



dreams of rabbits @therabbitdies

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THE RABBIT DIED - PART SEVENTEEN

The Rabbit Died is an NSFW horror fantasy CYOA about pregnancy, the effects of trauma, dreams, and meat.

You can read past installments here: tinyurl.com/rabbitdoc

Content Warning: Ableism, abuse, (mental, physical & reproductive), body horror, cannibalism, CSA (mentioned only), death, gender dysphoria, gore, incest, pregnancy, racist microaggressions, rape (mentioned only), sexual assault, torture, & vomit.

THE DREAM

There are holes in the membrane the size of peas.

You roll from your left to your right, the membrane swaying under your weight, and, disturbed, peer in the black beyond above you. The holes come from inside of you. The larvae - they crawl, they wriggle - out of your

pores and eat at your bed. Needles connected to tubes shed from you in herds driven by butterflies. Your creations, your cells, betray you.

Just like your daughter.

The membrane sags around you. You sink, seep, and drip. You are a damp clump of meat being wrung in a cloth. The harder you struggle, the harder the squeeze.

Is this death or worse - are you waking up?

CODY

Congratulations, you died. Again.

Was this a speed run? The time between deaths felt short - a gasp of life before dying. You choke and hack, and hack, your chest constricted. The ribs poking through your lungs spark each wracking cough with pain.

A delicate blade cuts an incision in your leg. You kick. And promptly regret the action. Your femur is in splinters.

"Try not to move too much," says Rabbit. Your Rabbit? You open your eyes to check.

The Rabbit looking down at you is a fountain of milk in the shape of a girl. She has the eyes, those rich brown eyes. Dark. She worries at her lip with her big front teeth.

She carves the shape of an animal in your thigh.

"I'm borrowing this from Inlé," she says. "I don't really have a gimmick of my own yet." She holds up a white plastic horse. "Other than being mean. Maybe I'll get one after Hazel names me?"

You do not have the heart, or lung capacity, to tell this Rabbit that the others are mean in their own unique ways. That is why you love them. Those sharp notes in their personalities.

"Who's Hazel?" Asking that simple question agonizes you. You have a chest full of matchsticks and your voice is the strip. Speak, and you burn.

"She's my surrogate."

You try and fail to speak.

"That's right," she says. "I'm still a bun in the oven, I haven't finished baking."

The Rabbit inserts the horse open cavity she cut into your thigh. The hard plastic pokes at the edge of the wound. You howl. Whispering an apology, she wiggles the horse until it sits comfortably in the hole.

Your leg mends.

"Hazel is Tsukiko's," the Rabbit says. "I don't know if you'll remember that when we're done, but no harm in trying."

She carves more holes, all in your torso. Blood spurts in her face. Marbles the milk.

Hazel is Tsukiko's, that is vague. Could not be her child, she murdered hers in the crib. There is Inlé, her Rabbit. Did Inlé change her name to Hazel? Can a Rabbit even have a child?

Your Rabbit wanted to have a family of her own one day. She daydreamed this whole scenario of raising a child in a tiny house with a garden. Cool Uncle Cody - that is you - was expected to visit every night to cook dinner. A small price to pay after what the Driscolls have done.

"Where's my Rabbit?" you ask.

The Rabbit sets aside her scalpel and gathers up more plastic tokens, a butterfly, a bread slice. Her hands are mixed pink. Your Uncle Bobby once stirred Rabbit blood into your milk and tried to force you to drink it. He called it strawberry milk.

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"Your Rabbit is not here," she says.

You can see that. You can fucking see that. The Rabbit, with her acute prey senses, draws back from you and bites both her thumbs. You exhale. "Sorry."

"I don't know where she is," the Rabbit says. "I wish I did."

Your Rabbit is not here. Instead, you have Hazel's Rabbit. Hazel, who belongs to Tsukiko. "Is Inlé Hazel?"

"No." The Rabbit lowers the plastic slice of bread, white as bone, into your body. She minds the edges of the wound.

"She has to be Inlé. Tsukiko killed her other kid."

She smothered her baby girl in the crib. The baby that even now, as you lie here, caught in limbo, you hardly remember. She existed. You refused to learn her name, still, she existed.

The Rabbit squints at you.

"I got to be right." You turn your head to burp up blood and acid. Spit, breathe. Reignite your matchstick ribs. "Is Hazel Inlé's new name?" The Rabbit drops the butterfly inside of you. "Her new-new name?"

"Why would Inlé be Hazel?" the Rabbit asks.

"You said--" The butterfly knocks the lip of the cavity. You howl at the abrupt jolt of pain. "--fuck!"

"I said Hazel is Tsukiko's."

The Rabbit removes the plastic butterfly and tries again, and again, her failures shooting through you in staccato bursts. By the time she gets the token in proper, you are soaked in perspiration, the pits of your jacket sticky and rank. Your bladder threatens to release.

"I said Hazel is Tsukiko's." The Rabbit opens a hole in your throat big enough to fit an apple. "Never said she was her kid. She did eat her child to make her, like how Woundwort fed Tsukiko Primrose's laurex to make Inlé. Like how Hazel was fed your Rabbit's ovary to make me."

The Rabbit working on you stuffs an apple, a real apple, fresh from the Driscoll orchard no doubt, into the hole. Awash in misery, you drift. They chopped up your Rabbit and fed her to surrogates. No Rabbit is spared from the butcher's knife. Not a one.

"They gave Quintana the other ovary." The Rabbit wipes milk away from her eyes. "In case you're wondering."

You were not, and you do not care about this Quintana. That is a lie, she carries a piece of your Rabbit. She and this Hazel, you will be the Cool Uncle Cody to both their

babies. Maybe they will let you adopt them and you can raise them in Rabbit's stead.

Sucks that you will probably forget all of this when you wake up.

"Tsukiko ate her kid?" you ask in a more steady voice.

The Rabbit inserts a pencil under the skin of your wrist. She does it without prep or warning. You rip your arm away from her and stab the plastic dowel into its proper place.

"That's what I said." Leaning forward, elbow on the table, and cheek smooshed in the cup of her palm, she offers you the scalpel. "Tsukiko ate her kid. Now she has Hazel."

What other parts of the body are covered by Operation? You stare hard at the remaining plastic tokens, a bucket, a cracked heart, a wrench, and a big rubber band. "You know they added an ice cream cone for the head?" The Rabbit asks. "They call it brain freeze."

"Fuck ice cream."

You hack at your knee until it becomes a pit of mash and gore. The bucket sinks inside, and you try not to focus on the hollow plunk and splash as it reaches the bottom. The Rabbit cocks an ear. She heard it.

"Did she regret killing her?" you ask. "Her kid? That why she did it? To see if she'd come back if she did?"

The Rabbit sucks on her pinky. She came from your Rabbit, you see it in her furrowed brow. "I don't know. Hazel isn't the same as her baby."

You core out your chest, the rush of air feeding your pain. Burns like a son of a bitch - ignore it. You set the heart. You upchuck soon after, green gunk, bile, and wet spent matchsticks.

"Blackavar shot her," the Rabbit says.

"Glad someone did."

"She might have eaten the baby to save her own life."

"Whatever the reason," you sit up and swing your legs over the side of the table, "it's my family's fault. We hurt her. We fucking ruined her like we ruined the Rabbits."

The table you sit upon is a dinner table - the same one that stood in your family's dining room for generations. The one Lucy served your mother upon. You rub the table cloth between your thumb and finger.

The Rabbit scoots her chair back, away from you.

"It's humbling each time I return," you say.

"You can thank Rabbit for that," she says. "And Hazel. If it was up to me, I'd leave you to fester and rot."

You chew the fresh lump of scar tissue that has grown on the inside of your cheek, your head low. The Rabbit gathers her scalpel. Steam peels from her fluid body. Bubbles surface and pop. She smells of apples and warm milk. She smells like your Rabbit.

"But they want you alive - Rabbit and Hazel. Hazel killed a man for you just now and it's going to eat her alive for the rest of her life." She sneers at you. "You owe her."

"I'll try to repay her."

If you remember once you wake. The floor shifts under your boots, whispering. The Rabbit abandons her chair and the floor, black, undulating, carries it away. She lifts her chin at you.

You hammer on your knee after you stand, banging the joint until it cracks into its proper place. The rest of you groans. Still as a deer, the Rabbit hovers nearby, her milk skin simmering. She hates you, and you accept that. Her loathing is deserved.

That does not kill the hope you harbor for her, and for your dream of raising her as your own. Are you being selfish? Yes, you are being selfish as hell. It is in your nature.

"Time to go," she says. "Save's reloading."

Words fail you, and so, with an aching laugh, you hook her in for a hug. She freezes in your arms. Then, she returns the embrace, sliding one dripping arm around your middle, followed by the other. Her antlers gouge you as she buries her face against your chest.

"Go." She shoves away from you. Her face is clear of milk. On the center of her brow, smack dab between her antlers, is a scar. "Don't stand there and smile at me, go."

You leave her at the table and wade deep in the black floor. Threads, you think, or hair. It rises around you in gleaming waves.

You submerge.

You wake.

CHOOSE CLOVER OR EMILE.

CLOVER

Kehaar parks his vehicle in the drive of a birthday cake house, lemon yellow siding, white trim, square, layered, and quaint. You want to run your finger down the wall and taste it. If this was the Dream, you could. That delicate yellow would be frosting, and the interior, cake.

Emile opens the door and lifts the box, Playstation contained within, off your lap. You thump the floor. "Clover," Emile says, "we're here, we gotta get out."

"We won't be long," Inlé says.

"Can I stay out here?" Blackavar asks, already out of the car. He avoids everyone's gaze. "I'm in need of fresh air after that stifling drive."

Before Blackavar was allowed in the car, Kehaar had him searched and his gun confiscated. "You were going to shoot me earlier," Kehaar said. "Don't think I didn't notice." Kehaar frisked Holly, too. He complied without complaint. "I already gave my sidearm to Inlé," he said.

He gave her more than his sidearm.

Holly and Inlé reek of sex. The weak-nosed humans in the SUV cannot detect it, but you do. It hangs around them in a swirling vapor of musk. They fucked. Cody would be ashamed of Inlé. And would she care? No. She hates him.

"You're being dramatic, Richie." Lori helps Rachel unfold from the backseat. Tall, quiet Rachel stretches her legs and then bends down to kiss Lori on the cheek.

"Richie's being dramatic because he's been through the wringer." Blackavar pats his sides down. "Anyone smoke?"

Lori hands him a pack from the seemingly infinite confines of her purse. "Here you go, kill your lungs."

She smiles and you, unaware why, smile, too. That is until you see Inlé watching Lori, wearing the same adoring expression, her eyes shining the same warm glint as yours.

They're mine, they're mine, they're mine, you snarl. Cody loves you, you can't have them, too. You can't have everyone, you antlerless runt bitch.

Blackavar offers Inlé a drag of his cigarette and she takes a pull.

"You doing okay, Clover?" Emile asks.

"Angery," you mumble.

"Don't you mean 'angry?'"

"I meant what I said."

You pinch and pull at Emile's cheek. He slaps you away with one of his new, bigger hands - as if you would not notice that change or the make of his new green clothes. They hum. They pulse, alive.

Inlé tilts her head in your direction, ear up. Her nose twitches as she sniffs. She notices, she must. Holly steals the cigarette from her lips and blows a smoke ring. It halos Inlé's head before it fades to nothing, taking her interest in you and Emile along with it.

Blackavar matches a fresh cigarette.

"Why are they acting like that?" Emile asks.

"They had sex," you say.

You kick with laughter at Emile's appalled expression. His clothes shudder in unison with him as he gags, tongue out. "I didn't need to hear that."

"I didn't need to smell it." You push Emile out of your way with your bare foot - Lori failed to find shoes that fit your dainty feet hidden in her luggage. "But I did, and I do. They fucked. Suffer with me."

Holly barks your name. Sparrows startle from the bushes and the house's royal icing trim. You startle from your skin. "Cut that out," Holly says. "He's a kid."

"You can't deny that it happened."

You hop out of the vehicle and fluff your hair. You preen, satisfied with everyone's open discomfort. The way they cough and shuffle and dart their gaze away from yours. Kehaar shakes his head, muttering, "Jesus," as he peels through his keyring.

Holly blows smoke from his nose. "I'm not discussing that with a minor present."

"I know people fuck," Emile says.

"You're a minor. We're adults. Boundaries need to be set and maintained, end of discussion." Hands resting on his hips, he observes the group. Your heart skips. "Understood?"

"Y'all coming in?" Kehaar asks from the front door of the house. "Wife's making pancakes."

Inlé heads in first, Holly follows, then Emile, Rachel, and Lori. Blackavar hangs back by the vehicle, standing at a distance, and smokes. Blackavar, the man that shot Cody at his request, an act to prevent you from hating Inlé.

"So," Blackavar flicks ash once you both are alone, "Inlé and Holly?"

"Cody would hate him," you say.

"I concur, he would hate him."

Blackavar takes in the surrounding houses. You join him. More cakes, their yards the fresh green of Spring. Domesticated plants and flowers and tamed statues. Vehicles fueled by gas instead of the simple, violent joy of running. Nothing wild, nothing strange.

"Cody would hate this place, too."

"He would, but for a reason different than yours."

"He might hate it as much as he'd hate Holly." You stick out your chest. "But what do you care? You killed my Cody."

Blackavar grinds out his cigarette on his wrist, right on one of the dots of his bitemark scar. You rub yours in sympathy. "True, true," he says. "We've gone over this. I shot him."

"You did it for her."

He fumbles the stub, and it lands on a budding dandelion. The leaves smoke. He crushes them out. "Who told you?"

"The game did." You wrench his wrist to size up the burn. You can heal this, easy. "After you left the room. Cody asked you to kill him if we ever met the Black Rabbit."

"I did it for both of you."

You lick the burn.

"I could murder whoever sent you that game. I intended to tell you the truth behind my motivations when you were capable of handling such a thing, not now. Not with you like this."

"Why not?"

"Where should I start? Your tantrums or your jealousy?" Blackavar escapes your grasp with a twist and a spin, and he slips behind you. You puff up, miffed. "You're a brat, Clover. A real rotten green-eyed monster when it comes to your precious Cody."

"He's my family."

And the man whose love could have made you real and whole. You pick at your hair. You rip apart the remaining strands of braid Blackavar took tender care in weaving. Cody will return in body only, his memory lost. He died. He died.

"He's my family. You killed him for her and she hates him." You yank your antler. "She said she'd kill him and you killed him for her--" The root rips and you cry-babble.

Blackavar snatches you up in his arms.

Your heart and your head buzz and scream and you need it all out. You need sleep. You need your home. You need Cody and you need to forget all you have learned. The antler tears from your skull, and you gasp in relief at the rush of heat springing from the wound.

"You silly, violent thing." Blackavar holds you. He staunches your wound with his sleeve. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I did it for both of you. You and Inlé need each other, Cody understood that. You don't need him, nor me."

Inlé appears. As stealthily as her namesake, she appears. Blood blurs the vision in your right eye. Blackavar passes you to her and she cradles you. "Clover, your antler."

"It's my fault," Blackavar says. "I riled her."

The pain assuages your poor, flustered head. Humans bled each other to cure them of sickness, a practice you found odd, but now, as you unwind in Inlé's grasp, you understand. Certain things are much too for words. They must be cut from you.

You let Inlé turn your head. She growls under her breath.

"I beg of you, Inlé," Blackavar says. "Don't be angry with her, I'm the one at fault. I needled her."

She slices her palm on her sharp, sharp teeth and presses her wound to yours, sealing them. Your blood mingles. Your hearts share a pulse. Inlé is concerned, not angry. Her worry verges on terror - she cannot lose you, not after losing Hazel and Quintana.

"You can't lose me?" you ask.

Inlé parts her lips, the mirror image of yours, and then gives a curt nod. You laugh at that. She carries you to the house, and you laugh, and you laugh.

CODY

You emerge in the back seat of your car, wet, skin tacky. A potent mix of blood, body odor, and the herbal tang of Hedgenettle RX Health Tonic sucker punches you awake. You sit up and fumble around in the sticky afterbirth of your resurrection. Green and red discharge.

Christmas colors. You burp up a mouthful of bitter, earthy fluid, and rest your head between your bent knees.

Outside, a storm batters the vehicle. A fucking nor'easter, the wailing gusts and sheets of hellish white are unmistakable. You must be near Maine. Dream Maine.

"You're awake."

The ghost of Tsukiko Rey watches you from the driver seat, dressed in a nightgown and robe. Her nipples poke hard through the white silk. They are dark, so dark you can make out her areolas. Wiping at your mouth, you cough up an apology.

"Hi, Cody! I ate a finger so I don't have to eat yours now."

A little boy sits in the passenger side seat. He has big, fat cheeks, the kind premature babies get from the steroids doctors use, a round chin, and a huge mouth. He beams at you, his teeth stained with bug guts.

"Campion, he might not remember," the ghost says. She scrolls through the stations. There are no scars on her wrists.

Your head swims.

"You're not Tsukiko," you say once you settle.

"I'm Hazel," she says. "Her daughter." There is blood on her, dried stuff on her robe and neck. She wiped her face, you can tell by the neat divide between her clean and filthy skin. Did she kill you?

"Tsukiko had another kid?"

Hazel picks a classic rock station. "She had me."

This woman is not her mother. Her eyes shine, whereas Tsukiko's weathered the world, dulled by the burden of living. That shine grows ever brighter as she recalls, unprompted, the events leading up to your current resurrection. Lulled by the crispness of her voice,

you lean your cheek against the headrest of the passenger seat. You kidnapped her. You shot a man. You hurt her. Blackavar shot you during the rescue.

"He shot me?" you ask.

Hazel nods, licking her chipped tooth. The chip, you learned, is your doing.

Memories shift, their grinding edges sending tremors throughout your brain. You think of Inlé, and that old board game, Operation. But why?

Hazel gives you no time to puzzle over your scattered head. She carries on, talking, gaze burning. Inlé, and Clover, and a surrogate named Quintana, and Woundwort. She fought him and lost. Clover's cabin destroyed itself.

"How old was Clover?" you ask yourself out loud.

"She looked about my age."

"How old are you?"

"Nine--" She gags. "What? Really? That's a lie, too? What about eighteen?" She rubs her belly. "Okay, I'm eighteen."

Clover is an adult? You swallow back the urge to sob, the last you remember is her being six years old. You punch your seat.

"Want me to stop?"

"Nah." You pat her shoulder with the back of two fingers. "I need to hear everything." Including the bad things you did, the cruel, wicked shit that sours your stomachs for days. Hazel frowns with a mother's sweet concern.

"Jay killed you," Campion pipes up.

"We're not there yet," Hazel says. Champion blows a loud, sloppy raspberry at her. She gets you there in the story. First, she takes you through the domestic nightmare of Woundwort's happy ending, a farm where he played house with her and his brainwashed, Starving children.

Woundwort's boys buried you in a pet cemetery. You returned to life while Hazel and Champion performed a funeral for a stillborn chick. Together, you fled the farm with the aid of Jay, the man you murdered when you kidnapped Hazel.

"We stopped at a gas station," she says. "We talked about my mom and other things. Shit then got extra weird."

Other things, vague. You stick a pin in that for later.

Hazel picked up a phone at the gas station and got transported inside Tsukiko. Through her mother's eyes, she watched Quintana get consumed by Lucy, who, for some godawful reason, now has grown into a giant. A crusty red sea in the shape of a woman.

"You laid your head on my lap when I told you about it back then. You made me think of my dog - Rafa."

You want to lay your head on her lap right now.

She clears her throat. "Jay turned out to be a piece of shit."

Racist piece of shit. He said things to you, poked, and prodded at you with loaded comments, and then questioned your ethnicity when Hazel spoke up. "Driscoll's an Irish name," you joke. "I could be a gringo with a tan."

"Your mom's named Xochitl, you're not a gringo."

"I told you my mother's name?"

"Yeah. I was considering naming the baby after her."

The plates shift again. Strands of hair cut your gums. You pick at your teeth and find nothing. Your knee sloshes, water in a bucket, as you fold up in the back seat.

Hazel wants to name the Rabbit in her belly Xochitl.

Where you expect to find seething anger - Hazel didn't know your mother, save that sentimental shit for someone else - you find your Rabbit, smiling. Mama would've loved that, you read in the curl of her lips. I love it.

Would have loved it, if she still lived.

"Thank you," you barely manage to hold together while you say it. Hazel turns the mirror to look at you. After a spell, she mutters, "You're welcome."

You collect yourself in the backseat, stretch, scratch at scars and their figments. The radio plays a song you half know, and you use it to center your thoughts. I'm not

okay, sings Gerard Way. Neither are you and the way Hazel says, "Wow, this is old," makes you feel less so.

She lowers the volume and returns to the topic at hand, how things became what they are now. How you struck Jay when he insulted Hazel, and how he panicked at the idea of crossing back to the real world to avoid the storm.

"He said he didn't want to be a rabbit again," she says.

"He ran you over," says Champion. "Lots of times. You went thump-thump-thump and then CRUNCH!"

"Then I killed Jay," Hazel whispers.

"I owe you," you say.

"Fuck right, you do." Hazel reaches back to pat your cheek. She rubs your scalp. "Why are you so fucking bald? Why do you shave it?"

The switch from serious to causal roasting feels familiar. Startling that you find anything familiar about Hazel other than her appearance. "I could grow a mullet," you say after a delay.

"You'd look like an idiot." She chuckles, "A fucking mullet. No hombre."

"Mean."

You do not deserve this from her, this friendly banter. You stuck a gun in her mouth. You abducted her for reasons you may never remember. For Lucy? For revenge against Tsukiko?

"I ate a finger," Champion says. "I ate the finger in Jay's head."

A chill blows through you. You check the window nearest you, it is sealed. Champion said that earlier, but now that you are more awake, the horror of it lands. Jay was a thrall. Making those is no easy feat for most Dream creatures.

Who the fuck made him?

CLOVER

Inlé slices her pancakes into eight even wedges. You opt to hack them up with the side of your fork. You nibble the odd, rounded squares slowly. Sweet, pillowy, crumb by crumb, they warm you up.

"I made them without any dairy or eggs," says Kehaar's wife, Bea. She serves you more sliced bananas and checks the bandage wrapped around your forehead. "Are they good?"

Mouth full, you nod. Eating animal products disquieted you. Their memories, their fears, haunted their flesh. The same goes for plants, but you never cared enough to feel bad for them.

Holly sits beside Inlé, his hand inching closer to hers. Her hand is bandaged. Missing pinky and a cut palm, poor thing.

You swallow. "How's your hand?"

Inlé flexes the remaining fingers. To your amusement, Holly freezes. "It aches," Inlé says. "The pinky more than the cut."

"Phantom pain?" Holly asks.

"A suckling pain. Like a babe's mouth is nursing on the bones."

She lays her hand on Holly's and he puts on a subtle, aching smile. You lean on Inlé's shoulder, an easy feat due to the loss of both your antlers. She fears losing you, and Cody wanted you to love her, so you will be there for her. Only her. Not Holly.

"Look at you." Blackavar sets his plate, which consists of only a single half of baked grapefruit, down across from you and sits. "Capricious thing. Are we feeling better, Clover?"

"We Rabbits are fickle," Inlé says.

Blackavar gives a good-natured laugh. A real laugh. You lower your fork, thrown by his mirthful display. Both Inlé and Holly seem to be at a loss as well. She raises her brows, while he lifts his aviators to squint at Blackavar in suspicion.

Emile joins the table with a six-stack of pancakes. He sits beside Blackavar. "Where did Kehaar go?" he asks, lifting a pancake. He layers each with margarine and syrup and sliced bananas and this hazelnut-scented chocolate spread Holly insisted Inlé try. "He vanished."

"He's arranging a plane," Bea says as she sits down at the head of the table. Lori takes the seat beside you and Rachel takes the chair next to Emile. "He's going to fly you to Driscoll."

You and Inlé shiver in unison. Driscoll, Maine was the name the humans call it, the hometown of the Driscoll family. The central location of Hedgenettle Farms. You have another name for it, Efrafa. You bet anything your mother is already there, rejoicing in Woundwort's absence.

"How did he know we needed to go there?" Inlé asks.

Bea is a tall woman, athletic. Strong shoulders to match her strong disposition. She does not flinch at the chill in Inlé's tone, or at the flinty glint in her stare. "Rabbit told me," she says. "And I told my husband."

"You talked to Rabbit," you say.

"More like Rabbit talked to me." Bea passes Rachel the syrup and then leans on her elbows to peer at you. Her eyes are as cool and deep as her skin. She is a scrying pool, serene, aglow with sapphire light. Dreamtouched without realizing it.

Inlé reaches for the pitcher of ice water. Holly grabs it for her and refills her glass. "I thought Rabbit was dead. How could she talk to you?"

"The dead talk," Blackavar says. "They can be particularly loquacious when need to be."

Emile worries at the end of a gloved finger. You know he knows how easily the dead can speak. Holly should too, he was there when your mother hijacked Quintana's body. "Are you being dumb on purpose, wolfy?" you ask. "You saw a possession first hand."

"My mind was scrambled, Clover. I don't remember everything that happened in the Dream." He glowers at his plate. Fried eggs splattered with hot sauce, he is the single carnivore at the table. "If I had my head on at the time I could've been useful."

"I doubt it," you say.

Inlé redirects the conversation back to Bea. "When did Rabbit speak to you?"

"When you called my husband, she visited my dreams. She explained what she could in a rush." Bea mulls her words over a wedge of grapefruit. The group watches, transfixed. You find yourself sitting straighter to listen. "She said you lost Hazel and Fiver, and you have no Bigwig."

"That book," Holly scoffs.

"That book," Bea confirms. "Rabbit apologized for using it, she said humans understand things better when they're compared to stories they already know."

You know which book they mean, Watership Down. Passages of it swim through the channels of your being inherited from previous Rabbits. You have yet to read it. Your mother forbade you from glancing at anything more complicated than a Golden Book.

"She wanted to avoid using it - she mentioned some man named Bobby Hedgenettle taking to the comparison strongly, too strongly - but she wanted me to understand. She wanted Kehaar and you folks to understand."

Rachel speaks up, "I think I understand."

You forgot she could talk.

"Understand what?" you ask.

Caught in the spotlight, Rachel begins to wilt. She spins her butter knife, murmuring, "We like stories."

You hear her fine, and you are sure Inlé and Holly did as well. Emile, however--

"What?"

"You need to speak up, big daddy." Lori pats Rachel's arm. You and Inlé, falling in sync, prick up your ears. Your amusement blends with her surprise at Lori calling Rachel such a pet name. "Not everyone can hear you."

"Humans like stories," Rachel says a smidge louder. "It's how we get things. Through stories."

"Does this mean Rabbit wants us to know we're going to die violent deaths?" Lori asks, distressed.

"That isn't what the story is about." Blackavar sprinkles salt on his grapefruit. He has yet to take a bite. "It's an epic."

"About bunnies dying violent deaths. I saw the movie, Richie." Lori gives Bea an imploring look. "Tell it to me straight, Mrs. Bird. Are we gonna die?"

Bea's smile winds tight. "I don't think that's what Rabbit meant," she says.

"Rabbit might want us to feel important," says Rachel. She stops the knife, the point aims at you. "Being part of story does that."

Do you feel important? Unprompted, Holly tops off your water. You eat a nibble of pancake, a nibble of banana, and wash them down. Born in your Cabin, kept by a mother that forbade you to ever leave. Isn't that a fairy tale?

Does that make you feel important, or silly? Silly and trivial and fake. The next bite of pancake turns to wool on your tongue. You gag it down.

"It makes it easier for them to accept death, too." Hot sauce dots Holly's lip. Inlé taps her mouth and Holly, head bowed, wipes his clean. "Or getting them to commit terrible acts."

"Such as joining the force?" Blackavar, smirking, holds his glass out to Holly. Holly skips over him to refresh Emile's drink.

"Exactly like that."

Your mother told you the babies you took from the womb were being given to good people. That was a story.

On a mission from God, the words travel from Inlé to you, from her skin to yours. They skitter up your nerves on insect feet, like fleas, or lice. Your mother told Inlé fairy tales, too.

"You're chatty folk," Bea says.

"No Hazel, no leader," you say. "No one to tell us to shut up when we talk too much."

"Hazel did handle that confrontation with Woundwort back at the cabin with

aplomb." Blackavar twists his fork into his grapefruit. "She dealt with the difficulties I caused decently enough."

Emile drops his jaw, and then his fork, and whips around in his chair to sneer at Blackavar. "You were being a bitch on purpose back then?"

"Yes."

Inlé holds her breath. He cost us precious seconds, her heart cries, her chin trembles. Hazel could have gone to save you earlier if Blackavar had cooperated better. You offer Inlé a bite of your food, hand cupped under to catch the crumbs, for there was little else to do. You

both lost important things during that fight.

She fears losing you, too. You plan on going nowhere, for Cody's sake. And for your own, you like the idea of being important to someone. You like being seen as precious.

"A good leader needs to be able to manage all members of a group, the most difficult included," Blackavar says by way of explanation. Emile, flushed with outrage, listens. He grips his dish as if he intends on smashing it into Blackavar's face. "It's an important skill."

"Inlé lost her sister," Emile says.

"I'm sorry for that."

No one speaks, the tension poisoning the air. With food no longer appealing to you, you push your breakfast away and ask Bea, "Was I close? No Hazel, no leader?"

"I believe that's what Rabbit was trying to get through to me," Bea says. "To you and yours. But, if I'm remembering right, the warren was still able to function." She finishes her grapefruit and stands to clear the table. "The lot of you need to learn to get along."

"Why?" Holly asks. "Why any of this? Why us? Why do we even need to go to Maine? What's our motivation?"

"Hazel and Quintana were heading there," Inlé says.

"But why?"

"The birth of the end of the world will happen there," says Bea.

"The birth of the end?" you ask.

Bea shrugs a shoulder. "It is how she worded it. There is blood in the clouds, the birth of the end of the world is coming." She frowns at the distance. You find an empty kitchen when you look. "It sounded final," she says.

"We're going to die?" Lori asks.

"Ending doesn't mean death." Holly rises to help Bea, his own dish scraped clean. You clutch to yours when asked, your appetite has fled, but you refuse to hand over your meal just yet. He sighs, "Key word here is birth."

"It sounded final, final is the end, the end is death." Lori grows shrill, her accent thickens. "How can you be so casual about this, Officer? Do you care? You care about anyone dying?"

The plate cracks in Holly's hand. No Hazel, no leader, no one to calm the crowd.

"I care, Mrs--"

"Ms. Bluebell," Lori says. "And you don't seem like you give a damn about anything."

Blackavar, too, has traced Bea's line of sight to the kitchen. He sits turned in his chair, his face not visible. "I'm still going," he says.

"I'm going, too," Emile says, his cheek crammed full.

"You're a kid!" Lori shakes her head. "You should stay here, with me and Rachel and Mrs. Bird."

"I'm going."

"There is no talking him out of it," Inlé says. "He'll follow if we leave him."

"Then I'll lock him in a room."

Bea and Blackavar share glances, odd ones full of recognition. You almost hear a click when their gazes meet.

"That's kidnapping, Ms. Bluebell." Holly goes into the kitchen.

Lori sticks out her tongue.

"I'm going," you say.

"Don't you think it'd be better if you stayed, Clover?" Lori pulls a curl straight, releases it, and pulls it again. "You're not at your best."

"You don't know my best."

"You hurt yourself, honey. That ain't good."

Feels fine to you, the rush of pain sorted out your head for the time. You leave the table and Lori behind for the kitchen. Holly scrapes remnants off into the trash can. "Lori is right," he says. "You did self-harm, you might crack under further pressure."

Smiling, you steal Holly's fancy aviator sunglasses off his face and toss them into the sink.

"I'm going," you announce to everyone. "The end of the world sounds fun."

"I'm not going," Lori says.

Rachel mutters.

"What you say?"

"I'm going," Rachel says. When Lori blanches, Rachel gives a vague shrug. "That Lucy lady stole your jacket. I'm getting it back." Then, under her breath, she adds, "And I want to be a part of the story, too."

"You got to be joking."

"Lori, come along." You slap Holly's hand away from the sink. He growls but backs off. "Please? Pretty please?"

"I don't know if I can do that, I'm scared. This is way over my head." Lori, with a shaky hand, picks an ice cube from her glass. She cups it. "You all seem so fine with it, too, I don't know how you can be. The end of the world. It's the end of the world!"

"Exactly!" You hop with excitement. "The birth of the end, how can you miss out on that?"

"She has the right to be frightened," Inlé says. Was Inlé scared? You inch away from the kitchen to check her expression. Her face is made of stone. "She has the right to stay behind."

You jolt the group with a stamp of your foot. The plates and silverware jump on their respective surfaces and the Birds' fat dog barks. "I want her to come. I like her, and I like Rachel, and I want them to go with us."

"Clover."

You throw yourself at Lori's feet, pride damned. "Please, please, please, come with us."

"I just met you," Lori says, laying her wet hands on your shoulders. "Gosh, you don't know me from Eve, Clover. Not really. I'm not a brave person."

"You were brave enough to stand up to my mother," you say.

Lori blows her blonde curls from her face. "That bitch does have my favorite jacket, and she took my car." She pulls you up to your feet. "Someones got to protect you, and Emile, and Inlé from these men creeping around."

"So you're going?"

"I'm going."

Rachel grins.

You throw your arms around Lori's neck in an exited hug. She returns the embrace without hesitation, squeezing you close. Her hands are cold from the ice, and wet. They dampen the back of your romper.

THE DREAM

Struggle, struggle, scream and flail, no one comes for you. The membrane tangles your endless limbs and compresses your plump body until fluids drip. You fight the shining, fibrous wires to no avail. There is no preventing your fate. You will wake.

CODY

After much rearranging of seats, you are back behind the wheel. Your car, not being of the Real World, wicks away the collection of fluids you expelled upon resurrection and your post-resurrection intake of RX. Hazel gags in disgust at the sucking noises the interior makes.

"Everything here is nasty," she says. "Fucking nasty."

"Could be worse," you say, adjusting your seat. You check the mirror. Campion waves at you from the back, Hazel's seatbelt in his other hand. "You ready, Freddy?"

"I'm ready," Campion says.

"You good, Hazel?"

"No." She covers her face. "Not in the slightest, güey. I'm not good. I'm fucked up."

Does she have to swear in front of the kid like that? Grinding your teeth makes you tense, they changed. Sharper, harder. Your molars burn cold. This rebirth stripped away more of your humanity.

Hazel inhales. "I'm really fucked up, but we got to do this. For Quintana. I'm going to save her." She scratches her wrist.

(green, there should be a strip of green there. where did it go? who took it?)

"It's what she'd do for me."

Too bad you cannot remember Quintana, her personality, her appearance. Your loss of memory seizes your gut worse than any hunger. The way Hazel speaks of Quintana, she sounds amazing. The kind of girl a broken Dog like you could fall for.

You press down on the gas pedal.

Time to go.

CHOOSE BLACKAVAR OR HOLLY.

BLACKAVAR

You give up on your grapefruit. While hungry, you lack any sort of appetite, and, be honest with yourself, Richard, there is a sinful amount of sugar on it. A moment on the lips is a lifetime on the hips, they say. Lacking an obvious reason to stay in, you steal out

onto the front steps to light a cigarette.

In the yard across from the Birds' abode, a pale squirrel runs laps. It is unaware that it has died. It lops and lops in perpetuity, and may very well stay that way until the end of time. Much like the squashed boy loitering in

the street and the woman - dressed in white, as per ghostly custom - sobbing in the backseat of a parked car.

The dead, out and about, mucking up your day as usual. You about groaned when you saw the phantom in the kitchen. Curious about the end of the world, most likely.

You snort, the end of the world. One could only hope. You get comfortable on the step and hold the cigarette upside down to watch it burn. The slow ascent of ash distracts.

"You didn't eat."

Inlé crouches by your side.

"My appetite is lacking."

You tell the truth. Lying to Inlé, to any Rabbit, in fact, is straining, and draining. The yarn you spun back at the pet shop depleted you, leaving you no choice but to eat at the Cabin. You hate that you did.

"You could've tried a bite," she says.

Is it presumptuous to assume that Inlé is unaware of the effect she has upon you? Upon Holly? She pulls the truth from you, her gaze twisting it out like pliers do teeth. To imagine she knows it, that she might be, right now, using that advantage, upsets you.

"It's too much sugar, I don't need it." You blow a puff of smoke. "I had water, that's all I care to have."

She switches positions, sitting and stretching her legs across the steps. Her shorts ride high. You are treated to the sight of her thick thighs and smooth brown skin.

Prim flashed her thigh when she was in a teasing mood. She stared at you as well, stared and stared until you cracked and spilled your guts. Depending upon what you said, she laughed after or cried. Both when you were at your most rotten. Then the two of you made love.

You doubt any of that will happen with Inlé.

She takes your cigarette. "I don't know why I do this," she says. "When I see you smoke, I want to steal a drag."

"Prim was the same." There goes a tooth, a grain of truth, pried straight from the socket. Prim shared cigarettes with you, the Gitanes you stole from your father. The two of you conversed in French, yours poor, hers perfect, while clouds of laughter billowed from your mouths.

Her nan always caught you, always boxed your ear, calling you a bad influence on her bonnie Primrose. To which, Prim replied, "Nan, I'm the troublemaker. Not him." Then she giggled and dashed away when Nan went to snatch her ear - which you remember being like a rabbit's.

No antlers back then, you think. Possibly. The Dream's distorting effect on one's mind makes you question everything at times, even your own name.

"Prim?" Inlé presses her lips together, as if to whistle, and blows white smoke. Her gaze picks at you, pinching and wiggling the loose bits of your resolve. Is this one ready to go, or this one? "Who's Prim?"

She passes back the cigarette. The filter tastes sweet.

"My Rabbit."

Inlé musses her hair so her bangs conceal her eyes. "Your Rabbit," she says. There is a hint of pain in her throaty voice. Does she covet you? You pin that thought for later and light a fresh cigarette off the cherry of the old.

A squirrel bounds up the side of a telephone pole and starts to cross the wires. Then, without much fanfare, drops dead in the street. Its spirit rises and attempts the journey once more, failing at the same spot. Inlé rises. You touch her hand. "It's gone," you say, "Dead."

She sits back down, this time closer, her chin on your shoulder. "What was Prim like?"

"Like you."

Inlé pinches you on the wrist, right on the scar. "We're not all the same," she says, a protest Prim would have made if she sat with you. You smile at her. "We're not." The full force of her gaze pins you in place.

A crow lands on the squirrel's carcass. It begins to feast. The ghosts of cats killed in the road stare in longing, hungry for the flesh they can no longer devour. Your stomach growls in empathy.

"She wasn't exactly like you," you concede. "But you're similar."

Inlé watches your mouth as you speak. To pluck out your tongue, perhaps? Or maybe she seeks more slivers of truth to yank free. "How?" she asks.

"She dyed her hair." Prim was born with silver hair, a trait rare among Rabbits, let alone humans. Her nan dyed it a deep black. Prim, being Prim, proclaimed one day she would be blonde. That day never came.

"Is that all?"

"You have her scar." Inlé stiffens, struck mute, as you draw along her throat. Identical in width and color, down to the jagged knot where you are certain the blade snagged, Inlé's scar is a perfect copy of Prim's. "Even the angle is the same."

"All Rabbits have scarred throats," Inlé says.

"Yours is a perfect match. If I had a picture, I'd show you."

She drums her fingers against her knee. "A scar and dyed hair, is there anything else we share or is that it?"

"My heart."

Damn Inlé and her prying eyes, you did not mean to say that. She pushes off from the steps the way a swimmer shoves off the side of a pool. "Your heart," she repeats, measured, rough. By her speaking it, she knows, as you do, that it is the truth. "Your heart!"

You move onto another cigarette. You are going to owe Lori a new pack by the end of this scene. Inlé falls into a defensive stance, feet even with her shoulders, as if your confession is the first swing in a match. She does her tick, four to one, one to four.

"It's something I wanted to keep secret," you say. "For now at least." You give up on smoking and flick, still lit, the cigarette onto the driveway. "Especially since you have chosen Holly."

"I haven't decided that yet."

"You slept with him."

"I did." She strokes one of her barren antler spots. The bite on your wrist goes taut, the tissue threatening to split. "He wants to be my Dog, though. I don't know if I want that."

The feline specters circle the scraps left by the crow. You shake your head.

"What do you want, sweet girl?"

"What I want?" Inlé turns to the sky, flushed crimson. You manage to avoid reciting

that old poem about sailors and warnings. In the creeping light, Inlé's hair turns to silver, silver with black iron roots. "I want--"

She forms signs with her hand, the whole one. Testing out the words she wants to say, most likely. You feel cheated. "I want," she says. "I want to know my sister and my mother."

"Tsukiko was a surrogate," you are shocked by the snarl in your words. The phantom of an old grudge rising from its grave, with Inlé's gaze elsewhere, you should have been able to contain it. You put yourself back together, and clap your hands. "What I mean is, a mother isn't the

same as a surrogate, and any child she bore later is of no relation to you."

"Hazel is my sister," Inlé smiles at her hands, "I decided it when I saw her. I want to know her, somehow. And I want to apologize for failing to save her."

You rise from the stairs and brush away ash that has fallen on your trousers. Inlé crosses her arms over her breasts much like a pharaoh being laid to rest, hands touching her shoulders. "It wasn't your job to save her," you say. "It's not your job to save a single soul."

"Is this another of your tests?" she asks.

You hover close to Inlé, your lips inches from her temple. She may not have a rabbit's long, lissome ear but hers are just as cute. There is a wedge missing from the shell, a petite nick. "What if it is?" you ask her.

"Let me tell you the other things I want then." She places her palm to your heart. "I want you to stop playing games. I want honesty from you." As if she has not been ripping it from your gums with those kohl black eyes of hers the whole time. You chuckle. "I mean it, Dick."

To submit to Inlé's wishes would be easy, say yes and be done. But what would that get you? Without your tricks, you might as well be dead. They are your armor and your blade. She has your heart, is that not enough?

"A proposal." You stop to hush Inlé before she can interrupt. "Be still, be still, and listen. If you desire my candor, my unalloyed truth, then I want a favor in return."

"I already owe you," Inlé says.

"Can you can owe double."

"Next I'll owe you triple." Inlé bumps your chest with her fist. "I put you back together."

"By your own free will, I didn't ask you to do it. Besides, dearheart, if we're calling that your favor, it would cover our original deal - which it doesn't."

The cats in the street lick the carcass with their wispy tongues. Dawn tints them red, giving them the illusion of being doused in the blood of the kill. Laughing at them

from atop the wires is the squirrel's ghost. It knows the truth, the cats' bellies are as empty as yours.

"This is a whole new deal," you say.

"A whole new deal." You do not care for the way Inlé drifts into thought after. She fixes your shirt as you, tugging on it, smoothing it flat. The act lacks sex. "I make the terms, then." She reveals her teeth to you.

Sweat breaks out along your spine. Her incisors and canines shine as she rises up on tiptoe. "I will owe you twice, the favor for your earlier help, and the favor for your honesty, but--" This time she shushes you.

"But! If you utter a single lie to or around me from this moment on, I owe you nothing."

You gulp down a surprising surge of pride. The rest of the dead join in laughing at the cats. They may laugh at you, too, and it would be deserved. "If I pass on this new deal?"

"I still owe you a favor. A single favor, and I'll refuse any other deals you may want in the future." She taps her lip, and then adds, "I'll tell Clover and all other Rabbits we meet to do the same."

Now you laugh. This damn girl, you could kiss her.

No lying to or around Inlé. Those conditions are simple enough to navigate and will do wonders for your body since you will no longer have to resist her pentothal gaze. You can go without eating for longer. And, push comes to shove, you have other ways to deceive.

Inlé may believe she has ensnared you, but you can slip her shining wire. You always slip the wire.

"With an offer like that, how could I ever say no?"

She grips you by the bitten wrist. "My name is the Black Rabbit of Inlé and I offer you, Dick Stoa, a deal." Her chest meets yours, and your pulse rushes in your ears. She has your arm pinned between her belly and yours. "For your honesty, I shall grant you a favor."

With Inlé this close, you could, if you wanted, actually kiss her.

Which you do.

You steal a kiss, a light one. Anything deeper requires maneuvers that could ruin the experience. You do not want to grab and crush Inlé. This is not an attack.

When it ends, Inlé stares up at you.

"Be merciful," you say. "It's only been a few hours since I last kissed anyone. I'm out of practice."

Down you go. Inlé sweeps your legs out from under you. The rejection hurts more than the crash, and you landed on the driveway. As you endure the chaos of stars bursting across your field of vision, Inlé bends over you.

"I said: be merciful," you groan.

"That was mercy."

She rests her boot against your sternum. Your attention races up the curve of her calf and up to her inner thigh. "You're going to muck up my shirt," you say. She presses her heel to your cheek. "Shall I kiss you here, too?"

"Get up, Dick." Freeing you, she steps away.

What pride remains demands that you stand on your own. Entertaining it, you roll back and then forward, rising up onto your own two feet. You cough. Inlé brushes you clean of dirt and picks debris from your hair.

Kehaar comes down the front step, his wife Bea in tow. "Everything's ready," he says. You thank him, and he ignores you, grumbling over to his vehicle the way you figure most public transport drivers do at the start of their shift.

Bea holds out a purple lunchbox. "I made you a sandwich."

"Am I that thin?" you ask as you take it from her, well aware that you are a stone short of healthy. You weigh the box in your hand; it's light. "Must not be a big sandwich."

"It's more filling than a crumb of grape fruit." Bea switches up her stance, the dip of her violin hips calling for your full attention. You pat the front of the lunchbox and thank her. She assesses you.

"How long have you been able to see ghosts?" she asks.

Thrown off guard, you laugh. Kehaar and Inlé raise their brows your way. All eyes rest upon you, as expected. You brayed like a stung mule. "How long have I been able to see them?" you ask, your deal already heavy on your mind.

"I've been able to see them—" Bea calls your attention to the gathering of hungry ghosts standing in the street. "—since I had my first." By first she must mean firstborn.

"He said he started seeing dead people after he got shot." Emile jumps the front steps. The rest of the lot make their meandering ways to the vehicle, sluggish from their carb loaded meals. "Unless that was a fat load of bullshit," Emile says.

Inlé idles at your side. Tested so soon? This hardly feels fair.

"I lied," you say, hand extended. You expect a tooth to shoot forth from your mouth and land smack-dab in the middle of your open palm. Inlé glances there as if she expects the same. "That part of the story was a crock."

The freckles on Emile's nose bunch up in contempt. "You're a piece of crusty, used dogshit," he says, tugging down the bill of his baseball cap, shutting you out. He then calls shotgun and jogs over to the car.

"He didn't even wait for me to explain," you mutter.

"Crusty, used dogshit." Bea chuckles, "That boy's mad at you."

"When did you first see the dead?" Inlé asks.

The phantoms cease their noise as if they are a court called to order. You taste faded purple, blood, old blood, and you return to the first time. An American woman visited your family's manor, she was tall, blonde, and stunk of nail polish and pink perfume. In her wake came

a flood of horrors, spectres of mothers, their bellies round and their thighs stained.

"I first saw them when I was a lad of nine," you say.

Girls with antlers/rabbit ears marched in the procession, their bodies marked with butcher's cuts. The woman cackled when you dashed up the stairs to escape her. "It's okay," she told your parents, "little boys are always shy around me."

"Still, Miss Driscoll," your father said, "he shouldn't be rude."

In the present, you shrug. "I've been seeing them ever since."

END OF PART SEVENTEEN