

## Strange Appearances

By Leah Hoffman

“I swear, that dog just gave me a dirty look,” Mark said as he and Rachel walked from their apartment to a bus stop at the end of the block.

“Dogs can sense people’s emotions,” Rachel said, head bent, as she rooted through her purse. “The dog sensed the intense feelings of hostility you have towards him, so he responded accordingly. That’s exactly why you should do this, you know, so you can get over this irrational hatred.” She lifted up her head, holding a Chapstick triumphantly, as they continued walking to the corner.

Mark reached the bus stop and sat down on the bench, slouching, crossing his arms like a hurt child. “Oh, Mark,” said Rachel as she sat beside him.

“What? Listen, it doesn’t matter how many times I tell you, you still don’t believe that I am not an animal hater. I just don’t like them. I tolerate that rat of yours fine, though. I refuse to do this, it’s completely ridiculous. A waste of money, just like owning an animal is a waste of money.”

“Maxwell is a chinchilla, not a rat. This is what I’m talking about, you’re passive-aggressive towards animals. They can sense it. That’s why Maxi tried to bite you the other day, and that dog growling at you, they could tell you hate animals. Animals are an investment in companionship, in quality of life! They are not a waste of money, dear,” Rachel said as she stood up, taking out her bus pass as the bus approached.

“I don’t hate animals!” Mark exclaimed in frustration, throwing his hands in the air. “I just think that people belong in houses and animals belong outside. The two should not share indoor living space!” he said as Rachel stepped onto the bus.

She turned back for a moment, sighing and shaking her head.

“We really should talk to Dr. Richards about how your hate of animals is seeping into all parts of your life. You’re in serious denial here. The key to a successful relationship is communication. We need to be open with each other, to work through our difficulties as a team, OK? I’ll call Dr. Richards when I get to work to find out how soon he can see us,” she said as the doors to the bus closed.

“But I never said I would go to therapy to work out my animal problems!” Mark said as he stood up from the bench, shouting at the bus as it drove away.

He passed back and forth at the bus stop, muttering to himself, “But apparently my opinion doesn’t matter. I just need to be more open. Open, open, open. What does that word even mean? Why is it important in our relationship? I was open when I told her how I feel about her rat, and what did it get me? Therapy. To get over my ‘irrational hate of animals.’ Great. Just great. ARRGH!”

Mark slumped back down on the bus stop bench, all his energy expended in that word of frustration. He bent forward, resting his head in his hands. “Why did I propose to a psychology grad student? I’ll be living with a therapist the rest of my life,” he said, into his hands.

“Aren’t frogs just fabulous?”

Mark stood up and turned around, looking for the source of the voice. It wasn’t until he looked down that he saw it, or him, or it. Standing behind the bench was a little man wearing a dark green tweed suit and a vibrant green bowler hat with frogs printed all over it. The man was short and stout. He had a double chin, small, bright green eyes and a wart at the end of his nose. There was a kind of green aura around him, and Mark thought the man looked sort of like a frog himself.

“Umm, yeah, sure, if you’re French,” Mark said, turning back around and craning his neck, as if sticking it out further would improve his ability to spot an oncoming bus.

The little green man practically skipped over to Mark.

“No, no, no,” he said, tugging on Mark’s sleeve with each ‘no.’ “They are, they are, they’re just fabulous! None of those woman problems you’re having, they just mate and move on! Yes, yes, yes, they are fabulous! I’m so glad you agree.”

“Uh, do you know when the next number 3 bus is coming? I thought it was supposed to be here already,” Mark said looking at his watch.

“Nope, not a clue, I need the number 7. But you know what I do know?” said the frog man excitedly.

Mark turned reluctantly towards the man, who just wouldn’t be quiet. “No, what do you know?” he said, brow wrinkled in skepticism.

“FROGS ARE FABULOUS,” he boomed, bouncing in his shoes.

Mark stepped back a few feet, watching the man bounce back and forth on his heels and toes. A bus pulled up and the frog man called out excitedly to Mark, “This is me!” He tipped his hat bowler hat towards Mark, winked, and walked on to the bus. Mark was almost positive all the eyes of the frogs on the bowler hat had winked at him too.

“Get it together, Mark,” he said to himself. “Stop imagining things. It was just some whacko in green.”

“That man is utterly ridiculous.”

Mark whipped his head around, unsure of what he had heard. It was almost like a whisper or an echo.

“Oh, I didn’t hear you coming. Yeah, yeah I guess that guy is, all dressed in green and everything,” Mark said to the woman now standing to his left. Her skin was tan, almost golden, and it seemed to sparkle in the morning light. She was wearing a bright yellow dress with scalloped edges. It sort of looked like it was under water the way it shimmered and moved in the light.

“I mean who wears all one color anymore, you know? I mean, um, yellow is definitely a better color than green. Um... Do you know him?” Mark asked, trying to fill the awkward silence that followed his comment.

“He’s jumped in a few times. Mostly his presence is an annoyance. He always sends ripples through everything,” she said, tossing her long yellow-gold shawl over her shoulder.

“Umm,” Mark said, looking at her abnormally large lips. There was something fishy about her appearance that Mark didn’t want to consider.

“Be careful who you associate with,” she said as a number 5 bus pulled up. “You don’t want to end up in a can.”

“Don’t you mean jam?” Mark said watching her gold dress swish back and forth as she climbed the steps of the bus. She turned her head in a fluid movement, shaking it in slow motion as the door to the bus closed.

Mark backed up slowly, trying to ignore the strange thoughts that were coming into his mind about the woman. He was about to sit down when he heard someone exclaim in a high pitched voice, “Careful where you sit!”

Mark straightened up abruptly and turned around again. A man wearing a muddy-light-brown colored suit, with strange, long, stiff threads poking out of it, was sitting on the bus stop bench. He had a tiny mouth and a long nose he used to sniff the air every few seconds.

“You really should look before you sit—you never know when you might sit on something sharp, or a person, or, worse yet, an animal,” said the man, shaking his head as he spoke.

“Are those? Is that? Are those needles poking out of your suit? They’re huge,” Mark said as he inched towards the man to get a closer look.

“The unique ones are always the best,” said the man. He hopped up off the bench causing Mark to jump back. “Just remember that when you think about her. The unique ones

are always the best. Like an echidna. A sharp exterior, but gentle within. Great mothers. Keep that in mind.”

Yet another bus pulled up and as quickly as he had appeared, the echidna man was gone. Mark didn't even notice what number the bus was.

“See, I would have sniffed that guy out a bit more.”

“AAAAH!” exclaimed Mark as he turned to see a man wearing a white suit covered in random black and brown splotches. “Where do you people keep coming from?” Mark said backing up in horror.

“Don't know what you mean, buddy,” said the man cocking his head to the side and scratching behind his ear. “Who's this 'you people'? We're all best friends right? Everyone's happy! Smile a little, play some ball!” said the man as he swayed quickly back and forth.

“I... No! I don't want to be friends with anyone. I just want to go to work!”

“Ignore him, it usually works best,” said a woman wearing a long black fuzzy dress. Her skin was dark too, making her unblinking bright green eyes stand out even more. She was staring intently at Mark, and he backed up slowly towards the bench, glancing down before sitting. He pulled his knees into his chest and closed his eyes.

“Just go away, please,” he said in a very small voice as he started rocking back and forth.

“Your life will be much better if you just listen to her. Do things her way. Trust me, when she is happy you'll be happy. You want someone to curl up with and keep you warm at night, right?” the woman in black said to the curled-up Mark.

“Companionship is always good, buddy. You might want to listen to her,” said the man in the spotted suit.

“Yes. No. No more. Please. I'll listen. Always right, she is always right, I know, I know,” Mark muttered, still rocking back and forth on the bench, his eyes tightly shut.

“That's the spirit, buddy!” said the man. “Just remember, kissy kissy said the fishy! Haha! I love that saying! So happy,” he said, skipping to the bus that had just arrived.

“Oh please. Kissing fish just gives you the flavor of it, what's the good in that?” said the woman as she started to board the bus. “Remember Mark, listen to Rachel. She knows best. Your life will be much simpler if you just listen to her.”

In an instant the bus pulled away and they were both gone. Mark couldn't tell for sure, though, because he hadn't opened his eyes since the woman started staring at him. He just sat there in a fetal position on the bench, rocking back and forth. He lost all sense of time as he

muttered to himself, "People, animals, people, animals... Rachel is right. She's right... People, animals..."

"Mark? Have you been here all day?" Rachel said as she got off the bus and rushed towards the ball of Mark still sitting on the park bench. "Oh my God, what happened? Are you OK?" she said sitting down beside Mark, placing her hand on his shoulder as he lifted his head and opened his eyes. "Tell me what's wrong, Mark."

"I... There was... You..." Mark began, squinting at the setting sun. He didn't know where to begin. Or end. As he sat on the bench in silence he recalled the words of the woman in black. It was something about agreeing.

"You were right Rachel. Animals are... well, whatever pet you want to get is fine with me. Maxwell is a great chinchilla too. Sorry for calling him a rat," Mark said quickly, staring at his knees.

"Is that why you were waiting here all day? Just to apologize?" Rachel said.

Mark thought about the people he had encountered that morning. Would she really believe he had talked to a fish-woman or an echidna-man?

"Yes," he said. "I just couldn't stand the thought of you being angry at me. I wanted you to know that I wasn't serious about all that hating animals stuff. I love animals. Like I said, whatever animal you want to get is fine." He still wasn't looking directly at Rachel.

"Oh, darling, I wasn't angry. I just wanted you to deal with your emotions properly. But I guess I was wrong."

Mark looked up.

"I'll cancel that appointment I made with Dr. Richards and we can go looking at the animal shelter for a cat this weekend!" Rachel said excitedly, hugging Mark.

"A cat?" Mark whispered disappointedly.

"What's wrong with cats? You just said any animal was fine. Mark, were you lying?" Rachel said, pulling back from the embrace.

"No, no, no. Of course not," Mark said quickly. "Cats are wonderful animals. A bit opinionated, but great companions, I'm sure."

Rachel looked at him skeptically for a moment. "Opinionated? Mark, cats are just animals. They don't have opinions. They are great companions though; I can't wait to go pick one out! Aren't you excited, Mark?"

“Of course! Right. Whatever you say, dear,” Mark said getting up from the bench. He took Rachel’s hand as they walked up the street to their house.

“You know,” he said as they turned up the path to the front door, “frogs are also fabulous creatures.”