

Rabbit's Foot

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George stabbed the broom into the corner of his ceiling snagging a spider's web, which stretched out and then bounced back, leaving filaments on his bristles. He shook the broom, waving the tail of wispy, cotton candy thread and wondered if the web was spun before he rented the apartment, three weeks ago. The day after Celia learned about his brief, foolish affair with a colleague, she kicked him out of their house, and he moved into a studio apartment near the Sheffield El station, a monolithic, brick building populated by young singles and older people with modest incomes.

After a cooling-off period of about a week, George called Celia to try to negotiate peace between them. "You have incredible nerve to think that I'd want to talk to you!" she said. "I can't believe you'd even ask me that. You haven't changed." But I have, he thought. Just give me a chance to show you. During the last attempt to talk though, he had noted a hint of a thaw in her icy attitude and was hopeful that he could start to make amends. There were many mistakes, he knew, even beyond the affair, but he wanted to show how he could change. He missed Celia, the fragrant air that trailed a foot or two behind her, trying to catch up, her peach-tipped fingernails raking through her bouncy hair, her arm curved over his chest while they slept.

If the separation from Celia made George feel thick and swollen, the absence of Megan, their six-year-old daughter, was a searing stab of pain. Just prior to the breakup, Megan's first loose tooth hung by a thread, but she refused to pull it. George had tried to convince her to give it just a tiny tug. Not even that. "You'll swallow it and the tooth fairy won't be sure you really lost it," he warned her. "The tooth fairy will *too* know," she said, tears brimming. Now the thought of having hurt her make him

ache. A few days ago, when he had called, she answered sounding older already. He was afraid she would grow up and stop needing him before he could come home again.

“Meggo. It’s Daddy. How’s that tooth?”

“Oh, it came out when I bit an apple. I spitted it back on the plate and Mom found it for me.”

“Did the tooth fairy come?”

“Yeah. She left me fifty cents under my pillow with a note.”

“That’s awesome. What are you going to buy with it?”

“I don’t know.”

What had Celia had told her? Was Megan angry with him too? He wanted to tell her it wasn’t his choice to be away. George wished he could be there to see Megan’s wide, proud smile with the gaping space.

For the first few days away from Celia, George staggered home from work and fell onto his futon and slept, dreaming jagged, chaotic dreams. Since then, his legs ached, his stomach was sour, and he was having trouble focusing his eyes. The outer edges of his vision were fuzzy like with a migraine, framed by an aura of zigzaggy light. In the last day or so, he had again begun to see a bit more clearly and so, when he woke up that Saturday morning, he decided it was time to clean up the apartment.

As George stretched above his head to make another swipe at the ceiling, he heard a knock at the door. Hopping down from the folding chair, he tossed some magazines onto the scratched coffee table and turned down the radio, tuned to an oldies station. In the hallway, he saw a young woman with straight, blond hair who looked agitated, as if she might start crying.

“Hi, I’m your neighbor, Jessica.” She pointed down the hall. “Sorry to bother you but no one else is home. I have a big problem.”

He closed the door behind him and stepped outside his apartment. “Yes? What’s wrong?” he asked, leaning on his broom, noticing how small she was.

"It's my fault. He died," her voice quavered. "They'll never forgive me." George hoped his face did not betray his alarm. Should he offer to call the police? He gripped his broom tighter, his stomach constricting in a dull ache.

She must have seen his worried look and said, "Sorry. I'm an assistant teacher in a kindergarten class and I took the class rabbit, Mr. Bun-Bun, home for the weekend. He was a little listless and wouldn't eat, but I figured he was unsettled by the change of place. But I didn't think he'd die. I should have taken him to the vet." She snuffled. "I feel just horrible."

Relieved that the death involved a pet and not an elderly shut-in neighbor, he said, "What would you like me to do?"

"Could you help me with him?" She repositioned a sheet of hair over her shoulder and tilted her head to the side.

"Well, I'm kind of busy," George said, stroking the top of his head, smoothing the sparse hairs. "I have a lot of things to do around here."

"Please. It would just take a minute."

"Well, I can help for a while, I suppose. I'll try." Although wary about getting embroiled in his neighbors' lives, he figured he'd help her for a short time since she seemed so desperate.

She walked down the hall ahead of him. Delicate-boned, she wore loose jeans with a ragged hole in the seat which he tried not to look at, ballet slippers and a baggy tee-shirt that said University of Wisconsin. Her feet turned out, her back was straight, and her hands floated gracefully at her sides.

"Are you a dancer?" he asked.

She looked back at him, puzzled, then at her shoes. "I used to dance. Twelve years of lessons. Then I hurt my knee and had surgery. Poof. Goodbye dancing." She did a graceful plié.

"That's a shame. Do you miss it?"

"Not really. I was never destined for the corps."

Megan had been taking ballet lessons for several months, and his heart lurched at the memory of her in baggy tights and leotard, tummy bulging slightly, in line with the other pink bunnies at the recital. Held up at work, George had arrived out of breath, but in time to see Megan's act. He sat next to Celia, stroking her hand, and saw for the first time, a glimpse of the woman Megan would become. It scared him; she was growing up too fast. That night, he again broached the subject of another child with Celia. Megan had been difficult to deliver and Celia was afraid of trying again, even though she had always talked of having more children. "You don't have to do Lamaze," he said. "There's nothing to prove. Just getting the baby out safe is all that counts. They can dope you up as much as you need." Celia was just softening to the idea when she learned about his affair.

When George and Jessica reached the dark, musty end of the hall, she pulled out a huge keychain, like a building superintendent's, and opened several locks, using a different key for each one. "A friend of mine was burglarized a few weeks ago so I got scared and had all these installed. I figure it doesn't hurt to be safe." She screwed her mouth into a crooked smile, and George wondered if she lived alone. Of course she must or she wouldn't be asking him for help.

She pushed open the door and motioned for him to enter. George realized with a twinge of guilt that the last woman's apartment he had visited had been where the one-night stand had occurred. On Jessica's walls hung shrink-wrapped art prints. He recognized one, a Picasso line drawing of a hand holding a simple bouquet of flowers. On the floor, there were puffy cushion chairs and the coffee table held an arrangement of dried flowers in a lumpy, ceramic vase. Crumpled in a wad on the coffee table lay a silk teddy and a pair of tights. Jessica scooped them up and rolled them into a ball, stuffing them behind a cushion. George looked for signs of a man's presence--a discarded Sports Illustrated, dirty crew socks, guy

stuff. "Sorry," Jessica said. "This place is a pit. School has kept me really busy."

"I'm no housekeeper myself," he said, embarrassed that he had intruded on her privacy, although she had asked *him*, hadn't she? Her apartment reminded him a little of Celia's during their early days together. They met in graduate school, where he had mooned after her, an unattainable goal. She surprised him first by accepting his dates, then by announcing, after a few passionate couplings, that they should move in together. They married right after graduation--nearly eight years ago. In his living room was the now-stained couch, salvaged from their basement, where they had drunk dark beers and eaten greasy burgers, before Celia gave up red meat, and where they had first made love, laughing, knocking over a bottle of beer in their haste. They would lie afterwards, their heads at either end of the couch, their legs intertwined, reading, or trying to, during the spring semester. As the year-end approached, George had imposed a limit on their time together so he could finish his thesis. In those days, they couldn't keep their hands off each other. What had happened? Did he miss the newness of their passion? "But that's not marriage," Celia had said, right as always.

"I've only lived here since the school year began," said Jessica, "so I'm still getting settled. The job came up quickly, right after the summer session so I packed right up and left Madison. I've been so busy I don't know many people yet." She smiled at George, who felt himself flush. He pictured her in leotards, walking across campus with her boyfriend, her hair twisted up high and held with a pencil. Was her boyfriend still in Madison?

"How long have you lived here?" she asked. "I've seen you leave in the morning, just before me. You take the El to work."

"Oh, well, I don't really, I mean, I haven't lived here long." George wondered what else she knew about his routine. "I probably won't be here too much longer."

"No? Why?"

“Oh, it’s complicated.” He wasn’t used to saying “separated.

She studied him for a moment. “Well, you’d better have a look,” Jessica said. “He’s in the kitchen.” The apartment had a strange odor, a mixture of eucalyptus, orange peel, and the heavy, humid smell of a confined animal. A beaded curtain separated the living room from the kitchen. Curtains like that put him on his guard, as if he were walking in the jungle under vine-covered trees, infested with black mambas. He parted the curtain, and a strand of beads snagged on his belt buckle. Untangling himself, he stumbled into the darkened room where the pungent smell of urine attacked his nose. As his eyes readjusted to the lack of light, he saw a large, metal cage on the floor which took up half the kitchen. Inside the cage, lying supine on a bed of crumpled and stained newspaper, was the biggest rabbit he had ever seen. It had a mottled, grey coat with a huge, furry pelt ringing its neck like an Elizabethan ruff. The rabbit was frozen in a pose that would have looked like a leap if it weren’t lying down and if such a corpulent rabbit could ever achieve an airborne state. The top front paw jutted out strangely as though signaling for nitro glycerin. It was clearly already stiff. Bunny indeed.

“Whoa, it’s rather large, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Now you can see why I needed help. I mean, he’s half my size. Poor Mr. Bun-Bun.” She ran her fingers through her hair, fanning it out over her shoulders like a shawl.

“Oh, my. What should we do?” He inspected the opening to the cage. “Do you have an extra-large garbage bag? Like for lawn clippings maybe? When does the garbage go out?”

“You’re not going to dump him are you?”

“Well, I figured that would be the easiest way to deal with it.”

“Oh, no. I couldn’t tell the children that he went into a dumpster. I never lie to them.” Her expression was somber. He wondered how the children would know where the rabbit ended up but he decided not to push it, remembering Megan’s brief ownership of a white mouse, which she had

pestered them for months to buy. After they broke down and got one, she promptly lost interest and neglected it, leaving Celia to feed it and clean the cage. When it died, George flushed it down the toilet but told Megan the mouse had run away. Now he felt guilty about lying. Maybe he would offer her a new one for her birthday.

“I was hoping you’d bury him for me,” Jessica said.

George thought about the unsavory prospect of burying this behemoth and didn’t know how she would handle it herself. “Bury it? Where? It’s a long way to the forest preserve.”

“I was thinking of that little plot of land behind the building.”

“The patio? Aren’t there rules about digging here?”

“Nobody’s going to see or care. By spring, it’ll have grown over. It won’t take long, I’m sure.”

“But what would I dig with? I don’t have a shovel here.” George was hoping to help her in some way that didn’t involve such a project.

“I have a trowel for my plants.” She held it out to him. He looked at her toothpick wrists, loaded down with silver bangles. Those skinny arms did it. He reached for the trowel.

“Listen. I’ll help you bring him downstairs and will start the hole for you. But you’ll have to finish it yourself.”

“Great. Thank you *so* much. You’re really terrific.” The cool grasp of her fingers ruffled the hairs on his forearm and sent a shiver up his neck. “I can barely lift him myself. A friend helped me bring him here after school.” George wondered why the friend wasn’t doing this instead of him.

Squeamish about touching the rabbit, George crouched down, his knees cracking, and reached in the cage. The rabbit’s body was not yet in full *rigor mortis* but felt moldable like cold clay. He hauled it out, maneuvering the torso back and forth so the outstretched paw wouldn’t snag on the bars. Jessica leaned over close to George, her hair brushing against his cheek as she emitted little “ohs” of concern. The body safely in

the bag, he affixed a twist tie and hoisted it under his arm. "You go first," he said to Jessica, "and check to see that no one's around."

The back stairs smelled of roach killer and sweetish garbage. Dust balls did somersaults in the corners as George stepped lightly down the steps, holding his load at arm's length. As he reached the second floor landing, an old woman poked her head out her back door. "Trash pickup isn't until Saturday."

"Yes, I know, but this smells bad and I want to get it out, you know?"

She eyed the bag. "I hope it doesn't stink up the hallway. I hate that. It comes right into my apartment." A scruffy cat poked its head out between her doughy, slippered feet.

Outside, he saw Jessica standing at the corner of the tiny brick patio. She waved to him, grinning, like she had found a perfect spot for them to share a picnic. "George, over here." Under different circumstances, he could see them having a drink together. What was the harm in that? She probably didn't drink liquor, just wine, or those awful sweet coolers. He looked up to see if any neighbors were spying on them. Luckily, the patio faced the wall of bathrooms with frosted glass windows. It was October, Indian summer, and the air was still warm in the afternoon sun. Despite the heat, the ground felt cold. The topsoil, if one could call it that, was hard and cracked. After the first layer of crust, the earth yielded more easily to the thrusts of his trowel. The tool was not meant for such heavy labor and threatened to buckle with each stab. He reinforced the back of the trowel with his index finger. George was out of shape and became winded easily, but he didn't want lithe, athletic Jessica to see that.

"George. Did you ever have a pet die?"

"A cat got run over when I was a kid." He didn't reveal his lack of fondness for domestic animals.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"That's okay. It was a long time ago." He wanted to dig the hole quickly so they could continue their conversation upstairs. Because she was

watching over his shoulder, he didn't want to show the strain of the job. "How's it coming?" she asked.

Sweating and out of breath, he said, "Okay. We'll need a long, deep trench, I figure about three feet by two feet and at least as deep. I keep running into roots and rocks." In truth, he was becoming drawn to the challenge. Calculating the volume needed to accommodate the corpse became a mathematical puzzle, irresistible to him. There was no sense digging too big a hole and a waste to have to redig if not large enough. Why was it that women had such trouble estimating the appropriate size needed? Celia was always trying to cram leftovers into too-small containers.

"Do you like your school?" wheezed George. "What's it like teaching all those little inner-city kids?"

"Actually, it's a private school. It's cool but a lot of work."

"Yeah. Kids can be a real handful, even one at a time." He thought about a roomful of Megans, all demanding his attention.

"I figured they'd come sit at my feet and I'd sing them songs. Yeah, right! It's all I can do to get their attention. This week they were pulling each other's pants down."

"What do you do then?"

"I threatened to pull their pants down. They laughed, but it didn't happen again."

"That's one way to handle it, I guess." He craned his neck to look at her, and she smiled at him as she lounged on the grass, leaning back on her elbows, one leg crossed over the other.

"You're doing great, George," said Jessica. "Listen, I have to go upstairs for a few minutes, Okay? I'll be right out." She got up and brushed grass off her legs.

"Yeah," he said, preoccupied again with his task. His wrist was sore and he had developed a blister in the pocket of skin by his thumb. He had to reroute his digging path twice because of rocks he could not

dislodge. His hand slipped and he barked his knuckles on a silvery stone. "Damn." He raised his hand to suck the scrape but the shreds of skin were caked with dirt.

Last summer, George and Celia had rented a cottage on the shore of Lake Michigan. One day, he and Megan spent a morning at the beach building a sand castle. Megan worked hard, scooping, dumping, smoothing the sand, her slender torso bent over her work. "Okay, Daddy, make a tower here." It was a wonderful moment for him, the best, most equal thing they had ever done together. Celia had taken a picture of them in front of their masterpiece. Where was that picture? Would he ever get to do that again?

As he dug now, he felt his knees bent and frozen under him and wondered when Jessica would return. Megan would like her. She was in love with her current teacher, Ms. Bellini, who was fresh and open, a lot like Jessica. Her voice would be soothing to a child. He wondered how she would survive in the city, whether she'd make it on her own and he was glad he decided to extend himself. There must not be a man in her life here or else he'd be helping her do this. For several minutes, he continued to scoop out damp dirt into a pile next to him, looked down at the lumpy plastic bag in before him. He eyed the dumpster peeking around the corner of the building and briefly considered tossing his load and filling in the hole. However, he didn't want Jessica to find out he'd not finished the burial. It seemed so important to her.

He ripped the plastic bag off the inert bundle of fur and tried placing it in the hole but it didn't fit. So he hoisted it out and dug some more. His hands, stiff and nearly frozen, made futile stabs at the soil. Winded and gasping, he hauled the carcass into the hole and started shoveling dirt over it.

"George?" He was roused from his thoughts and looked up. With the sun behind her, Jessica was surrounded by an aurora of light. He was exhausted and relieved that she would now take over.

“You’ve been so great. I can’t believe you’d help me like this. You don’t even know me.” He noticed that her hair was gathered up into a cascading ponytail and she was dressed in a gauzy skirt. She looked fresh and pretty.

“Well. It’s important to help neighbors,” he said. “People often forget that in the city.

“I know. That’s why I’m sorry I have to leave you alone with this big job.”

“What?”

“I didn’t think it would take this long and I have to meet some friends in half an hour downtown. I can’t call them. They’ve already left. Sorry. I have to get going. God, you’re so sweet.” She touched his shoulder briefly in leaving. “Bye, thanks.” She twirled around to wave at him, grinning broadly.

George sat back on his heels, stunned. As she padded down the street, the sun moved behind the corner of the building. His sweaty shirt clung to his back, chilling him. Had she planned to dump this job on him all along?

Although he managed to cover the body, the wayward paw still stuck up a few inches above ground level. He mounded the dirt up and tamped it down, creating a gentle hillock. “Screw it. I’m exhausted.” It was getting dark and he could no longer see what he was doing.

He uncramped his legs and rose to a hunched position, his head spinning, his heart throbbing. His watch was upstairs in the apartment but George guessed it was nearly six. Leaning heavily on the banister, he hoisted himself up to the second floor.

He picked up the phone and dialed his, Celia’s, number but the line was busy. He needed to talk to her. Fixing himself a jelly glass tumbler of Bourbon and ice, he lay down on his futon and switched on the T.V. Exhausted, he soon dropped off to sleep.

When George awoke, he had a stiff neck and sticky mouth from the alcohol and his head felt stuffed with cotton. It was raining, leaden drops

pelting the window fiercely. The clock said eight. Desperately lonely, he picked up the phone and redialed. After three rings, he heard Megan's bell of a voice. "Hello? Bradley residence, Megan speaking."

"Meggo, it's Daddy."

"Daddy! Guess what? I made a collage at school yesterday and Ms. Bellini put it up on the wall. Then I went to Courtney's house and we played Barbie dolls. She has seven. Can I get one for Christmas?"

"Well, maybe. How are you?"

"Good. When are you coming home?"

"I'm not sure just yet. I hope soon. Can I talk to your mom?"

"No. She's out with Bob."

"Bob? Who's he?"

"He's her lawyer or something. Valerie is babysitting for me. She made me popcorn. We're watching 'The Little Mermaid.' Bye, Daddy."

"Wait, Megan." But she hung up.

He fell back on his futon, his head throbbing. Eyes closed, he pushed on them and saw paisley patterns inside his lids, dark and light globules flowing over onto each other. He opened his eyes, blinking and saw the ghosts of his fingertips, blue and red, dancing before him. He turned out the light, rolled over and put the pillow over his head to block out the sound of the rain.

In the morning, he woke up feeling a heavy lump in his chest. Then he remembered why. He drifted in and out of sleep until a gnawing hunger forced him up. Nothing to eat--he usually shopped at the convenience store a block away--it was hard to plan ahead. He craved doughnuts, pastries, chocolate fingers, something sugary and greasy. So, he shoved on shoes without socks and a jacket over a tee-shirt. On the way to the store, he passed by the burial spot. The rain had washed away the mounded dirt and the rabbit's stiff paw stuck up above the earth, mocking him. He ducked his head and ran past.