as a donkey, to death I mean. While running and braying I broke loose, barely aware of it, swallowed up into something so much bigger than me. I do recall having a race with a train, at a gallop, braying at the people in the windows, trying to show them what that is, freedom! Until I splashed into a pond, head over heels, no ground under my hoofs. Then people in panic, a rope round my head, round my legs. Pain. And that term they came up with – 'put down' – I thought: that's it then. But the old woman and the boy came to save me with their apologies and their compensation and their flatbed truck and they carried me safely back to our meadow. Salt of the earth, those two.

Sometimes I stand for a long time in silence and my mind slips away. Then for a moment I'm a pale, expressionless woman on a sofa in a living room on the other side of the country. Luc takes good care of the living dead, and he clings to his rose-tinted specs, which I never want to knock off his face, because for a long time he smelt of alcohol and I thought that was so terrible for him. He always used to drink in moderation. I felt pain and guilt, because Luc deserves better than that, much better, and it's cowardly to let my mind quickly float back to the meadow each time, but that's where I belong, that's who I am. That's who I always was, I often think. It strikes me as completely logical that I started out as a donkey, before going through life as a human for a while. Whatever the underlying reason, the result was unsatisfactory. I still remember it all, but I barely think about it, to be honest. If you'll allow me I'm just going to run and bray again. This subject is making me feel a little uncomfortable.

(...)

Right. What I mainly wanted to tell you is that Luc came striding past our meadow yesterday, cheerful as ever. My donkey heart stood still. I recognized the man who was with him. I've forgotten his name but I know Luc has been trying to make a film with him for a thousand years. A hopeless project. And at that moment I'd have loved my braying to be intelligible, because that man looked frightened, when I was only begging him to take good care of Luc. Although he did stroke me then, all the same, hesitantly. A decent man. He has to do it. Luc takes good care of the shell in the living room that's all that's left of me, so somebody has to take good care of Luc. And so it goes on, doesn't it, in the human world? No, there's no chance of a return.

They went into the house of the people who sometimes shout, 'Shut your trap, damn you!' Not our friends, but there's nothing they can do to us. Does it give you an air of authority, jumping up and down in your dressing gown shouting 'Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!' at a donkey? That's a rhetorical question. I don't trouble myself about them. Why would you, when you can bray?

While Luc and the man were in that house I remained watchful. My anxiety grew. They might do something to him.

And they did. I could see that at once when my poor husband came out. Defeated. The other man put an arm around him, I saw that too, a comfort. He had understood his role. He knew it took a great deal to quell Luc's cheerfulness, the poor dear. I ran along with Luc, next to the wire, and I brayed that I was sorry, for him, but that it might happen to him as well. The cowries had predicted it for us both, and it was good, he could surrender to it.

When I saw them walking away from me like that yesterday, into uncertainty, it was undoubtedly the saddest moment of my life as a donkey. I was quiet all evening and my mind slipped out of me and for a moment I was a motionless woman who, very slowly, moved her head a little and saw him sitting there, her husband, his gaze turned inwards, next to her on the sofa.

Confused questions plagued my mind when it floated back to the meadow. Who would care for us in the human world? What would happen to my donkey form if I gave up the ghost as a woman? And was Luc becoming an animal too now? Also a donkey? In the same meadow?

Today I'm able to answer the last three of those questions. Yes, no, more or less.

Luc is planning to come and live mainly in the tree next to our meadow. It was a joyful reunion. Shy, somehow. As a new life form, your relationship with your partner is very different, after all. I don't know

whether I'd have preferred him to turn into a donkey too. He has just run a lap on my back, to a harmonious hoot and hee-ha. That made my friends here in the meadow turn to look. But as I've already said, we donkeys lack a tendency to form an opinion about the behaviour of others. It's going to be alright. Luc needs to hunt at night and will sleep a lot during the day, that's true, that's what owls are like. Still glad I'm a donkey.
