

The Fox and the Batting Practice Cap

By DraVulMep

Lydia Barnes left the stadium, disappointed that the game hadn't done much to lift her spirits – and the Mets had *won* that night, even!

It had been a tiring day – as usual – shepherding tourists around the Big Apple. Her walking tour had covered most of Midtown. She walked often, and she liked to think she was fit, but for some reason, leading all those tourists with their constantly snapping cameras just wore her out these days.

It wasn't that the route itself was exhausting, or that the tourists were ill-mannered – in fact, some of this latest bunch had seemed downright understanding – it was just that she was beginning to question the point of her job.

After all, she was a true blue New Yorker. She'd grown up in the city, as had her parents, her grandfather, her great-grandfather, and who-knows-how-many generations of middle-or-lower-class Barneses. After a while, it had become tiring to lead people to see the “airbrushed” side of the city; the big landmarks, the things just about everyone on the face of the planet knew about.

Some of the people who lived in New York these days didn't help. Her family had been priced out of Brooklyn, decamping to Queens. Just as well. Something about the newer residents of her old stomping grounds in Brooklyn just didn't sit right with her. Even more so with the gajillionaires over in Manhattan. Anyway, she liked being closer to Citi Field.

Usually a good ballgame was her way of escaping reality for a few hours. It was practically a family tradition. She was a Mets fan, and occasionally, a Brooklyn Cyclones fan. Her grandfather had been a Dodgers fan in their Brooklyn days. He'd told her about how he'd been utterly crushed when they left for Los Angeles, yet oddly comforted by the Mets in their early years, given their similarities with how the Dodgers had been in their “Dem Bums” days. Lydia often wondered how he'd have fared now that Brooklyn had a minor league team. She'd never know for sure. Her grandfather had passed away three years before the Cyclones came to town.

This time, the ballgame hadn't been enough. Now, she found herself wandering into a coffee shop called The Lack-A-Daisy on her way home. She was a regular here, so the barista almost instantly knew her order.

“I thought you'd be happy.” the barista said, “The Mets won, didn't they?”

“Oh, that's not it.” said Lydia, “Just been feeling kinda funny lately.”

Lydia took her usual seat near the window, doing a bit of people-watching.

“Excuse me?”

Lydia turned around to spot a young, light brown-haired man with a t-shirt and vest.

"I *thought* I recognized you!" the man said, "You were the tour guide!"

It was then Lydia recognized the man. He'd been one of her most recent tourists. One of the "downright understanding" ones that had done things like give a well-placed elbow to a tourist who was loudly snapping photos in St. Patrick's Cathedral not four feet away from the sign that said "No Flash Photography".

"Oh, hi." said Lydia, trying to feign difference. She was too tired for chitchat.

"Yipe! You look beat. Tell you what, I'll pick up the bill."

This caused Lydia to raise an eyebrow as the man sat down opposite her.

"I imagine you get real tired of leading people around places you've seen a thousand times, huh?" chuckled the man. "It must be good to get some rest – even in the 'city that never sleeps'!"

"Oh, it's not the 'leading people around' part..." said Lydia. "The 'thousand times' part, though... I dunno. It just makes me worry that people's relationship with the city is only skin deep."

"Skin deep?" said the man, looking somehow genuinely interested. "I was under the impression that New York was the great hive of human activity, where different stories collide with one another, and human potential manifests in innovation!"

"Heh! That's what all the brochures say!" said Lydia, too tired to be anything but candid. "People come to New York either to make money inside those skyscraper palaces or spend it all looking at big attractions that don't really *do* anything anymore!"

"How so?"

"Well... Take the Empire State Building, for instance. It was the tallest building in the world when it was built. Now it's not anymore – it's not even the tallest building in the city now that the Freedom Tower's there. All it has are offices. But no, tourists still come out in droves to take the elevator to the top. Why is that? Because the Empire State Building is famous just for *being* famous!"

"You think that's a bad thing?"

"Well, New Yorkers get more use out of... let's say... Hoyt-Schermerhorn subway station, but you don't see the *turistas* coming out to see the view from the platform... unless they're trainspotters."

"I must make a note to go there..." murmured the man.

"It's not like New York's the only place with this problem either. I mean, look at Venice! It's sinking under the weight of all the tourists that there. If I can't stand it here, think about how Venetians must feel!"

"Oh, so this is about authenticity!" said the man.

"Yeah... Somebody's gotta *live* in the place for it to be a real city! I mean, I got a cousin who moved to Cleveland. She tells me the place is boring, but at least you don't see so many gift shops selling statuettes of that Tower Station building (or whatever it's called) that you start seein' em whenever you close your eyes! Sure, the crime rate's dropped, but you've got people who've been living in New York neighborhoods for generations getting the boot 'cause they can't afford the prices with all the rich folk deciding that living in the Big Apple is fashionable!"

"So you're an 'authentic' New Yorker?"

"Well I like to think I am, at any rate..." Lydia stared at her coffee. "My parents and I still live here. They're thinking of moving out; maybe to New England, but I'd like to stick it out here, even if I have to cram myself into a shoebox of an apartment."

"Ooh! Shoeboxes are nice!"

Lydia stared at the man, unsure what to make of that remark. The man's smile vanished as he saw the puzzled expression on Lydia's face

"Er, I mean, I'm sure that you'd be able to make a small apartment work out for you. You seem like a very resourceful young woman."

"Hmmm..." Lydia returned to people-watching. The man seemed to join her in this activity until he piped up.

"Why are you still a tour guide if you don't like it?"

"I gotta pay off my college debt *somehow*, and I guess I'm hoping that sooner or later, I'll start seeing what the tourists see in the place."

More people-watching. This time it was Lydia's turn to break the silence.

"You know something?"

"What?"

"Sometimes I think the animals around town are more authentic New Yorkers than I am."

"Oh?" the man seemed particularly interested at this remark. "Why's that?"

"Eh, mainly 'cause they just plain live here. They adapted to the city instead of having the city adapt to how they think it ought to be. Plus, you don't see them worrying about gentrification!"

"They've probably never contended with ill-tempered coyote spirits..." murmured the man.

"Huh?"

"Nothing! Go on!"

"I've always been interested in urban wildlife, even when I was a kid. I mean, there I was, growing up in the middle of the 'civilized' world, but you still saw squirrels,

pigeons, rats, everything, all just living here with the rest of us! Hell, there are beavers in the Bronx, would you believe! Even coyotes in some parts!”

“Coyotes?!”

The man suddenly turned around, staring out the window, as if he expected one to attack at any moment. It reminded Lydia of this time when the agency had her doing tours of Central Park and a young, garrulous couple from Japan had shielded their heads when she mentioned an anecdote about a squirrel “attack” video that had gone viral the previous day. The couple later confessed that they had both been born to wealthy families and hadn’t really contended with wildlife before in their sheltered lives. Maybe this guy was a sheltered rich guy too? He certainly didn’t *look* the part...

Still, the absurdity was too much for Lydia.

“Relax!” she chuckled. “I haven’t seen any coyotes in Jackson Heights! You’re more likely to see ‘em in the Bronx or northern Manhattan, and sightings aren’t that common.”

“Okay... I really should return that demigod’s coffee percolator though...”

“What?”

“Uh, Nothing! Um... I noticed you seem to know quite a bit about urban wildlife!”

“Yeah, I’m studying biology and ecology in college. I figured I might as well put my knowledge to good use. Maybe I’ll be a bio teacher or a vet someday. Who knows?”

“Why those jobs?”

“How else can you make money with that kinda degree?”

“The money question again...!” the man shook his head.

“I know what you mean, but hey! That’s life!”

The man looked forlorn. Then Lydia laughed.

“Why the hell am I telling you all this?” she murmured, “I don’t even know your name!”

“Fox.”

“Huh?”

“Fox. That’s my name; Fox.” the man said, extending a hand.

“That’s a funny name! I’m Lydia Barnes, but you knew that already from the tour.” Lydia accepted the handshake.

“People keep telling me it’s funny. Some people call me ‘Big F’ for whatever reason. I mean, I’m not *that* big, am I?”

“Heh!” Lydia then checked her watch. “Crud! I’d better get home! I don’t usually take this long here, and I’ve gotta get to bed at a decent hour to lead more tours tomorrow!”

“Oh, before you go...” said Fox, pulling a box out from the shoulder bag he’d laid beside his chair. “Next time you want to connect with your city, or just want a break, give this item a whirl. I got it for myself, but I think you need it more than I do...”

“Uh, thanks...?” Lydia accepted the package. “What is it?”

“You know what? It’s a surprise! Don’t open it until you think you need it!”

Lydia accepted the package, put it in her bookbag, and after saying her goodbyes to Fox, paid for her meal and went home.

The next day, Fox took another one of Lydia’s walking tours. This time it was of southern Manhattan, in the vicinity of City Hall and the Brooklyn Bridge. Fox seemed to have brought a bunch of friends with him this time. She could tell they were together because they all seemed to cluster together.

This tour seemed to go uneventfully for the most part, but Lydia felt there was something... *off* about Fox’s group. They all seemed somewhat skittish; flinching whenever a car or cyclist got too close, and seeming in awe (even by tourist standards) of just about everything, even minor details like subway entrance signs. The only ones in Fox’s group that didn’t seem to have this skittishness were this glasses-wearing woman with an Edmonton Oilers cap and – to a lesser extent – Fox himself. Lydia wasn’t sure what to make of this display.

Once the tour was over, Lydia went to take the subway back home. The train was late (no surprise there). It was on the platform that she noticed two things. One was Fox’s group, chatting amongst themselves. The other was a rather garrulous young blonde woman yakking on and on into her phone about how her expensive car had broke down while she was here to visit relatives in Manhattan.

“I mean, like, if I’d known traffic was gonna be this bad, I’d never have come here. *God!*” grouched the woman. “And all the dirt, too! How can people, like, *live* here?!”

Lydia found herself clenching her fists at this display. Besides her anger about gentrification, she was particularly frustrated at how this woman was playing the “dumb blonde” stereotype to a tee. Lydia herself was blonde, so she’d grown rather tired of being associated with that trope.

She reached into her bag for her headphones in the hopes that some music would drown her out. It was then that she realized that the box Fox had given her was still in her bag, unopened.

On a whim, she opened it. Inside was a New York Mets cap. She recognized it as one of the new batting practice caps with the orange bill. She quickly put it on before reaching for her headphones.

However, no sooner had she put it on than she felt an odd tingle running down her body.

She felt the world suddenly grow around her. Regular commuters became towering behemoths. The rich woman's complaining grew indistinguishable from the rest of the crowd. Something was wrong. Lydia quickly scurried off the platform, taking cover in the crawlspace beneath it.

Lydia couldn't understand what had just happened. She scratched her head underneath the cap, dodging her large ears. Her tail twitched nervously-

Tail?!

She looked behind her. Sure enough, there behind her was a long, pink, hairless tail dragging on the subway floor behind her.

All of Lydia's clothes except for the batting practice cap had vanished, but that didn't seem to bother her as much as the fact that grey fur had grown in to replace it. The only places it didn't cover were her tail, and her- her hands and feet! They'd grown claws! Her feet had also grown and her arms and legs had become shorter.

She put these altered hands close to her head and felt an odd sensation. There, sprouting from her face, were whiskers, extending as long as the snout she soon discovered they were connected to. Lydia's hands then went up to her ears, which the Mets cap seemed to have altered to fit. They had grown and were now situated atop her head.

Lydia grabbed her phone out of her bag (she could have sworn she'd put it in her pocket) and used the front-facing camera to get a good look at herself. There, to her dread, was a rat-woman. Eyes locked in horror towards the camera. The only signs of humanity were the Mets cap on her head and some indescribable quality about her eyes.

Come to think of it, why'd she gone down to the crawlspace?! In fact, Lydia now noticed she was outright *standing* in it! She hadn't just changed; she'd shrunken to rat size! The cap, her phone, and her bag had even changed to fit her new size! She looked like an extra from *Zootopia*!

Lydia collapsed against the concrete of the platform. How had this happened?! She tried taking off the cap. No luck. She didn't change back.

"I'm stuck..." she groaned, or rather, squeaked, "Totally stuck..."

"But you aren't stuck." Lydia turned to look further down the crawlspace. There was a sort of semi-anthropomorphic, four-tailed, orange fox, followed by several animals – a black cat, a skunk, an otter, and a beaver – in a similar semi-anthropomorphic state. All were smaller than humans, and looked like they could walk on four legs or two if they so wished.

"In fact," continued the fox, "you'll find your options have only broadened."

Lydia soon noticed that the beaver was wearing a resized pair of glasses and an Edmonton Oilers cap. It was then that it all clicked. These animals were Fox and his group!

"Y-you did this!" said Lydia, backing away from the fox, or rather, Fox. The larger animal could very well pick her up and eat her. "You turned me into a rat!"

"Well, I did about half of the work of turning you into a rat by way of the cap..." said Fox, rubbing the back of his head. "Then, I'd say a quarter could be attributed to the station and a quarter to your mood. You see, that cap is environmentally and emotionally empathic."

Lydia's panic gave way to confusion. "Huh???"

"Yeah, he's like that." piped up the cat, "Sometimes it's best just to nod and pretend you understand."

"What I *mean* to say," interrupted Fox, with a glare at the cat before turning back to Lydia, "is that I gave the hat the ability to transform you into different animals depending on your mood and your immediate environment. If you were drowning, for instance, you might have turned into a fish. Here though, you're in a subway station, and I've heard that many rats have established their domiciles in subway tunnels, so I'm guessing it determined that a rat was the best species to turn you into based on that."

"...Oh." Lydia somehow understood that.

"Yes, but in order to make sure you're best adapted for your environment, it will make you into a species that could be considered native to that environment, so don't expect to turn into a jaguar when walking down Park Avenue."

"Wait, so I can only turn into animals that live in New York?"

"As long as you're *in* New York, yes."

"...And I can't control what I turn into?" said Lydia, looking over her rat body once again.

"Pretty much. That bit of randomness adds excitement, wouldn't you say? And it's educational!"

"Like I said, he's like that." said the cat, doing a 'loonie' gesture.

"Quiet, you!" protested Fox.

Lydia then realized that maybe the cap had done her a favor by turning into an animal small enough to make a quick getaway from that annoying rich woman.

"Don't worry. Nobody on the platform will think anything of seeing you transform. But don't rely on its reality-warping abilities working *all* the time." said Fox.

"Okay, but why didn't I turn back when I took it off?" said Lydia, taking the cap off to examine it before putting it back on.

"I'm guessing it thought you'd be safer as a rat."

"Why's that?"

"I don't know. Maybe because of *that...*" said Fox, pointing down the subway line, where the wind seemed to be coming from and a light kept coming closer until a train thundered by them. Lydia was soon reminded how small she really was as one of the train's wheels came uncomfortably close to her.

Once the train had left, the conversation resumed.

"I'm surprised this thing didn't blow off..." Lydia mused, examining the cap again.

"It stays on your head as long as you *want* it to stay on your head," explained Fox, "A safety feature so you don't get stuck in one form. In fact, here's another one! Let's say you were to mislay the cap somewhere..."

Fox then grabbed the cap from Lydia's hands/paws and flung it onto the tracks.

"Now, close your eyes and imagine yourself wearing it."

Lydia did as she said.

"Now open them!"

Lydia opened her eyes, felt the top of her head, and realized the cap was again resting between her oversized ears.

"It's like this thing's alive..." said Lydia, taking the cap off and looking at it again.

"In a way of speaking, it *is*. I initially got it to see if I could encode adaptability in the form of multiple transformations into an object." said Fox. "All I needed was a subject."

Lydia could contain herself no more. "Why give me this?! Am I just a test subject for you?!" she said.

"Not entirely." explained Fox, "You *said* you wanted to see in New York what the tourists saw in it. This way, you have access to a whole bunch of new perspectives! Plus, it'd be an all-authentic side of New York you'd be seeing. You don't see people creating a false façade for an animal's sake!"

"I..."

Lydia didn't know what to make of this. She kept staring at the cap, idly tracing the "NY" on the front of it with a claw. As much as she hated to admit it, Fox was right. This *was* a new way to look at the city. And even if it was experimental, Fox seemed to have really thought ahead with those safety features. Plus, if this hat really *was* alive, by now it almost seemed like a good companion.

"If an issue develops, I can give you my number." said Fox, "and if worse comes to worse, you can send me a thoughtmail."

"Okay..." said Lydia at last, putting the cap back on, not sure what a thoughtmail was, "So how do I go back to being human?"

"It won't let you turn back until it decides it's *advantageous for you* to turn back, so once you get out of this crawlspace, you simply imagine being human again, and

you'll be back to normal!" said Fox, "But before you do that, I was wondering if you'd do me and my friends a favor."

"Oh?"

"You see, fuzzy as we may be, we are tourists ourselves. You may have noticed that some of us were a bit uncomfortable with seeing the city from a human perspective."

Lydia remembered how out of sorts the animal-tourists had been when conducting her tour earlier.

"I wasn't!" pointed out the beaver.

"Because you were human originally!" said the cat.

"Be nice!" said the otter, elbowing the cat.

"...So we were wondering," continued Fox, seemingly oblivious to the short disagreement, "if you would be so kind as to put your knowledge of urban wildlife to good use, and give us a tour of New York City from an animal's perspective, *for* animal perspectives."

"I... I dunno..."

"You know the city better than we do, and as I said, a new perspective can do you some good!" said Fox, still in a chipper mood, "You know what they say! In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king!"

"No, I don't know if 'they' *really* say that!" said the cat to the skunk, only to be shushed by the otter.

"These may help." said Fox, pulling out a silver pendant, "Pendants on, everybody!"

The other animals put on similar pendants, and pretty soon, the various animals had been replaced with rats like Lydia.

"These pendants will turn anyone wearing them into whatever species you turn into when you put on the cap." said the rat that had once been Fox, "This way, we'll be as adaptable as you, and you can keep the pendants once we're done."

"Well..." said Lydia, "Okay!"

"Splendid!" said rat-Fox.

"Anything I should know about you guys before we begin?" asked Lydia.

"Yes." said the cat-turned-rat (Lydia's altered nose allowed her to pick out who had been who), "In case you're wondering, Fox is the only one of us who goes by an *Animals of Farthing Wood*-type name. The rest of us have actual names. We sometimes call Fox 'Big F-Fox' to avoid confusion."

"Oh, as in a *capital* F!" Lydia realized.

“Got it in one!”

Lydia began to walk down the tunnel, out of the station, gesturing for the other newly minted rats to follow her.

“If that’s all, let’s begin! Stick close, everybody! Now, The New York City Subway first opened in 1904, making it one of the oldest rapid transit systems in the world. However, it had a few precursors, such as various excursion railroads to Coney Island, and elevated railroads in Manhattan and Brooklyn in the nineteenth century, but one of the weirder ‘pre-Subways’ was the Beach Pneumatic Transit system, whose debut, I’m sure, was welcomed by the city’s rat population...”