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# Rat? Where Rat?

A Tale of Transformation

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**A**ndy was starving, the hunger was driving him senseless. He couldn't think of anything else but eating. Not work, not sleep and certainly not family. For him, nothing else existed. His eye's perceived things with a crimson aura. The colors he saw were muted and he was barely able to maintain any sense of humanity. Strangers saw him as in indigent, another homeless wander, a hobo. No one dared speak to him, which was fortunate. At this stage, he would only have been able to squeak in reply. He fought back the urge to drool, it was his last ounce of self-control. His peripheral vision narrowed leading him ever forward. He knew where it was taking him, but he was powerless to resist. He could smell the alley, three blocks away. To him, it was scented jasmine, pine and the intense odor of melting asphalt.

Andy walked slowly down the alley. It was not a path many chose willingly. The air was heavy as a low-lying fog, with an ambiance of vomit and piss. Because it was so isolated and contained rotting smells which could choke a horse, it was Andy's favorite hunting ground. Amid what might be the world largest collection of overflowing dumpsters he was at home. He simply couldn't avoid its lure. The prey he found there, tended to be insensible, drunk or completely unconscious.

Andy found a victim, it wasn't hard to do. He was propped up against a brick wall, between two of the ever-present trash containers. Andy stretched out his arms and gazed at the heavens. Some, who transformed into wolfs at this stage, complained of the pain ... but it was nothing compared to this. Lycanthropes at least stayed in one piece, whereas he ... well Andy's process was completely different. An observer would have seen Andy's skin grow numerous lumps the size of oranges. But instead of merely growing, they writhed and moved under his skin as if they were some nightmarish freight train. Next, the hair appeared, followed by the appearance of small black eyes. In the end, Andy's clothes fell to the ground, unable to stay vertical. Out of the arms and legs of his clothes came a mass of rats.

They soon covered their prey, the unconscious man between the dumpsters. They crawled over him as if they were flies on a pile of open manure. From Andy's now many points of view, the man's breathing looked like a purple mist, rising slowly as he breathed. A horde of black noses sniffed the air, drinking in the lilac fumes like an exotic liquor. The smells had a similar effect. Andy was soon euphoric. The wild, exotic taste made all other foods seemed like stale whitefish and over boiled mutton in comparison.

His neighbors were always concerned about Andy's health, as he frequently looked pale and gaunt. As the hunger grew the hollows of his face deepened and his arms became thin, rope-like extensions of his torso. His eyes would change from hazel to a deep brown. The downstairs tenant, Mrs. Nowitzki often brought him steaming bowls of pasta, laced with basil, rosemary, and garlic ... straight from her packed 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue restaurant. If he wasn't home, she'd leave it by the door, accompanied by a sack of baguettes. But to Andy, it tasted like raw dust, as if she had scraped together the leavings from the bottom of an old vacuum cleaner. When he could, he passed it along to the neighborhood soup kitchen, where the manager would give him an earful.

"Can't you find some regular food?" He often complained, "You'll give these people heartburn with all this fancy gourmet stuff."

Yet to Andy, the purple haze of his prey's alcoholic breath, was a luxury, an indulgence of epic proportions. The very scent which drove other people away from this friendless man was like a bag of sweets to Andy. Filet Minion cooked by the finest chefs. He drank the fragrance in like it was a bottle of

Armand de Brignac Midas. Like the Albarragena Jamon Iberico de Bellota, which is made from pigs who were only fed acorns and roots to give them their distinctive flavor. This man had been cured for many years. Filled with hardships and horrid hallucinations, before collapsing in this alley.

A stray cat turned the corner, looking for a handout. When the creature saw Andy ... or rather the pack of rats Andy had become ... he hissed and fluffed all his hair. One of the rats turned and gave him an unnatural snarl and the cat abruptly retreated.

As the purple exhales diminished, the man started to stir. All the wrongs and all the pain were being drawn from the man and it rose him to consciousness. When he did awake, the experience of being covered in rats led, as always, to one result. Still, the magnificent taste drew him in, Andy couldn't drag himself away. He breathed in every scent, every fragrance, every droplet of mauve gas.

When there was no more, the man screamed flailing his arms in the fashion of a helicopter. Andy had known others of his kind who lived without fingers or thumbs ... some even without a leg ... the result of a crushing blow by a man regaining his senses. This time, however, Andy was fortunate. His victim had no taste for violence and his attacks were more of a hindrance than a danger. He scurried off under the dumpsters and toward the river.

The next stage was bitter and excruciatingly uncomfortable. The rats ate each other as they slowly formed back into one large protoplasmic form. As if Andy was a cookie being baked in the oven, the soft goo coalesced back into a vaguely humanoid form. Andy had hidden several caches of clothing along the river, the result of several days spent in jail for indecent exposure. He found one and opened the plastic bag. Either he'd forgotten to add them or someone else had found the stash and made off with the socks and shoes. Andy staggered home barefoot.

Now the next process began. All the hate and viciousness of his dinner's life now bubbled up from his innards like a bad case of food poisoning. Andy could understand why this man took to drinking, the acid in his stomach was shockingly nauseating. For many of his victims, now cleaned of all the evil which had beset them ... and their memories ... life was better. They would go on to lead normal lives, unaware of what once haunted them. But for Andy it meant several days of living in his apartment bathroom, worshiping the porcelain goddess within. It took a few more days to bury the memories and the black feelings so deep they blinked out of existence. It was an oriental technique Andy had picked up in Bhutan. Mental exercises most psychologists would have sold their mother to master and teach to their patients.

When it was over, he seemed like a new man ... as if he had recently returned from a trip home and had been fattened up by his relatives. Full cheeks, toned muscles ... and abs you could use as a trampoline. Andy checked his messages. As expected there was one from his boss. Most employers didn't cotton much to several days of unexplained absence. He'd go into work tomorrow despite the message. The boss would most likely demand to see him in his office, a trailer at the construction site. Once inside, Andy could take all the boss's memories of firing him away. It wasn't an unpleasant experience, except for the transformation into rat form, but it was like having an Iron City beer chaser after dining at San Carlo Osteria Piemonte on Prince street.

Sometimes Andy envied the life of a vampire. The power to command mortals to do your bidding. Only he wasn't fond of the idea of killing. Murder was the one thing a wererat preferred to avoid. Andy had

never killed any of his victims. In many cases, he essentially improved their wretched lives. Andy was also not a night person, so the thought of never seeing the sun again had no inducement for him. Werewolves didn't have a problem with daylight and they had the same monthly problem, but it wasn't for him either. Sure, the raw animal power of the wolf had its allure, but again there was the killing. It was not to Andy's liking.

Besides, try handling real silverware when you're a werewolf. While Andy was mulling this over, a knock appeared at the door. Mrs. Nowitzki again. He'll simply have to get the food to the 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue shelter again. But when he opened the door, it was Ida, the attractive young gypsy woman from across the street. She ran a little tea parlor there ... palms read, tarot cards and the like. She was a redhead with a closely cropped mop top and an outfit adorned with cheap plastic jewelry. He often fantasized about her ... she was the type anyone would fantasize about. Still, how do you go out on a date with a woman and explain once a month you're compelled to transmogrify into the one creature guaranteed to make her scream and run away in panic?

She appeared distressed. "You have to come help," she grabbed Andy's arm and started pulling him toward the stairs.

"Look if you're having trouble," He pulled out his cell phone, "Let's call 911."

She gave him a quizzical look. "They'll only take him to Bellevue. I need you to eat his thoughts for me."

Now it was Andy's turn to be astonished. "What are you talking about?"

She glanced at him with a smile so sharp it would have put a Ginsu knife to shame. "Don't be so coy, I know what you are. The spirits whisper to me about you."

Now it was Andy's turn to play indignant. "They do? How witty of them. Oh, Ida, wooo ..." He did his impression of a ghostly intonation, "there goes my handsome construction worker again."

"Don't play dumb with me Andrew ... I'm a gypsy." She started pulling him toward the stairs again.

He tried to put on his best manners, even though he didn't get much practice. "I thought your gypsy thing was just an act to bait the tourists."

She stopped and raised her filmy blouse. "I'm as real a gypsy as these are." She displayed two of the most perfect, mouth-watering mounds he had ever seen. He was so shocked he stopped resisting and she led me off towards the stairs. He followed her to the far side of the street. He supposed it was curiosity. He'd never been in one of those tarot card places, even though they are all over the village.

This place was buried. The bottom of her sign was level with the sidewalk and you had to go down a fairly narrow stairwell to get to her door. The inside was just like the store in the Jimmy Stewart movie *Bell, Book and Candle*. Mandrake root and sage, bat wings and ... well, a lot of other stuff he couldn't identify. "Where's Pyewacket?" He asked trying to be nonchalant. She didn't answer but indicated something on the floor. Having just come in from the bright sunlight, it took his eyes a minute to adjust.

There, in the middle of the floor, was a rather odd-looking sight, even for a place like this. A well-dressed man, in his mid-30's, was lying prone in the middle of the floor. Even from here Andy could see the wisps of purple colored smoke rising from his lips and drifting toward the ceiling. Having just eaten, He

had a little more resistance than he usually did. Andy pulled out his phone and started pressing numbers.

She gently covered Andy's screen with her delicate hand. "It's not what he needs." Their gaze met, and he got the feeling of great wisdom and intelligence from her extraordinary eyes. "Don't you want it?" She asked enticingly. She leaned over the body and used her hand to force the vapors over in Andy's direction. "Just take in the smell," she cooed. "The savory taste, the delicious aroma."

Andy swayed on his feet slightly, like he was about to collapse, "I shouldn't ... I shouldn't ... I ..."

"Why not?" She almost winked at him. At this one moment, she was Cleopatra, Mata Hari and Marilyn Monroe all rolled into one. It was as if Andy were iron filings to her magnet. He tried to will himself to walk out her door and call 911, but his shoes stayed, glued to the floor tiles. "It'll be worth your while." She whispered in a seductive, hushed tone. "I promise."

Andy had lived his whole life avoiding having others witness the change. But here he was, the girl staring right at him with those piercing eyes ... and he couldn't help himself. The next moment was a haze of pain and torment. Then the running, the squeaking and the eating. Oh, what a feast. His thoughts tasted like exquisite seafood paella, ohmi-gyu beef steak and pastel de nata. It was everything she hinted it would be ... and more.

The smells were as enticing as the taste. As he gorged himself of the magnificent tastes, there was one reminded him of the dentist. It stank of ... nitrous oxide. Yes, he recalled the smell, nitrous oxide. What would nitrous oxide be doing ... he had the vague impression of steel bars being lowered around him ...

When he awoke, Andy was in a small cage. Ida and the man in the suit stool examining him. The cage was off the floor, sitting on the counter. Ida looked pleased.

"Andrew," she explained, "this is Nick. Nick meet Andrew, the newest addition to my stock." She turned and peeled off a wad of hundred-dollar bills into Nick's palm. "Nick's a Rakshasa all the way from the Bronx." He even looked a little like Jack Lemmon, but if he was a Rakshasa, this wasn't his real form anyway. They like to imitate others. On the shelf behind him, He could see other small cages of rats. He knew he was looking at himself, in the same way you can recognize yourself in the mirror.

She peeled off another hundred, "Here sweetie, for cab fare back to the Bronx." She turned her attention to Andy. "You know he lives across the street from the place where the Lindberg kidnapper lived. I bet the vibes are delightful. His father framed the boy you know. They never guessed the secret marks in the ransom note was his claws. It's a wicked story, I'll tell it to you some night." She leaned closer to the cage. "I paid him extra to get him to imitate one of those drunks you like so much. I've been working on getting you over here for months. I don't wear this blouse without a bra for just anyone you know. You're going to make me a fortune. I'll keep one of you here, but I have orders for some of your brothers all the way to Hollywood. You'll eat the finest thoughts of troubled actors and producers."

Andy threw himself against the bars. It was pointless, but he felt he had to do something. If she started selling off his rat forms, he'll never be able to reassemble into his human form. It doesn't work well when you reconstitute yourself as nothing but a liver. The prospect of spending the rest of his life in a cage was chilling.

“Won’t work sweetie, the bars are solid nickel. I had it specially made for you.” She smiled, Andy could see the recognition on her face. She was delighted. “You didn’t know, did you? Wererats can’t reassemble when they are surrounded by Nickel.” She laughed. “It’s just so delightful. You’re going to help so many people, sweetie. Imagine, no more painful transformations. All the agony gone for good. You really did look uncomfortable when you changed, dear. This is going to be so good for you; just free eats ... and all the finest thoughts you can conceive. When we’re done, and I’ve sold off all your brothers, I might just take you along to my planned vacation home I’m going to buy in Bermuda. You’ll have to hide extremely well from the baggage handlers though, or you’ll wind up spending your final days living in the sewers of Queens.”