

TALKING ANIMALS



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●
■ The city is an island and an island is a ship that never sails.

The city is a vessel for animals.

A long time ago, before the island was a city, it was a crumb of land bobbing in an ocean tea. But even then, it was jammed with plants and animals. The island has always teemed with life, moored as it is at a powerful juncture of rivers, the ocean, greater islands, and a whole roiling continent. It is hard now to picture the island of before, in its green state crisscrossed by streams and edged by marshes, as it has been changed so thoroughly by wave after wave of arrival and violence, construction and reconstruction. But before or after, this place was ever vital. This was never just any old island; it has always been a planet in miniature, a bubble of disordered life.

When the outsiders came they came in messy herds. Foreign birds arrived in flocks, and multitudes climbed from rough wooden crafts, all knees and heaves over the silty rocks.

Once grounded, some lay for a long time, crying for beloved friends lost at sea. Others put their grief aside and got straight to business. Whatever the attitude, all newcomers

carried some memory, potent or cloudy, of the homes they'd left behind. They hoisted various flags and commenced the same battles that had driven them from their old lands in the first place.

More, then more arrived. You've never seen such a multitude. Everyone squeezed in and then did it again. So tight did it become that the ground in some areas disappeared beneath the crush of living creatures. The island swayed and creaked but did not sink because this was a ship of bedrock.

Native gulls turned above flocks of European starlings strategizing in trees.

The creatures from away brought with them panic. Gruesome histories trailed like a putrid smell. They had firm notions of how life should be lived, and they intended to impose them.

The island trembled.

Somebody cobbled a street where a soft path had been. Somebody drew a map. Somebody carried out a massacre.

Animals tore into one another. They spread diseases and infections. A pool of blood formed, dried up, then turned into flakes that the wind carried away. There is no story of a city that is not also a story of brutality. There is no story of brutality that has not been retold as one of heroism.

The invasive species began right away to mythologize themselves. They renamed everything. They got into fights with one another, and whoever won renamed places once again. They built houses, stores, bars, and jails out of the

island's trees. The city burned again and again, and they rebuilt in whatever architectural fashion was current. Everything was brutal and everyone died. The living tore down old buildings and erected new ones in their place. They renamed streets and buildings after their dead, only for the living to die in turn.

To repress the psychic chaos that swirled inside, the living turned to numerology. They began to count everything and categorize what they'd counted. Someone measured out the whole island then divided it with a grid. Grids sent the message that everything was under control. Meanwhile, more arrived and more died.

"Don't panic," they murmured to one another as they drew out long, straight lines.

Once they had the grid on their map, they set about filling every square on the real-life land. They built great halls and courthouses, they built fire stations and granaries. Around the edges they erected docks and strung bridges. Larger and larger ships kept bringing in more beings and things. Some grumbled because by now they saw themselves not as invasive, but rather as new kinds of native species. The community worked on complicated myths to explain away the violence at the core of their city-making.

Streets and avenues continued to creep, until they covered not just the first island but surrounding islands as well.

See! Here a beam, there a reservoir. Here a scaffold, there a retaining wall. Here a beer hall, there a bakery. Here a sweatshop, there an armory. Here a train station

with vaulted ceilings painted celestial blue, and there a system of grease-black tunnels.

The living paved over old cobbling. They numbered and lettered the new trains. After vigorous debate, Helvetica was chosen as the official typeface for all signs. Buildings grew tall. Apartments stretched along streets like rows of stalls in a stable. Rooms proliferated inside like cells in a hive.

As the cityscape expanded, it also shrank. It came to feel as if the whole population lived together in one big house. Bricks, wallpaper, matted fur, insulation, granite, saliva, glue, venetian blinds, mud, twigs, vinyl siding, steel beams—they overlapped and merged. Architecture and infrastructure blurred into continuous surface. This great combine creased and flipped, so that private was public, and public concealed itself in plain view. Looking out might as well be looking in, as building walls made streets into halls. Foyers led to front doors, led to bedrooms with views of—if one was lucky—the Hudson River or the Kosciuszko Bridge.

In summer, sun pounded the sidewalks and the heat intensified the smell of everything. Citizens put plants into pots and put these pots on their sills. Youths leapt into turquoise pools that sat in the middle of emerald parks. Air conditioners hummed dangerously overhead. The city was like a pizza oven, and the inhabitants were greasy little toppings. These toppings felt weak or furious. Vendors sold chili mango and ices. Smoke and steam billowed up to join the clouds. The clouds grew tense. Rain fell heavy. The

storm cleared up. Everyone felt happy, but then the heat would return, bringing with it fury and fatigue.

In late summer, places closed for vacation. Those who could, fled. Then September would come, school would start, and everything would be open and packed once again.

Fall was the most beautiful.

Then came winter. The first snow was nice, but every subsequent just coated the frozen street filth. The mélange melted and refroze and the city would be miserable for months.

Winter lasted half a year or more before the winds blew in spring, when every tree exploded with pollen and flowers. Ginkgo and linden released their funky cream perfumes. The island went mad with joy and allergies.

The streets stank. Storefronts emitted puffs of salon chemicals and cooking grease, dung and bleach, fungus and air freshener. When crowds on the train pressed together they released whiffs of cocoa butter and Chanel.

Trash piled up. Workers took it away. There was so much stuff that even nice things cycled into the trash. Whoever got tired of their shoes just left them on the stoop. Someone else would put them on. Creatures threw out whole bedroom sets and decent abstract paintings. Socks, umbrellas, books, and incense could be bought on any street corner.

The crush, the wealth, the waste of wealth, all the tight quarters and inward-facing windows, made residents obsess over their bodies, their fur and feathers. They ignored seasonal dress and followed instead the gulf streams of

fashion. Tatters in winter and suits for summer. Horn rims and corno portafortunas, buffalo plaids and leopard prints, socks and sandals—it all came and went, then returned later, reimagined. Everything was beautiful artifice.

Creatures obsessed over the unwritten laws of class, order, family, genus, and species. Mayors and councilmembers chattered among themselves, and with bankers. It had to do with ideology. It had to do with money.

The island, which was by now a city absolute, was full. One could get whatever one wanted, but walking around the block cost more than whatever you had in your pocket. A very few had way too much, some had enough, and many had nothing. Many moved away because they were tired, but plenty stayed because they didn't have enough to leave. Things got violent once again.

Though each age seemed as if it would go on indefinitely, the wheel of fortune turned. Outside wanted in afresh. Up wanted down. Those who'd fled to live in smaller herds drifted back to join the urban masses.

The bubble shifted and shimmered.

The city was a mystical chimera that spoke in the voices of multiple animals. It was a teacher, and its core lesson was that all must find peace with their own restless suffering. It also taught restlessness. The city didn't care who was jubilant and who was suicidal. It witnessed without comment. As a great teacher, the city had its true devotees, and they would twist themselves into knots to make sense of their master's riddles. They turned the incomprehensible into a logo, a slo-

gan, a beast, a balloon in the parade. Pressure from within countered that from without in exquisite tension.

The city was an impossibility. An impossible yet existing place. It was a real piece of work. Animals from everywhere loved its whole routine. They adored the city enough to wear its name silk-screened on T-shirts. These shirts hailed others with a greeting that doubled as warning.

WELCOME TO NEW YORK, it read. NOW DUCK, MOTHER-FUCKER.

2 It was the start of some August Friday. The green-copper, brown-gold island gleamed. The park exhaled a cool sigh held from the night before.

Alfonzo Velloso Faca—student of urban behavior, public servant, and brown, fluffy, big-eyed alpaca—emerged from the subway. He trotted along with the great flock of animals coming to Manhattan to make their dough. The crowd was large yet hushed. Everyone felt good because it wasn't humid for a change.

When the traffic lulled, Alfonzo dashed across Broadway and entered his favorite coffee shop, The Early Cenozoic. He hummed a few versions of a joke, and when it was his turn with the lemur barista he tried one out. She'd been working there since late spring but he had yet to establish a rapport.

"Did you hear the news?" he asked. "Some sea animals escaped from the aquarium."

"No! Did this just happen? Was it an uprising? Which aquarium?" The lemur clutched a mug, her eyes wide. Her machine hissed, temporarily forgotten. In the short line behind Alfonzo, a German shepherd was tapping her tail against the counter and a raccoon was fiddling with his newspaper.

Alfonzo had imagined more banter around the joke. He hadn't anticipated her seriousness. He stumbled. "I mean. It didn't happen in reality. I just—I heard it was otter chaos."

The music that had been playing reached its conclusion, leaving a silence for Alfonzo to squirm in. He felt like he'd shoved a used tissue into her paw. He watched the barista take his pun, turn it over and around in English until she saw what it was. "Oh. Utter like otter." Finally she bestowed upon him a slight nod, releasing them both from this snare of awkwardness.

Alfonzo added a wheatgrass cake he didn't really want to his coffee order and left a large tip as a mea culpa. Slinking toward the door, he heard the lemur apologizing to the shepherd for the wait.

These jokes were his hiccups. They came on without warning, spasmed through him, then departed. There was no repressing them, although his former fiancée, Vivi, insisted he could if he tried. Vivi said one should at least be *good* at punning if one had the indecency to say them aloud, and she even went further, suggesting that Alfonzo told bad jokes to humiliate himself because he was afraid of intimacy and craved judgment. Rather than responding to her comment, Alfonzo had searched for a good rhyme to pun with *intimacy*: *nutritionally*, *illiteracy*, *idiocy*? But Vivi's criticism returned to haunt him, at times like these, with its accuracy. He couldn't guess why he wanted to alienate the barista.

Alfonzo entered the park. It was 8:46 a.m. He had fourteen more minutes of freedom, and he could feel the building counting. City Hall knew the minutes and the seconds even for the most insignificant of its animal workers. Alfonzo thought of his dream from this morning and hummed the words *The End*. He had a pressing task to complete, but for the moment he wanted to let his thoughts float as he sipped his coffee. Taking a bench beside the central fountain, he basked in the sound of the water and in the yellow of the flowers. Shaggy green linden and thornless honey locust trees arched above. Beyond the trees towered Woolworths and the municipal building with its golden top. These old buildings dwarfed the trees just as the corporate towers dwarfed the old buildings. Traffic snaked along. The rhythmic mélange of sensations soothed, like a cool stream.

Baseball-hatted tourists milled around the park, oblivious to the space they took up as they waited for the morning tour of City Hall to begin. Workers darted around the clustered creatures as Alfonzo pondered and judged.

These tourists wanted, came for, and found another New York, a model city that existed within and yet separate from the one locals inhabited. These visitors came to pay full price at flagship department stores. They stopped by to wander MoMA at midday and scrunch their foreheads disapprovingly at the CoBrA retrospective. They seemed to enjoy waiting in long lines to eat mille-feuilles served by feathery exchange-student waitstaff. They shelled out

big for tickets to musicals like *Laika* and *Bats in the Belfry*. They came to collect little anecdotes of Staten Island ferry rides and colorful characters. To become a tourist was to be rendered temporarily innocent.

The scurrying locals inhabited another layer. These two populations flowed along side by side, yet maintained a separation, like a rainbow of oil in a puddle.

To belong was taxing. It involved so much will and work. Alfonzo and everyone he knew was depleted. The locals were tired. They felt the constant need to show who they were or wanted to be with little symbols of significant affiliation or aspiration. Tote bags announced jobs at banks or time spent at an Ivy. A miniature flag stitched to a young goat's backpack told the world he was Dominican. According to their shirts, the pigeons at the breakfast cart were all union members from 32BJ SEIU. A pair of Siamese cats who emerged from an entryway touched noses before parting ways; if Alfonzo had to guess, he'd say they were executives. He based this on their purses. The city was an exhausting text that demanded endless reading.

Alfonzo saw in his mind's eye a poster, bought from a street vendor, of the Brooklyn Bridge. It hung in a black-and-white-tiled kitchen. He thought of the creature who'd taken the image. He thought of the ink suppliers, the printshop worker, and the brotherhood of printer-repair animals who kept the machines working. He pictured the paper dust of all those images being made swirling into a storm that enveloped the whole city. He coughed.

The City Hall tour guide tromped down the steps to lead the lost souls inside for the 9:00 a.m. tour. It was the cue Alfonzo wanted to ignore. He scanned the newspaper headlines to wring out a last moment of freedom.

MAYOR SHERGAR LOOSENS REGULATIONS FOR
 WATERFRONT DEVELOPMENT
 PANEL URGES ACTION TO PROTECT FRAGILE ICE
 SHELVES; INDUSTRY OBJECTS
 ABANDON BREEZY AFTER HURRICANE SPARKY?
 WATER-EVER, SAY LOCALS

That was a bad one, he thought with a snort. How many mechanisms must exist to turn tragedy into a digestible headline pun? His own plays on words were, he thought, harmless. But what were the puns of the news? These media makers were forming minds in this influential city. Some of the very creatures who oversaw this transformation had likely just passed before his judging eyes. Yet what right had he to judge? He was as much a part of the machine as anyone—scribbling and filing away. A humble cog, but still a cog. Alfonzo didn't joke because of intimacy, he joked because of fear and angst. He gathered his things and ambled inside.

How does an alpaca get to work on time?

Sheer force of wool.