

Bad Animals

by

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Scout Masters always wore hats with animal ears attached to them, and Katrina Van Nickles hated them.

"Why do you always wear hats with animal ears?"

"All the better to hear you with, my dear."

"Well, you look like a fool, and its embarrassing."

"You know, if everybody thought like you do, fig leaves would still be in fashion."

Katrina wore a floppy plum beret and silver earrings in the shape of tiny eggplants.

"I'm not a very good weatherman, I'm afraid," Scout said as he helped Katrina up onto the stage that had been set up in the park across from Binkman's Department Store. "The sky is full of fireworks, and I told you it'd be a fine night for boating. I'm sorry."

"It's OK." Katrina pulled herself up on stage thanks to Scout's offered hand. His sharp nails accidentally grazed her wrist, but she didn't say anything until she was standing beside him. Lightening skittered across the sky, chittering like radio static.

"You should cut your nails," she suggested curtly.

"They're useful like this. Besides, who doesn't want claws?"

Katrina fingered a few of the locks of her black hair where she'd had subtle purple highlights dyed in. It was an absent-minded gesture, but even the subconscious appreciation of it made her feel happy.

"I wouldn't. I'm not an animal." She moved to center stage and sang a few lines from "Trapped in Morocco" in her beautifully rich and powerful mezzo-soprano. Scout thoroughly enjoyed her singing. Somewhere off in the distance a dog howled in reply.

"You are an animal," Scout said when she finished. "We all are. You're just too proud to admit it."

They hopped off the stage and strolled toward the street. Through a brief break in the clouds, the warm, black sky struggled vainly to selflessly bespeckle them with starry glitter against the deluge of city lights looming all around them.

"I hear something strange ... over there," Scout said. He pointed at a dark copse to their left at the edge of the park.

"I don't hear anything," Katrina said irritably after a pause.

An old man in a tattered tan coat, slumped on a park bench beside the walk, stared intently down at his feet while holding a red helium-filled balloon that hovered softly above his right shoulder.

"Infinity in a circle," he mumbled in a dusty gravitas as they passed by. "A circle is infinite. I ain't trapped in no bender. Infinity in a circle. A circle is infinite"

Scout stopped them in front of the old man and stared down coldly. Katrina looked around anxiously. The old man didn't look up, but just kept mumbling his three-line mantra over and over.

"Scout, let's go," Katrina said nervously. Scout ignored her.

"Stop it!" he shouted at the old man. The old man kept chanting.

"Scout, leave him alone. Let's just go." Katrina tugged at his arm. He yanked it back forcefully without looking at her.

"He's like all the rest of us," Scout replied. He sounded frustrated. "He's no longer infused. A victim of generations of excessive self-domestication. He's allowed himself to be defanged and declawed. He's too utterly dependent on the artificial world to survive in his natural habitat and in his natural condition. Denying his true nature is driving him mad."

"Snap out of it!" Scout shouted at the old man. The old man kept chanting. Scout grasped the old man's balloon and squeezed his nails into it so that the balloon popped. He dropped the shriveled shell of it in the old man's lap, the silky silver ribbon coiling loosely over the gnarled old hand that held it. The old man slowly looked up and into Scout's face. Tears welled in the old gray-blue eyes and spilled in streams down his gaunt and dingy cheeks.

"Thank you," the old man said softly. He stood and shuffled off in the direction of the copse.

"Not that way, you old fool!" Scout said, grabbing him by the

shoulders and turning him toward the path. "You'll be swallowed." The old man nodded his thanks to Scout and lumbered a short distance to a nearby trash bin and began pillaging its contents for dinner. Scout loped the few strides over to the trash bin and stopped him. He pulled a five and some ones from his pocket and stuffed them in the old man's dirty palm.

"Go to McDonald's or something," Scout said and returned to Katrina, who had watched the entire episode in horror.

"Come on," Scout said, "the thing is getting closer."

"Stop it," Katrina said, and then added, "You know he's just going to drink it away."

"I'm not responsible for what he does with it, just whether or not he has the chance to choose."

They crossed Dogwood Avenue and turned down a side street, and then Scout stopped suddenly, doubled back, and peered around the corner of a tiny bookstore. Katrina followed with a groan.

"What are you doing?" she asked angrily.

"It follows us." He turned back down the side street.

"What? The old man?" Katrina felt a chill tingle through her.

"No, thank goodness. It isn't human. It goes on all fours."

"Some kind of animal? And it's following us? Exactly how is that something to be thankful for?"

"If it were human we'd be in real trouble." Katrina looked at him

annoyed, the disgust in her expression discernible even in the near dark. Scout remained a quiet silhouette, the street lamps of Dogwood relentlessly behind him, his hat ears pricking up into their creamy glow.

"Let's go in there," she said without hiding her irritation and pointing to a corner coffee shop across the street. She grabbed his arm and hurried him to the establishment. Halfway across the road Scout interrupted their progress.

"They're not going to let me in there without shoes, you know."

Katrina stopped them at the sidewalk, looked down at Scout's feet, and rolled her eyes. "Dang! I forgot about that."

"Unless you convince them I'm your service animal," he joked with a grin. Katrina looked into his face with the sincere prejudice of those convinced the other is mentally ill. "Scout, what's wrong with you? Why do you want to be an animal?"

"I told you," Scout said calmly. "It's not what I want, it's what I am. I'm merely sloughing off the artificial skin I spent my life growing. I am embracing what others fear: reality. We are all animals, Katrina. Most are tamed to debilitation, like that old man. Some have become feral, but corrupt. Even you feed your animal, though only through the sanitized self-deceptions of so-called 'civilization.'"

"I'm sorry I asked. And I am not an animal."

"So you said," Scout replied, and smiled gently. "But one is coming,"

he added.

Katrina looked alarmed. "Just ... keep your feet hidden," she said, hurrying them into the Coffee, Confections, and Conciliations coffee house.

Katrina got them drinks and doughnuts so that Scout could keep his bare feet hidden under a table near the door. He either wasn't trying very hard or simply found it difficult, because the barista informed Katrina that shoes were required and that her friend should wear his next time they came in. Katrina was mortified, thanked the barista for putting up with Scout this once, assured her it would never happen again, and tipped her generously before returning to Scout with two coffees and two chocolate frosted doughnuts.

"Here," she said coldly, putting the coffee and doughnuts on the table.

"Why are you angry?" Scout asked, cocking his head and looking up at her. Katrina sat down across from him and leaned in.

"Because you embarrass me," she said in a low voice. "The girl at the counter said you can't come in again without shoes on."

"I told you so," Scout replied, smiling. "And it's outside." He picked up a coffee cup and wrapped his hands around it, savoring the warmth, and then brought it up in front of his lips. "It won't be long now," he said over the rim, his hat ears projecting slightly forward as he rested on his elbows and leaned into his cup for a sip, his fingers

interlacing at his long nails he kept filed into sharp claw-like points.

"What do you mean? I'm calling the police." Katrina angrily pulled out her cell phone.

"Now there's an idea," Scout said quietly and sipped his coffee.

Katrina punched the emergency call button. Scout quietly sipped his coffee and considered his doughnut while Katrina anxiously filed a report with 911.

"Well, I didn't actually see it," she said nervously into the phone, glancing at Scout, who calmly watched her, "my friend did. He saw a shadow running on four legs." A pause. Katrina absently coiled a lock of hair around her finger. "I guess it could have been, but he said it was following us." Another pause. "OK, I see. Thank you." She hung up.

"They aren't going to do anything," she reported. "They say it was probably a stray dog and they'll send a car to drive through the area, but that's all."

"It's not a stray dog," Scout said matter-of-factly.

"How do you know that?" Katrina whispered angrily. "You don't, and now that woman probably thinks I'm an idiot."

"That's just clown pieing. You worry too much about what other people think of you."

"You don't worry enough."

"I don't live my life in perpetual fear of being judged."

"I'm not afraid of what people think."

Rather than argue further, Scout stood and strode over to the counter where he took a black plastic fork from a cup full of identical black plastic forks.

"Did your friend tell you about our shoe policy?" the barista asked.

"Yes, thanks. Next time I'll leave my feet at home." Scout smiled. The barista frowned and her eyes flashed. "Just kidding," Scout said. "This was an unexpected stop. Had I known we'd be coming in and meeting you here, I'd have brought them."

"You're feet?" the barista smarted back.

"Good!" Scout replied, smiling and pointing at her. "I like you." He returned to the table and applied the fork to the doughnut.

"You know," Katrina said daintily licking her fingers, "you're the only person I know who eats doughnuts with a fork. They really are meant to be eaten with your hands."

"Really?" Scout replied. "I don't like how they make my fingers sticky."

"An animal wouldn't use a fork, " Katrina chided.

"You don't, and you claim not to be an animal. Anyway, I'm only using one for your sake, so I don't embarrass you licking my hands like a dog in public when I'm done."

"I appreciate that," she replied sarcastically. "And that you don't pee on fire hydrants when I'm around."

Scout smiled softly into a sip of coffee. "It's gone now," he said.
"We can go."

They finished their doughnuts quickly and took the coffee with them. The barista came around the counter as they stood to go. She wore black string sandals and waved and smiled as Katrina and Scout headed out the door, letting her gaze linger on Scout. He winked at her. Katrina groaned. "What?" Scout asked innocently.

"Let's take the shortcut through the park," Katrina suggested when they reached the end of Dogwood several blocks from the coffee shop. Scout looked apprehensively across the road into the piled mass of shadows exacerbated by the cloudy sky. A frail ribbon of yellow lights lined a path that snaked weakly through its heart. The thin strand of shabby brick was, indeed, a shortcut, and they were both familiar with it. It passed more or less straight through the wooded park until it came out across the road from the apartment complex in which they each leased a one-bedroom unit.

"You know," Scout mused, "humans are really just animals possessed of Divine gifts that they abuse with unspeakable cruelties." He paused, still deeply considering the park. "I think we'd be safer sticking to the street," he said.

"Now who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf," Katrina mocked triumphantly. "You're the one who always says march to your own drum"

"Fear has a purpose. There's more than one way to misuse it."

"Look, Scout, the park is well-lit and regularly patrolled by the police. We're probably safer there than here."

"I suppose," he replied, unconvinced. "Still, I think we should stick to the road."

"Well, I'm going through the park whether you go with me or not," Katrina announced defiantly. A far away flash flickered in the dark sky.

Scout's eyes sparkled in the light from the street lamp as he looked first from Katrina, then to the park, then back again, the ears on his hat emphasizing his indecision. "OK, the park," he said reluctantly. "If nothing else, to keep you safe. I don't want you going through there alone." Katrina looked a little surprised, smiled, and led them across the road into the grass at the edge of the park.

"Also," Scout said when they picked up the path lined with lamps, "I think it best we get home and indoors as quickly as possible. There's no telling where this ride will end up. The thing has found us again and we shouldn't waste time arguing."

"What?" Katrina exclaimed in alarm, looking sharply back the way they came.

"Yeah, I saw something about a block from the coffee house, and then heard it again. It's pretty close now. I'm surprised you haven't noticed it."

"No, I haven't! Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't want to alarm you. You often overreact to things you don't understand."

"Overreact? There's some sort of animal following us, maybe hunting us, and I'm overreacting?" Katrina peered intently into the dark that groped around both sides of the path. "I don't see anything," she said.

"I know. Like Abraham and the stars."

"What?"

"Never mind. We best keep moving."

The path was paved with brick and lined with tall lamp posts at regular intervals so that the pools of light intersected and they never passed through darkness. Their course meandered casually through the interior of the park, a ribbon of light in a vast sea of deeply gathered gloom all around them. They saw no other visitors, the park benches eerily empty. Wild things played and hunted and were eaten in the grim wooded shadows and pale gray meadows. Katrina led the way, steadily and subconsciously quickening her pace as they progressed along their course. Several times she looked back or off to the side seeking some sign of movement or presence. More than once the sound of an animal startled her and she asked timorously, "What was that?"

Variously Scout calmly explained: "A opossum," or "Probably a fox," or "Just a deer." After a few such false alarms, as they passed the halfway point through the park and nothing happened, and assurances from Scout that the "thing" was not getting any closer, Katrina began to

relax. She teased him a little and played with her hair.

And then all the lights went out.

There were sounds of feet and breath. The smell of spilled coffee wafted upward toward a narrow sliver of moon obscured by wispy gray clouds. Gutturals followed by a kind of muffled groaning played around her, and invisibly in the pitch darkness before her eyes began to adjust, she felt something brush her arm.

"Scout!" she shouted in panic. He did not answer. Hands grabbed her roughly by the arms. Laughter broke the darkness from a shadowy form emerging from her fading temporary blindness to her left.

"What are you doing walking in these woods, little girl?" a rough voice to her right asked in creepy cheerfulness.

"Yeah," said the laughing form in response, "What's in your basket of goodies, Little Red?" And then it laughed as if it had made a great jest. Katrina didn't find it funny at all and pulled at the firm grip that held her.

"Let's just open it up and see, shall we?" the rough voice snarled suggestively from the hulking shadow to her right. She grabbed at the hairy, meaty fingers that dug into her arm, trying to pry the hand loose, but they were thick and rough and strong as steel.

"Please ... I have money," she pleaded, still vainly struggling to escape. "I'll give you anything."

A massive hairy arm pulled her close to the body inside the hulking

shadow.

"Oh, that is the idea," it's gravelly voice growled hungrily into her ear, blanketing her neck with warm, fetid breath. Katrina fought in vain. "Please!" she cried. "Scout!" No answer. "Help!" she screamed. Rough hands grasped at her from her left and a thick, stinking cloth was pressed across her mouth and nose. Something flashed in the dark and the cloth was hastily and tightly taped roughly across her face. The hairy arms dragged her backwards, her feet kicking first at the brick, then the grass, and then dry, rotting leaves as she writhed and squirmed, and fought to resist being lugged deeper into the wild and the dark.

And then, suddenly in the midst of her struggling, she was dropped and the hairy monster of a man that had been holding her turned and stood braced in a wide stance. A shadow lunged from the darkness down upon her attacker and dragged him brutally to the earth. Katrina thought she heard a growl or someone loudly grumble "run," she wasn't sure, but finding herself free, she clamored to her feet and ran, tearing the cloth loose from her face. Behind her as she ran a man shrieked and an animal snarled and growled and there was tearing and shuffling, and by the time she had found the path and escaped but a short distance, silence enveloped the grim, shadowy scene behind her.

She ran in a full sprint, recklessly rushing through the dark toward the park's edge, at times blindly hoping every step was still on the

path. Her breath tore in her lungs and the blood pounded in her ears, and her whole body burned and wanted to break down in tears, but still she ran and did not stop until she had broken from the park's boundary and stood, bent, panting on the sidewalk that ran beside Ridgecrest Lane across from her apartment building. Even then she only paused briefly before stumbling across the road, the warm street lamps holding her in the protective light of their comforting embrace.

Behind her she heard a sound in the feral brake that marked the untamed border of the park up a small hill from the path. She looked back and saw a dark form burst from the brush in a great leap and land on all fours. It hesitated a moment to orient itself to its surroundings, spied her, and bounded down the hill toward her.

Katrina cursed and turned, and sprinted for her apartment. The beast reached the sidewalk and leaped, cleared half the road, and charged toward her, a wild, wolf-like creature in the lamp light, its sinewy muscles rolling smoothly under its thick black pelt, teeth glinting in its panting jaws.

Katrina reached her door and found her keys in her pocket. The wolf raced across the parking lot, it's heavy paws scraping the pavement. Katrina picked clumsily through her keys, found the first she needed and opened the bolt, then flipped to the second for the door knob, but the beast was in the breezeway, and before she could get the key in the lock, it slipped and backpedaled, scraping its claws against the

concrete to come to a stop beside her, standing hunched on its hind legs, its hot breath panting over her face and its forelegs raised on either side of her. Katrina braced for the fall of its hideous, fiendish claws, closed her eyes and tensed every muscle, and prepared for the slavering, hungry fangs to tear at her neck. It would be over in but a moment. But all she felt was the warmth of the beast's paw gently on the back of her hand. There was no fatal strike or gnashing jaws. Only the creature's steady, heavy breathing and the soft touch of its paw on her hand, and then another paw on her shoulder.

"Katrina," it growled indistinctly, in a deep, gentle, gravelly snarl. Katrina opened her eyes and looked into the canine face peering intently back into hers. "I told you humans are worse." The creature was mostly in silhouette from a lamp post in the parking lot behind it, its ears pricking up into the light's creamy glow.

"Scout?" Katrina asked timidly. Scout smiled in a wolfish sort of manner and his large, fluffy tail swayed languidly. He nodded in a not quite human way, then turned, and bolted on all fours across the parking lot, across the road, and back into the wild and untamed park from whence he came.

END