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The Rabbit Died - PART FOUR

Warning: this story contains scenes involving body horror, death, gore, gun violence, reproductive abuse, and vomit.

Dinner has been served, Calabaza con Pollo, rice and beans, and fresh-made flour tortillas. You sit at the end of the table, plate full and stomach empty. Your guests for the evening are Dr. Adams, Nurse Lucy, and the cashier. The creature sits at the head of the table.

"No one's going to die, huh?" the creature asks.

"That isn't on me," you say, "I didn't know that was going to happen! It isn't my fault!"

The cashier scratches at the ruined socket that once housed his eye, the skin around it powder burned black. He nurses a bottle of Coca-Cola.

The creature has eyes now, soft brown ones. They weren't there a moment ago, and you curse how dreams work as she blinks at you. "You didn't act, and it cost him."

Adams burbles as he pushes his food around his plate.

"I got--" you pause, "Who the--" you pause again. Your guests let out slobbering wails of laughter. Adams slaps the table, Lucy claps, and the cashier throws his head back. Brains spill from the hole in his crown.

The creature sighs, "Would you like to try that again?"

You screw up your mouth and spit out, "Who the fuck are you!?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm your baby."

"Oh."

"You didn't know?" The creature pushes away from the table, putting distance between her and the jeering guests. She observes them, blinking away the milk as it runs into her eyes. "I suppose you wouldn't. Adams died before he could tell you."

"What the hell happened to him?" You jerk your head at Adams. "Why'd he puke his guts out?"

Adam starts to pull at his meager crop of hair. He pulls at his face, his jaw, growling

deep in his skinny throat. He rocks in his chair, he trashes, kicks.

"Cheap!" he froths.

"Cheap bastard!" Nurse Lucy screams.

The creature rubs her wrist and you yours. Adams and Lucy tear their shirts, howling in grief and marrow-deep rage. When their shirts give, they start at their flesh, peeling off their skin in rags.

"Woundwart killed him," the creature says.

"That a person or a thing?"

"A man."

Your arm twitches, the one with the band, and you pin it to the table. Across from you, the creature, your child, copies you.

"How did he do it?" you ask.

"Don't drink the milk."

"Does he own a dairy?"

"Yes!"

Your wristband constricts around your wrist, coiling, coiling, tighter and tighter, biting into flesh and bone. Your baby's wrist boils and bubbles. You scream and she screams, and your guests scream in reply.

"This him?" you shout over the din.

Your baby, the creature, affirms your guess with a nod. Her milk skin melts, goes thin, and you see streaks of skin. It's freckled and brown. Your mom had freckles.

She falls over, seat and all, the wooden chair and her antlers clattering. Adams kicks over the table, and you see her, your baby, in a fetal position. Your hand goes numb, your skin turns blue, and you can't take this shit anymore.

"Woundwart!"

The pain ceases.

You have his attention.

"I'm not, I'm not--"

Off to a weak start there, little rabbit. His voice is on you, inside you, scuttling along your body with wet, burning fingers. Would you like to try that again? And don't forget, be for real.

Your baby whines.

"I'm not fucking scared of you!"

Wicked shame you can't stop lying, little rabbit. I was hoping you would have learned by now that's a big no-no.

And yet, you feel fine. No cramps. You whip around to search him out, he must be near you, whispering his crap. "It's the truth, you coward piece of shit!"

You catch a whiff of sandalwood, there and gone before you can trace it. Soap and musk, crushed green grass, the steady stomp of a boot, a dry chuckle, you get these pieces of the puzzle. But without the picture on the box, you're lost.

"I'm sick of this, I'm sick of you!"

How can you be sick of me when you barely know me? A puff of breath rustles your hair. You swing your elbow at nothing and he sighs. You don't know what's happening. We haven't even met yet.

"Don't worry, we will." You stand upright, chin jutting out in defiance. "I'm coming up to Maine to kick your stupid ass, Yankee. I'm going to make you eat your teeth."

Are you now?

"Fuck yeah I am!"

His voice pulls away from, dragging away all other sounds in its undertow. You wait, panting, your injured arm pressed to your chest. Blood throbs through your numbed fingers. Your heart rabbits in your chest.

"Don't have anything to say?" you ask.

His silence is as invasive as his voice, slicing through you with the deft hand of a surgeon. He wants your bravery, the tumor that is your courage, and he hacks away at your organs to find it. You hug your chest, aware that you are in one piece, aware that you are whole.

You are on my trail, he says. I thought that was a bluff.

"I don't lie," you say.

You don't hear your baby whine and you look for her. She isn't there. Adams, Lucy, the cashier, all gone. The table remains overturned, the plates and food scattered.

"Where did--?"

"Does it matter?" Woundwart stands beside you, a mass of red in your peripheral vision. He evades you as you turn to look at him. "Do you really care, Hazel? You're coming to kick my ass."

"I am."

"Then how about I do you a favor, a real solid. How about I come to meet you."

You realize as the red grows, as the scents sandalwood and green grass putrify, that you have made one fuck of a mistake. Hands pull you away before Woundwart crashes over you in a wave of meat. You wake, cursing.

"You're awake!" Patient #5 smiles down at you. Your head rests on her lap and, unless Patient #5 spilled cologne everywhere, you're definitely not in the backseat of Adams's car.

You sit up. "There's something I need to tell you--"

"Tell her what?" asks a voice from the driver's seat. You press pause on your warning as you recognize the speaker. The guy from the gas station. Wow, your luck is bad.

He blows cigarette smoke out the open window. "Mornin'."

"What the hell happened?" You ask Patient #5. She hides her face behind a curtain of hair.

"An incident happened at the gas station," your not-friend says. "You were attacked and I saved you. Name's Cody, by the way."

He winks at you from the rearview mirror. "You're welcome."

Patient #5 scoots in close, pressing her shoulder against yours. You pat her knee. "He hurt you? He threaten you?"

She mimes a gun, holding the barrel level to her cheek.

"He threatened you."

"I said sorry," Cody says.

You pull Patient #5 in for a hug. She tucks her head under your chin and picks at her fingers. "He came out carrying you," she says. "You weren't moving and there was blood, I saw blood on you, and I got scared. I thought you were dying. I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"It's alright, you didn't do anything wrong." You card your fingers through her long, knotted hair. She needs a brush, you need one, too, and you both could use a shower.

She takes your hand and peers up at you through her bangs. "I told him everything. I tried, but he asked--"

"And you can't lie."

"One helluva character trait," Cody says, cigarette bobbing from the scarred corner of his mouth. "Is it a bug or is it a feature? Never had a chance to ask her."

"Where are you taking us?"

He messes with the radio until he lands on a station he likes. Old alternative rock crap from the 90's, you roll your eyes when the DJ announces that up next is a Stone Temple Pilots song.

"Hey," you say, "Where the fuck are you taking us?"

"Places," he replies.

"Tell me where we're going!"

Cody taps ash off into an empty styrofoam cup. You spot a scar on his wrist, a bite mark. Strange teeth, almost human. "What're you going to do if I don't tell you?"

You don't know what you would do, you're light on options. He has the wheel and a gun, you have a twitchy, pregnant sidekick and a growing sense of dread.

"Thought so," he laughs.

You think of his wrist. "What's with the bite?"

"Hunting accident."

"Hunting what?"

"Hunting Rabbits."

Patient #5 brushes the hair from her face. "Isn't it hunting wabbits? And you're, and you're supposed to laugh after. Like he does. Like, like Elmer Fudd."

"You're right, that's how it goes." You watch for Cody to smile or to quirk a brow after his answer. He does neither, he goes quiet, his attention on the road ahead.

"I'm sorry," Patient #5 says.

"Don't apologize to him," you say.

Blushing, Patient #5 says, "Sorry."

She will never learn, fuck. You kick at the back of the passenger's side seat. "What's your problem, güey? Feeling guilty?"

"We're almost there," is all he says.

You look ahead, gasp and grasp at Patient #5 right as she grasps for you. The road forks, the right lead back the highway, the left lead nowhere. A dense, black nothing, as if God snipped the scenery out to save for later.

Patient #5 screams your name in a panic, and you would scream hers if you ever bothered to learn it. Cody speeds forward, driving into the black, the nose of the car

stabbing deep. The black resists, the tires shriek, and the black moans low as its membrane breaks.

You arrive at the front of a cabin, sitting neatly in a small clearing. A phone booth, receiver swinging on its cord, stands at the mouth of the driveway. You twist around, desperate to connect the progression of events. Road, black, and now woods, now a cabin.

"Ah, you," you shake Patient #5's shoulder, "you okay, you?" Let her be okay. Someone here other than you needs to be okay. She sways back and forth as you shake her harder. "You okay?"

"You were only supposed to get directions," she whispers.

"Excuse me?"

"That's why you went into the gas station, right?" She turns to you, lower lip already trembling. "You went in for directions, right?"

"Yeah, I don't think I said so back then, but yeah. I did."

"Then," she gets in your face, eyes watering, "How did we end up here?! How do you mess up getting directions so badly that you get us kidnapped by--by--"

"Oh boy," Cody

"By this scary freak?!"

You throw your hands in defense. "Will you calm the fuck down?"

"No!" She jabs you in the chest with a jagged, chewed nail. "No, fuck you, Hazel! This is your fault! You messed up! We're here," she spreads her arms wide, "because of you!"

You keep an eye out for a flinch, a twitch, or a wince. Any sign of pain to tell you that she's lying. All you see are her tear jeweled lashes and her flashing eyes. Adrenaline could be masking the cramps, maybe it's her anger.

Hard as you look, you find nothing and, with a lump in your throat, you say, "Sorry."

Patient #5 sticks out her chest in a huff, a messy, sniffing huff, and rattles the car door. Cody pops the child lock and it swings open. She stumbles out, coming to a stop a few paces away.

You stay seated. Oh fuck, you hold your head, you need to tell her about Woundwart. How are you going to do that without upsetting her more?

You then realize that the car is in park. "When did we stop?"

"We never started," Cody says.

"You know what, I'm not. I'm just not."

You slide out of the open door before he can reply. You stick close to the car, unsure where to go. The cabin is close. Rustic curtains hang in the windows, moss roses and pansies grow in the box planters. The place is as inviting as a pitcher plant.

Patient #5 stands a few feet away, head tilted back and breathing deeply. She snorts and pinches her nose. Nose bleed? Should you ask?

You look down the driveway and there is the payphone, the receiver off the hook. You have never seen one of those outside of a hospital.

Cody exits the car and you jump, your skin going tight. You face him and he sizes you up, taking you in from head to toe. He lays a hand on your belly.

"Want to hear something funny?" he asks.

"Are you going to kill us?"

He takes his hand away and hooks his thumbs in the belt loops of his jeans. His smile is loose, easy, and you want to dive back into your dream. Woundwart, in all his crushing, red horror, terrifies you less than this man.

"Would you believe me if I told you no?" he asks, bending down. Cigarettes, mint, you inhale his breath and feel hot and stupid. "You accept things so easily, you probably would. You naturally that naive or did she make you this way?"

"She? You mean--" you point to Patient #5.

"I'll explain later," he says, patting your cheek. He heads for the cabin, spinning his car keys on his finger. "After dinner, you've gotta be starving. I'm fucking ravenous."

Back when you first left home, you met a guy at the soup kitchen. He volunteered every Wednesday, porkchop night, and would smile at you. You floated whenever your eyes met, high above the cold and grime and misery. You might have loved him.

He cornered you in the bathroom one day. You stopped going to that soup kitchen on Wednesdays.

Adams found you hiding in a bus shelter, your clothes weighted down by rain. He offered you an ice cream cone and you refused. He laughed when your stomach growled. You gobbled down the cone before you reached the Clinic.

Next morning he served you steak and eggs and you signed the papers, crying. Your meal came with a tall glass of milk. For that moment, you might have liked Adams.

Later that day he called you a stupid breeder for dropping a glass.

You touch your belly, a small bump full with child, and look up at Cody. He offered you a hotdog, a stupid fucking hotdog, and you, like always, took it. He laughed and smiled and you fell for it.

"Come on," he says, "you must be hungry."

"No, I'm not," you say, and you don't care that you cramp.

Cody opens the cabin door. He smiles back at you and says, eyes meeting yours,
"Don't lie. You're always hungry."

END PART FOUR.

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