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The Transformation-Donkey

R.H. Busk

A farmer and his wife had a daughter they kept carefully at home, away from the town and its distractions. They told her to stay indoors, to keep the shutters closed, and above all never to open the door to strangers. She was obedient — almost entirely.

There came a day when a woman knocked at the door. The daughter looked through the shutter and saw an old woman with a kind face, leaning on a stick.

"I'm tired," the old woman said. "Just five minutes out of the sun."

The daughter let her in.

The old woman rested. She talked pleasantly about nothing in particular. Then, as she rose to leave, she reached into her bag and produced a beautiful comb — tortoiseshell, carved along the spine with tiny flowers. "A small gift," she said. "For your kindness."

She left. The daughter, delighted, ran the comb through her hair.

She became a donkey.

Not gradually — all at once. One moment she was a girl in a cotton dress. The next she was standing in the kitchen on four grey hooves, the comb tangled in her mane, looking at her own reflection in the window glass with wide donkey eyes.

Her parents came home and found a donkey in their kitchen. They were very upset. They didn't know what to do with a donkey, but they couldn't sell it — what if someone bought their daughter? They put her in the stable and tried to think.

Now, the son of a nobleman had been watching this girl from a distance for some time, without her knowledge or her parents'. He happened to pass the stable that evening and saw the new donkey. Something made him look twice. He bought the donkey from the bewildered farmer for a fair price, brought it home, and treated it kindly — better than most people treat their horses.

One morning he woke very early and went to the stable to check on the donkey, and there in the grey light before dawn he found not a donkey but a girl sitting in the straw, combing her hair with a tortoiseshell comb.

He stood very still.

She heard him and looked up. In one terrible moment she understood he had seen her. She scrambled for her donkey-shape — but he was faster. He caught the comb.

With the comb out of her hair, she stayed a girl.

There was a long, awkward silence.



Then they had the conversation any two people would have to have in those circumstances. He said he had suspected something. She said she had been afraid to tell anyone. He said he had been watching her for a while before any of this happened. She said she had noticed him, actually.

He destroyed the comb. She remained a girl. His parents were surprised by the fiancée he produced, but she made a good impression, and the circumstances of their meeting became one of those family stories that gets told at dinners for the rest of their lives, slightly differently each time.

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