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Circe

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Circe · *Laura Gerrity*

MEN TURN INTO ANIMALS; then they are mine.

My mother warned me: New York, for gods sakes, a seething little island like that? What can you expect? Still, it would have happened even at home, and where would I have been then? Argos, Pennsylvania. A town about as fun as an exhumed graveyard—dead, dead, dead. The tombstones of shops that were once fur boutiques and antique dealers, then turned into beauty salons and five-and-dimes. Now the only survivors are Sam's grocery, the drugstore, and the bowling alley, where the shoes have been worn so many times they feel like old leather slippers. If someone has hemorrhoids all of Argos knows because Rose, the cashier at the drugstore, can't keep her flapping mouth shut. Any prescription filled for V.D., even the garden variety, means no nookie for the medicated. Rosie takes it upon herself to warn everyone to stop before the clothes hit the floor. That's what would have happened to me in Argos. I'm getting a reputation even here.

Still, it's a living.

I find a man somewhere, bring him home, give him wine, a meal, a warm bed. We roam the island together, sitting in the hot places. We talk about beauty, art, politics. It doesn't matter what he says; I'm watching his lips move, the soft skin brushing and cleaving. When a man opens his mouth, the lips part like skin peeling away from fruit, the teeth, tongue and soft gums inside. After all this time that's what still gets me, that's when I believe in a man, when I watch his lips. I watch it all. The way his eyes shift, the way his spine curls and straightens his body across from mine. It would be easier to get to know him if he didn't talk. I'd learn him faster, just watching, without words clouding the subject. Of course I am interested in their bodies. But I don't get involved. It's business.

A man expects questions on these dates, conventions. So I ask if he likes his mother; the Oedipal thing can work to my advantage. One boy, Max, he's a real tiger now, put his head in my lap and I told him his world would disappear in a moment, that he'd be like a baby, my baby, my pet. I wasn't lying. But I do the usual preliminary screening with everyone. It's as if I'm asking them their favorite colors; their answers just different shades of the same hue. No one says plaid or houndstooth. Their responses tick along

like seconds on a noisy watch; I'm not really listening while I look for the beast inside. I wait for the wildness.

The first man who turned on me was a rat. We met at one of those readings at the uptown Y, and he came to my place for coffee afterward. We were talking about Proust and the power that redredging the past unleashes. I'm this kid from Argos, been in New York all of one week, and I'm sitting there crossed-legged in my Jordaches and Docksidiers looking at this guy in a three piece tweed number with those little round glasses and Cole-Haan loafers, thinking this has got to be God in a scratchy suit. After a while Proust gets peripheral and we lock gazes as if we are circling each other. Here I am, the magna cum A+ queen of Argos State without a clue in the world of what people can become. Pretty soon I'm touching his neck with the back of my hand and his head is between my breasts. He's breathing as if he is the lungs of the world and it's a small flimsy bed that breaks in the middle and we fall on the floor tangled in blankets and he seems a little irked to be flat on his ass in a dingy apartment and at that moment I feel like I will do anything to make him stay. So I look in his eyes and start to whisper and whisper and his jaw, which is all tensed up, goes slack and he stares at me with a little smile so I just keep whispering and moving my hair and my hands over his skin and I feel him relax under my fingers. I kept whispering long after he had fallen asleep.

In the morning I woke to a chirping noise, but then I realized it wasn't a chirp but a small shrill shriek. There was a light brown rat as long as my forearm in the blankets. He burrowed straight for me.

I grabbed him by the tail and threw him out the window. His head hit one of the bars and then he landed with a thick thud on the fire escape. I looked out after a minute, but he was gone.

I told myself the next guy I dated would be different. He was a Lithuanian actor who had gone to Harvard. I thought, oh, lovely to look at, intelligent, tells funny stories. They were long stories with beginnings, middles, ends, and moral lessons. I listened and listened.

Then one day he turned like milk. I was listening to his story about a car chase he was in in Venice, and mid-sentence it came to me that there are no cars in Venice and I looked at Markus and pictured him in this nonexistent Ferrari in this city of bullshit with boats as slow as slugs. I realized in that

moment that he didn't stay underwater for ten minutes with a shark, that the other boy had not had a knife, that he had never set foot in Zimbabwe, that all of his stories were lies. Then I began to see the ass in him, that it had been there all along, and that it was only a waiting game, his flirtation with being a man.

He lasted a little while longer and then he turned into an ass. I came home from work and he was standing in the kitchen, braying, braying at me. I knew it was him because of the eyes, slightly crossed, the sad confused eyes that I see in all of them. He kept shaking his head and baring his huge blunt teeth—he didn't want to be an ass. But there he was. I led him down into the street, but he stayed in front of my building, whinnying at my window, until the police came to take him away.

I began to think it was my fault.

I told my friend Dusa about it. She doesn't have a normal love life either; guys just freeze up around her. We were having lunch, and she didn't seem surprised until I told her about the police. She looked up then, her head cocked, her hair wild about her head, her mouth in a small smile.

"The police?" she asked.

"Maybe it was the SPCA. I don't know. It was a big van. Looked official."

"But you just let them take him?"

"How could I take care of a donkey? I don't even have a backyard. . . ." Dusa reached over and covered my hand with her own.

"I wasn't suggesting you keep him." She paused. "I don't know how to say this, Cici, but I'm not an art dealer for nothing. I smell a million dollars here."

Dusa put me in touch with Herm Finkelstein at the Odyssey Circus. About acquisitions. I drove to Queens to talk to this guy, their head trainer who was also doing the late night thing with Dusa. I made an illegal left hand turn just to get down the little street to their warehouse. Everywhere the warehouses yawned like bored cats, gray and unimpressed. I parked halfway on the curb and walked to the entrance.

It was a huge bare place, its ceiling crisscrossed by iron beams, with walls that looked as if they had been laced together by the lines and ropes stretching from one side to the other. Lining the walls were animal cages: a few parrots, a lion, an elephant, and what looked like either a stray dog or

a wolf. The floor was marked with chalk: one large ring and two smaller rings drawn on the gray cement. In the main ring, a small man in black was kneeling on the back of a camel. He had a wooden rod, and when he prodded the camel in the shoulder she knelt, when he poked her in the haunches she rose. The camel had just folded her knobby legs under her, lurching like a car out of gas, when he saw me.

“You Dusa’s friend?”

“This is a circus?” He slid down one side of the camel and slapped her on the rump so she stumbled up again. He walked her over to me, holding the reins in one hand.

“First things first: I don’t wanna know. You come up with what we can call paperwork—you got the zebra from your aunt, you got a cousin in Kenya—good enough. There’s no truth as I see it, so I don’t wanna know. You call me, I send the truck.”

“What kind of circus is this? No spangles, no tent, no feather head-dresses?” The camel curled her lip and shifted her back half from one hip to the other.

“You want the run of the mill variety, you sell to Dumb Dumb Brothers. They pay five figures, we pay four. But I’ll tell you—they’ll want papers. Legal papers.” He pronounced each syllable. “Plus, I’ll teach you to train.”

“The animals?”

“Einstein. Whatever you get, I’ll teach you to train.”

“What’s the number for the truck?” He pulled out a card. “Day or night?” I asked.

“Twenty-four hours. And Cindy.”

“Circe.”

“Whatever. Think Exotic.”

About two weeks later, I was dating a sculptor from Louisiana. He turned at night. Imagine waking up in bed with a stallion. The bedroom was a shambles by the time the truck got there.

A wad of cash can make anything feel like a job. I began to think exotic. I learned to tell what kind of animal a man will be by the way he looks, the way he moves. Skin is a thin disguise. The lions with their barrel chests and thick glinting hair. The pumas with their sleek small heads and muscled taut bodies. When I knew what we needed at the circus I would look for the

type—in clubs, in bars, I would hunt him down. When I guessed wrong there were always plenty of cages, but I didn't make many mistakes.

The first time I touch them I am sure.

Once, I was unbuttoning an investment banker's shirt. I undid the last button and pulled the tails out of his pants. Then I moved my hands, flat and splayed, along his chest. It was covered with dense brown hair, and I looked into his large eyes and reached down to his waist. He made a small rumbling noise in the back of his throat and I knew, *Bear*. I kept on top of the situation and hoped he wouldn't change in the middle. I didn't worry too much. Eventually I tamed them all, even the wildest ones eat from my hands. Herm (Hermes, he said, was his ring name) taught me to train, and he said I was a natural. The animals watched me, mesmerized, and once I had taught them a command they would perform as if hypnotized. Together, Herm and I taught them a complicated procession for that month's show. The rest of the performers were dancers that had gotten too chubby and beauties that had gotten too old. We had a couple of ex-Rockettes and a former Miss Teen Mississippi in the troupe. They liked me because I wore black sweatpants instead of a black unitard and so on opening night they could be sure that their husbands weren't checking out my legs.

I began to perform with the animals because I was the only one who could get the lions to do the quick mincing step on "Hurry up, please, it's time." When we performed I lost all sense of audience and attitude and coaxed, cajoled, and cooed my animals to their hops and hoops. I knew each one intimately, and they obeyed me like new lovers. Sometimes the girls would pause during the dance just to watch us. One of the dancers' brothers wrote reviews for *The Village Voice*, and she got him to slip us into the Style section. Pretty soon we were setting up double bleachers to pack the people in. Herm took to selling tickets and gave me the wilder animals to train. On my days off, I'd look for new ones.

One day I called Herm to come and pick up a land tortoise. When he came he brought a dolly with him and slid it under the mound of contracted tortoise.

"Reptiles reek," he shook his head. "I wouldn't have this sonofabitch in my apartment for five minutes." I held out my hand, and he reached into

his pocket and peeled off a few hundreds from the steadily growing roll that never went to the bank. “You gotta meet the Greek. Alligator wrestler. Scar the size o’ Jersey on his thigh—from the war, not the lizards. Little hard of hearing too. He shows up every once in a while, we put him up, though he doesn’t deserve it. He’ll get a kick out of you, but don’t let him near that animal connection of yours.” I wasn’t paying much attention; I was already thinking about the next one, the insurance agent with llama potential. If I watched closely enough, it was like a science.

There was a rhino, a crocodile, a zebra, a gazelle, and a wildebeest in one month.

I noticed that it happened after long conversations, and I began to think it was because I knew something I shouldn’t have. I had spent most of my life cramming myself full of useless knowledge. When I am with most men it is as if I am on a see-saw and everything in my head is like a weight that loads my side down. I sit on the ground, squinting up at him. He is flailing and powerless against the sun. This is what I see in their eyes when they turn.

I looked for the animals, but I always searched for the one who would keep the balance, who would have the gravity to play with me. I didn’t believe it would happen. Herm and Dusa had broken off even their late night meetings, she claimed he couldn’t look her in the eye. I looked at Herm and saw an Owl. I began thinking that being a man meant having the animal inside, that it only took a certain loss of control to release it. That didn’t make them all the same. There are a million kinds of animals.

The more I whispered to them, the faster it happened. One, a chicken from the beginning, listened to me as if I were a priest. I could see him fade, halfway between sleep and love, into a trance. He sat, nestled on my couch, dazed and dull in the middle of cocktails. I talked to him until the change overtook him.

Soon, I began to get creative. It’s not as if most men are purebreds. They would have the lips of a camel, the smile of a dolphin, the wings of a barn swallow and the teeth of a hyena. In some, the different animals jostled within them, fighting for space. These were the difficult types; some would rather die than be tamed. Some tried to kill me.

With an iguana panther I waited until he was about to leave, heading for the door. I came up behind him, pressed my body against his back, my fingers trailing up his neck, into his hair, my whisper constant warmth in his ear. I turned him like this to my bedroom, my voice tumbling into him. He changed before dawn. I woke to see shining eyes in the corner of my room. He circled the bed slowly, his tongue flicking from his mouth. I was naked, and it occurred to me as I inched back against the headboard, *how stupid, not to have a gun*. The beast was twice my size and riled with anger. He looked at me and hissed, his triangular jaw opening like a trap—rows and rows of teeth.

I lived because the iguana panther did not know, could not comprehend how he had changed. I began to sing to him, as I would have sung to a child. My voice was shaking at first, but as he slowed and shook his head my song grew stronger. Soon he dropped, limp and heavy as a rolled rug, still watching me with his thin-lidded eyes. I went and sat beside him, stroking his smooth black coat. And for a moment, when I looked at him with his head in my lap, I wished he were a man.

Perhaps what I do is a gift, perhaps it is a curse, perhaps it has nothing to do with any god at all.

I had nightmares sometimes that I was being eaten by the animals I had created. I could die a thousand times—ripped limb from limb by a hyena, swallowed whole by the unhinged jaws of a boa constrictor. In each of these I lived to feel myself devoured.

In the Odyssey, they said I worked some kind of magic. I'll admit it was eerie the way the animals followed me around when they could, howled to get attention when I passed by their cages. And I could get a cheetah, or a boa constrictor, or a hippo with no trouble. Herm told me once in a matter of fact way that he assumed the animals had something to do with drugs. Illicit connections in other hemispheres. He didn't want to know, he added, searching my face for a confirmation. If I ever wanted out though, I would still have work with him.

I didn't want to give it up; I was good at it. I'd decided against doing hybrids for now, so it was safe enough. And the animals came cheap: apartment damages, and a small finder's fee. As long as I came up with the creative paperwork no one at the circus asked any questions.

One day I came to the warehouse and Herm was on the floor, coloring flyers with a green magic marker. *Ulysses the Alligator Wrestler* captioned an outline of a man who was either wrestling with an alligator or had the animal tied around his waist.

“Think you could manage a couple alligators next week?” Herm asked. I shook my head. I was working on a couple of arctic wolves for the pooch parade. The men, Politês and Eurylokhos, were a tough pair. Politês was innocent and trusting enough, but Eurylokhos was wily and suspicious. Like most of the pure dog types, they were pack animals. I knew if I could get one away from the other he would be a dog by the next morning, but in bars and clubs they practically held each other’s hands. Then it occurred to me to do them together.

They came to dinner and I spoke softly, making them lean forward to hear what I said, bringing us closer, warming them up. Then, before I even served dessert, one was lifting his leg on my sofa and the other was out on the balcony howling at the moon. I was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, holding the ice cream scooper for the Baked Alaska, and realized I had arctic wolves in my house. I stood there for a minute, watching, just watching the one on the balcony. His cry, aimed at the hazy stars, was long, low and lonely. And suddenly I felt tired, just sad and lost and tired and I imagined my life going on forever like this, an endless procession of confused animals. I leaned against the doorway and closed my eyes, wishing that once it would be me and not them who would turn into the wild wondering thing.

Then one of the wolves turned and snarled at the other. I slid the kitchen door shut and called the truck.

The next morning I was sitting in the bleachers in the warehouse, inventing origins and donors while Politês and Eurylokhos paced in their cages, hungry and savvy now that they were limited by bars. They growled occasionally, but when I whistled to them they would whine and roll over, their long tails brushing the floor. Then I heard them both stop pacing. They were completely still, quiet. I looked up, and there he was in the main ring. I stared and kept staring at him because I couldn’t see what he would become. For a moment I saw him as a lion, then a bear, a snake, a bird. He began striding up the bleachers toward me, talking about where he had

come from and what he was looking for, but I didn't hear a word he said for all the animals I could see in him. There was a whole jungle in his face. I stood as he came closer to me to see if I could smell it—just a trace of what paced within him.

When I breathed in I only became dizzy.

This one would be a bit of a challenge. A rare animal. Not easily caught. Most of them give themselves away so quickly. In a minute, really. As I swayed from his scent, I reached over and put my hand on his arm thinking I would know from the first contact, the first touch skin to skin, I would feel it in him. But I could not. Instead of feeling the animal I could only feel this skin, this flesh warm against my own. And I stopped and looked in his face that was lined with human wrinkles, punctuated by human bones.

He admired the new additions, and his voice was not accusing but admitting me. He asked where I found them all, and I said I picked them up. Here and there. My hand was still on his arm.

When he moved my mind spun farther. We walked down the bleachers and onto the floor and I watched him. He moved like a wrestler, like a long line of elastic muscle that could stretch or contract itself at will. He could be a mongoose, a leopard, a lynx, an eel. Even his shrugs and crouches did not give him away. Perhaps, I thought, he is an animal I've never met. Or a mongrel of the worst kind. When we were walking next to the cages the animals moved with me, trotting alongside as far as their pens would allow, whinnying, clucking, hissing and howling. When we left the arctic wolves behind with their pitiable whimpers he asked me what I did to them. I whisper to them, I thought, not so much, but enough to explode them out of their fragile skins, their unformed selves. I said, I bring them here.

He said I was a legend, that no one in the world could procure such animals. I knew that he was flattering me, wooing me, and I listened. I listened to the texture of his voice as he paced out his words, his tones low and intimate. I listened to the way he said *procure* and it seemed he was suggesting that these beasts had merely been solved of their humanity.

He said, your paperwork is shoddy. I laughed because it did not seem so much shoddy as fantastic. I agreed and shrugged and my shoulder brushed against his with a shock. I stepped back and stopped laughing. For a moment I had forgotten the animal inside him.

When I asked him for dinner I almost wanted him to say no, to prove that he was different. And we talked and I was watching, watching his face for

changes, for that dull, thick expression that tells me that a man is no longer thinking, that his mind is beginning to stammer with his voice. I brought him home with me, with his fascinating fluid movements, with his weathered face and fresh body, with his voice that echoed through my skull. He would not stand still for a moment, he seemed to circle me when I cooked. A raven, I thought, a coyote. He seemed to be everything and for a moment I thought it would be too dangerous. If I turned him he would attack me, and I might have to kill him.

He did not slow down even when we sat. His gestures, large and various, kept his body in constant motion like some of the rodents I had known. But they were deliberate expressions that flowed into each other, one after the other. He was not parts but a mystifying whole. I whispered over the candle and our faces drew closer and closer until I could feel the heat of the candle flame rising under my chin. He watched my lips and did not succumb but responded. I could not eat. By the end of dinner, I was wild to know what he was.

Perhaps, I thought, the difference lies in knowing that he will leave, that he has only come to rest here for a while. He does not look at me as a destination, his eyes see through me to another horizon. Perhaps I will not be able to turn him.

I poured him some liquor that I saved for when I didn't want a fight. It could flatten the strongest of them, my liquor down their throats, my voice in their ears. Suddenly, I felt him behind me, his lips moving in my hair, his hands on my sides. My fingers loosened on the glass and it dropped to the carpet with a soft thud. I could hear a roar within me as my hands tingled and flexed. I turned my head and the four walls of my apartment seemed too close, moving in, containing me. And it struck me that there are female animals too. What was he trying to make of me? I heard his words soft next to my ear and I thought, who is this man and where has he come from and who but the gods could send this to me?

I turned my body to face him all at once and I put my forefinger to his whispering lips. He was silent, surprised, and then he smiled. His smile shocked me; he laughed at my desperate wildness. I began to murmur to myself, to beat down what was within me. He watched me regain myself, waiting. I would beat him, I thought, shaking with frustration. I would turn him no matter what he was. But when I turned my voice to him he

pressed his finger to my lips. And in that moment of stillness I realized how different this was to be. The fighting had ceased.

We stripped each other and were human and animal, everything.

He stays now. He sleeps in my bed, washes himself in my shower, smells of my soap and skin. After that night I knew I would not change him. We keep this balance, the urges trapped within us. And we train together and drink together and wake and cook and eat together. Once he asked me how many men there had been before him. I just looked at him and he shook his head as if he were waking up. It is only in moments that we forget that the rules have changed. At first I would see a monkey when he bent over, a seal when he raised his head from the pillow, a bull when he swayed in anger. Then the animals disappeared from my vision. He became, in his movement, man.

Even now he sleeps beside me, this man. And I know, because I have seen his eyes meet mine in a flash of anger, his hands stroke my sides with deliberate care, that it is only his strength that keeps him from turning. I have learned to tame myself, to keep the roaring reasoned within me. But it is so delicate, this truce which keep us from what paces between the bars of our bones; sometimes I feel as if one word could explode us. Now he awakes, his eyes taking me in with the world. I put one hand on his arm, skin against skin. I do not use my voice; I am weary of spells. My hand grips him, my body asks, how will we keep this peace?