

Licking the Newt
by Christian Roberts

Licking the Newt

Kayne was trying to decide whether the girl in the black trench coat was attractive or not when she turned and looked directly at him. Caught staring, he blushed and looked out the window at the rain. The bus slowed to a stop. From the corner of his eye he saw her stand and make her way toward the exit.

But instead of getting off she sat down beside him. He felt her looking at him, but he was too embarrassed to look back. He clutched his book bag, watched the rivulets of water on the outside of the window and pretended not to notice her. He tried to think of something to say. It was like playing speed-chess and not seeing his next move and falling further and further behind on time while his mind spiraled out of control. His heart pounded.

"Hey," she said.

He looked at her. She had a ghostly white face and long, shiny black hair. Her lips were bright red and her eyes dark with heavy, black lashes. She looked about his age. Smiling, she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear; her fingernails were as red as her lips. Except for

these she was monochrome with the contrast turned all the way up. She looked like a re-touched black-and-white photograph come to life.

Speechless, he gazed at her lips. She moistened them with the tip of her tongue as he watched. He looked down and saw her trench coat partially open, saw one smooth, bare leg all the way up to her inner thigh. Way too attractive for me, he thought. And yet there she was, sitting next to him on a nearly empty transit bus.

"Want to lick my newt?" she asked.

"Huh?" said Kayne.

From the pocket of her trench coat she pulled a reddish-brown newt about four inches long. It looked like a lizard, with a slender body and long tail, and a thick head with wide-set eyes. She cocked her head and raised one eyebrow, like Mr. Spock, and stuck out her long, pointy tongue. She raised the newt; Kayne could see its bright orange belly. It squirmed in her red-tipped fingers, crawling through the air with its tiny hands and feet. She touched the tip of her tongue to the base of its tail and slowly licked the length of its back, then curled her tongue and licked back down again, all the while looking

into Kayne's eyes. He wondered if she was crazy. The book bag on his lap was becoming uncomfortable.

Then she popped her tongue back in, smiled, and presented him with the newt. "Your turn."

Kayne stared wide-eyed. He recalled from his high school biology project that its skin secreted a poison identical to that of the deadly puffer fish, which kills a dozen Japanese sushi connoisseurs every year. "Uh-uh!" he said, shaking his head and clasping a hand over his mouth.

She frowned and made sad, puppy-dog eyes as she put the writhing amphibian back into her pocket. "Well then," she said, glancing slyly around the bus. "How about a kiss?" She puckered her luscious lips and leaned toward him.

He dropped his hand from his mouth and looked around, but none of the other riders were paying attention. He looked back; her eyes were closed and her lips parted. He could see down the front of her coat, could see one creamy breast almost to her nipple. Was she wearing anything at all underneath? He leaned toward her, considering whether there was enough residue from the newt left on her tongue

to make him sick. He'd read about a frat boy who'd croaked after swallowing one of those same newts.

He leaned forward and the last thing he saw before his lips met hers was the tip of her tongue, only it looked more like the head of a newt. Before he knew it her hand was on the back of his head holding him tight and he couldn't have resisted even if he'd wanted. Her perfume smelled like gardenias.

She kissed him deeply. Her tongue was inside his mouth, only it wasn't her tongue at all but a newt. He could feel it, cold and rough, slithering over his teeth, past his own tongue and down his throat.

He pushed her away and grabbed his neck, gagging, trying to choke it back up, but it only crawled deeper, clambering down his gullet with its tiny hands and feet. The girl was laughing as the bus slowed to a stop; then she was out the door, waving from the rainy sidewalk.

Kayne fought to keep from panicking as the bus pulled away. Had it really happened? He was on the edge of his seat, about to shout at the bus driver. What a spectacle he would make of himself: Help! Stop the bus! I swallowed a poisonous newt! What would the bus driver think? The

other passengers would stare at him, thinking him a fool, angry for the delay--how embarrassing that would be! What if he had imagined it? He'd be a laughingstock. Most likely no one would believe him unless he were actually dying, but by then it would be too late. It was probably too late already. He sat back and waited for the first symptoms, whatever they might be. Better to die quietly in his seat without calling attention to himself.

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A week and two X-rays later Kayne was standing in the rain in front of a shambolic health food store near the stop where he'd last seen the girl. It was an old, soggy building with a sway-backed awning and peeling paint. The reflective coating on the windows had blistered, and a small neon sign said Madame Blue's Health Food in swirly, cursive letters. Under the sign was a picture of a witch with a pointy hat and fishnet stockings riding a broomstick; in one hand she held an oversized shopping bag with Madame Blue's written on it.

Incredibly, the newt hadn't caused him any health problems, but he was tired of feeling it crawl around down there. It knew its way around pretty well after a week of

exploration--well enough to hide from the X-ray machines. He'd skipped class to come looking for the girl in the black trench coat; this was his last shot before he took the doctor's advice and called a shrink. He figured she must have gotten off here for a reason, and Madame Blue's looked like the kind of place a strange girl like her might hang out.

He walked inside. The door slammed behind him with a loud, embarrassing bang. He feigned interest in a barrel of umbrellas by the door, avoiding the reproachful stares of the people in the store, then sheepishly dropped his own umbrella into the barrel after its purpose dawned on him. He pulled out one shirt-tail and dried his glasses, trying to appear absorbed in the task while the patrons and employees of the store all glared at the pathetic intruder fumbling at their door. Replacing the glasses, he ran his fingers through his bristly hair, creating a shower of tiny water droplets that re-coated the lenses. He dried them again and just caught himself, hand raised to his head, before repeating the same mistake. At last he turned and looked around the place.

The store was dimly lit and smelled like a combination of incense and mold. His wet sneakers screeched as he

walked up the narrow aisle to the counter against the back wall. There weren't so many people there after all, just a couple of middle-aged hippies perusing the bins and a fierce-looking old woman with flowing, gray hair stocking a shelf.

Behind the counter was a second woman, younger than the first, with dark blue hair. He was about to ask the obvious question when it hit him: except for the hair, she looked like an older version of the girl on the bus! His adrenaline rushed and the newt started pushing against the inside of his stomach. He gave it a good hard smack with his hand. Madame Blue looked at him and raised one eyebrow. "Everything okay?" she asked.

He felt himself blushing and blurted, "Yes."

"Can I help you find anything?" she asked.

Kayne had rehearsed this part a hundred times. "I'm looking for a girl I met on the bus last week. She got off here. I don't know her name. She had black hair and..." He stammered, in uncharted territory now. "And she looked like you, kind of. But young."

Now you've done it, he thought. You've just insulted this lady. His mind started into the speed-chess spiral, but before it got out of control he saw a way out. "She was really pretty!"

Madame Blue smiled. "Why, thank you!"

Kayne felt the blood surge in his cheeks. The old woman with gray hair was standing next to him, watching him.

"Got the hots for Taryn, have you?" she asked.

He looked over at her; she was leering at him.

"Taryn?" He asked.

Madame Blue sighed. "Wearing a black trench coat with a mini-skirt and combat boots?" She gave a weary smile.

"That would be my daughter. She'll be home from school later this afternoon."

Kayne hadn't noticed the boots. "Yes," he said. "And she had a--a newt in her pocket." His newt was writhing furiously now; he poked at it with his fingers.

The old woman cackled. "A newt, did you say? A newt? And what did she do with this newt?" She looked as

though she were expecting the punch line of a hilarious joke. Kayne felt a flash of anger and wished the old hag would leave him alone. She poked him in the ribs with a gnarled finger and winked, then said in a low voice, "Did she slip you the newt?"

"Yes!" cried Kayne. "That's exactly what she did. And I can't get rid of it!"

She shrieked with laughter and slapped her thigh. Kayne turned back to Madame Blue, who rolled her eyes. One of the hippies was at the counter now, staring at him. Madame Blue turned to ring up his purchase. "Taryn," she said, glancing back at the old woman, "takes after her grandmother."

The old woman went behind the counter, still laughing. "Don't worry, sonny boy. I'll fix you right up." She rummaged around and produced a long, thin, flexible tube with a plunger at one end and four metal claws at the other. She pressed the plunger and the claws opened and closed. "Open wide!"

Shocked, Kayne started to protest, but Madame Blue reassured him. "No need for that," she said. "There's a

better way." She disappeared through the back door and returned after a few minutes with a jar.

"Ooh!" said the old woman. "The mushrooms!" She eyed Kayne skeptically. "He don't look like the mushroom type to me."

The mushrooms were dried and bluish-white; they had an unpleasant, musty smell. "I have to eat those?" asked Kayne.

"Don't worry," said Madame Blue. "We'll make tea out of them."

Kayne wrinkled his nose. "What kind are they?" he asked.

The old woman picked one expertly out of the jar with the claws. "They're the kind that cure you of a newt in your belly," she said, waving it in front of his face. "Of course, they do have their side effects."

"Side effects?" asked Kayne.

"Nonsense!" said Madame Blue, glaring at the old woman. "You've nothing to worry about. Don't pay any attention to Granny."

Granny cluck-clucked as she dropped the dried mushroom back in the jar. "If I were you, I'd want to know about the side effects before I chose the mushrooms. They ain't for the weak of heart! Now this, on the other hand..." She pushed the plunger and worked the claws rapidly a few times. "Any sissy can handle this! And it'll work from either end, depending on your preference." She reached over the counter and grabbed at him with the claws, laughing as he jumped back.

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The tea was gritty and tasted like dirt mixed with honey. Madame Blue reminded him as he choked it down, "As long as you have faith you'll be fine. Believe in the cure, and believe in yourself."

Believing in himself had never been Kayne's strong point, but Madame Blue's calm confidence had won him over. Granny's insults had stiffened his resolve; he was determined to prove her wrong. Besides, there was no way he was letting her at him with those claws, and seeing a shrink would be embarrassing. The mushrooms were the lesser of three evils.

He was sitting in a tiny kitchen painted all orange and yellow. Madame Blue and Granny had returned to the store-front; he was alone except for a blue cat sitting on the table, keeping an eye on him. The newt was tearing around like crazy and he was starting to feel a little nauseous.

He felt chilly, though the kitchen had been comfortably warm earlier; he was hunched over and shivering. Everything felt oddly out of place. The pots and pans hanging from the ceiling were all spinning in place, although too slowly to see. The orange walls kept trading colors with the yellow ones. He found himself counting the burners on the stove over and over. His thoughts began to race. What if Madame Blue had miscalculated the dosage? His brain was an egg in a frying pan; he would never be normal again, would never finish college or get a steady job. They'd lock him up in an institution or turn him out on the street to beg for spare change and live under a bridge with all his stuff in a shopping cart like the crazy people he sometimes saw downtown.

The cat asked if he was going to be sick. He realized he was, and it directed him through a curtain of beads down

a hallway to the bathroom. He knelt with his face in the toilet, vomiting in slow motion. He looked for the newt in the smelly, pink mess, but it wasn't there. He wretched again and again, painful spasms from the very bottom of his guts. Still there was no newt.

He lay on the floor and prayed for it to be over. Why had he agreed to the mushrooms? Granny was right: he wasn't the type. They ain't for the weak of heart! Madame Blue had been wrong about him. Have faith, she'd said. But how could he have faith when he'd puked up every last morsel in his system and the newt still hadn't come out?

At last his nausea subsided. He rinsed his mouth in the sink and looked at himself in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot and his complexion pale, but he felt calmer now. The worst was over. He felt a glimmer of hope and a sense of euphoria began to take hold.

He walked down the hall toward the kitchen and stopped in the doorway of a tidy little bedroom. He poked his head inside and caught a faint whiff of gardenias. Taryn.

The bed was made up with a blue comforter and burgundy pillows that matched the draperies. Back-lit by the daylight outside, the draperies glowed with a richness that

was almost frightening. Their folds were luxurious and inconceivable. He stood gazing at them for an eternity and then, overwhelmed, lay back on the bed.

Taryn's bed. He went to put his hands behind his head; they left bright trails against the dark ceiling. Delighted with the effect, he waved them about as if he were conducting an orchestra, made circles, figure-eights and corkscrews until his arms were exhausted.

He lay there contemplating an endless parade of thoughts, each one related to its predecessor, but forging off on its own before giving rise to the next. His insight at times seemed remarkable; it was a shame not to record it. The relationship between all things was clear; he wondered how he had overlooked it until now. It occurred to him that he'd lived as if he were an actor with a bad case of stage fright before a scornful audience.

What seemed like hours might have been minutes; minutes could just as easily have been hours. At last Taryn appeared in the doorway. She entered the room without a word. Her face and hands left white trails. Kayne remained motionless on his back. She knelt by the

side of the bed and looked into his eyes. Her silky hair made a warm cocoon around them both.

She kissed him, gently at first, then harder, sucking his tongue into her mouth, drawing it out of him, stretching it like silly-putty until it was nothing but a thin strand tugging at the very bottom of his intestines. He realized she had the newt by the long thread of his tongue. It struggled like a fish on a line as she pulled it up. It squirmed in his throat and struggled against his teeth, but she sucked it out of his mouth and into hers, slurping its tail like a spaghetti noodle. Then she smiled down at him, placed her hand on his forehead and gently slid her fingers over his eyes.

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When he awoke he was lying on his side, curled up next to the cat. Everything was peaceful, as if a storm had passed. He walked out into the store. Madame Blue was with a customer, but she winked back as he waved goodbye. Granny smiled when she saw him and made a show of tossing her claws back under the counter.

Outside the sun was just peeking under the clouds, flashing a brief hello before disappearing behind the

mountains. He saw his bus approaching as he walked toward the stop.

"Hey!" called Taryn. He turned to see her standing in the drizzling mist, a rainbow framing the store behind her. She waved his umbrella. "Don't forget this!"

He smiled and walked back. She was wearing a faded apron and sandals, suitable attire for working in a health food store. Her hair was pulled back and he noticed she was sort of plain and skinny without her makeup and trench coat. He liked her all the more for it.

"You're not mad at me, are you?" she asked, looking down.

He thought a moment, then replied, "How could I possibly be mad at a beautiful girl with a magic kiss?"

He wondered if that sounded too corny, but she looked up and smiled, then blushed and he knew he'd said exactly the right thing.

They stood together, oblivious to the evening rush of gray pedestrians who trudged around them on the wet sidewalk. Kayne's grin felt a yard wide.

He'd licked the newt.