

The Rabbits

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There was nothing remarkable about the rabbits I gave birth to, other than the fact that I'd given birth to them.

Little dun-colored rabbits with eyes glistening like wet stones. I'd had fifteen, over the course of as many days. They weren't velvety, like most newborn rabbits, but softly furred, more like rabbits a few weeks old. As rabbits tend to do, they slept in a pile, their bellies moving in gentle waves over my quilt.

My mother-in-law helped deliver them, although nearly all slipped out with little pushing. I know that in all her years as a midwife, she's seen many strange things—twins fused together at the shoulders, babies born with teeth, with both sexes, with pincers like lobster claws instead of hands, a drunkard's baby covered in birthmarks like spilled wine—but nothing like this. She was silent on the matter. That's her way: thin white lips pressed shut. My husband was the one who couldn't stop talking.

"If only you'd been thinking of gold, not bloody rabbits!" Joshua said, smiling.

He supposed it would really amount to the same thing—that we’d be famous and grow rich so he could retire from the clothier’s business. “Just imagine the food you could provide. At a special price!” Other rabbits were on their way. I could feel them leaping in my womb. I wasn’t sure how to look on these rabbits, if I should consider them as victuals or even as special pets, like those kept by wealthy ladies.

“Rabbits. Dear little rabbits,” was all I could say. I petted each one in turn before I slept at last, my hands on my restless middle.

After my short rest, Joshua brought me a steaming meat pie. When he told me it was rabbit, I burst into tears.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” he asked.

I’d been going on and on about rabbit pie, about rabbits in general, for weeks, ever since I’d been startled by one on my way home from the market. We tried to trap it, the other women and I, but it became more of a game as the rabbit darted this way and that, and soon we were laughing too hard to keep up. I’d been newly pregnant then, full of cravings and hoping for a boy.

“Not anymore,” I said.

We decided to house the rabbits in a hutch that Joshua built out back, so they wouldn’t keep getting lost under the furniture, or be trampled underfoot. I’ve always liked rabbits, as far as animals go. They spoil the garden with their nibbling thievery; still, they’re tender things.

I had reason to resent these particular rabbits. True, they were living babies of a kind, even if they weren’t my own kind. Not long after I’d chased that rabbit in the field, I awoke to find that my nightgown was wet through to the sheets, and although I’d slept deeply, I’d had terrible dreams filled with darkness, birds, screams, a rabbit caught in a snare, pulling and thrashing so that the wire cut deep into its neck. Joshua dozed beside me. I lay still, hoping that the slickness between my legs was sweat, that my bladder had misbehaved during the night. When I finally lifted the blanket, I saw that it was all red underneath. He was not the first one I’d lost, but he’d lasted the longest. I so believed he would last. My little boy gone, drowned in that shallow pool.

The following day, I felt a movement in my womb, and that's when the rabbits came.

I considered sewing clothes for them, but Joshua thought that would be a mistake. "We don't want anyone thinking you're crazy," he said. I'm good at turning out tiny sleeves and such, but I took his point. I didn't give them names, either. They were just "the rabbits." Joshua promised that they'd be well looked after, with plenty of fresh straw in their hutch, while I stayed in bed, waiting to labor more.

The neighbors' tongues had been clacking about this whole business. Joshua didn't discourage it—he said the shop was bustling with sudden customers, eager for more than just cloth. Word spread beyond our village, and some wit did up a broadside, the usual doggerel with smudged illustration: "Mary Toffte, Rabbet-Mother." Joshua flapped one in front of me.

"Penny apiece!" Meaning, those pennies should be ours.

"I don't look anything like that," I said.

"Nice job on the rabbits, though," he said.

"They're moving again," I said. "Really moving—come lay your hand, there!"

I was thankful that in all the gossip, I hadn't heard any murmurs of this being the devil's work. Really, I wondered, would the devil busy himself with a trace of rabbits? On the other hand, I wasn't so sure that it was a miracle, although I knew it wasn't my place to say so. As I understand it, there are some things that He watches, and some things that He does, and it's not for us to sort out which is which.

My mother-in-law helped me with the next two rabbits. And the two after that, which I assumed, surely, would be the last of the litter. It's odd: I'd gotten used to the feel of the rabbits, with their wriggling and their springy feet, but I could not get used to the touch of that woman's cold hands, groping about me.

She carried away the last couple of rabbits, one struggling bit of fur clamped under each elbow, only to return a few minutes later. "You've got a visitor," she

said. This surprised me. For the last few days, she'd been shooin' away the gawkers who'd turned up at our door. A "man-midwife," she called our guest, making him sound like some bizarre mongrel. She could have just said he was a gentleman doctor, because that's what he looked like, with a powdered wig, gold spectacles, and a large leather bag. Granted, his hat and coat were well cut, but shabby. He introduced himself as Dr. Andreas, and my mother-in-law took away his hat.

Although Dr. Andreas was disappointed that he'd missed the birthing, he was pleased when I said I'd let him examine me and my most recent rabbits. He drew a chair up to my bedside and asked me many questions, beginning with, had I spoken to anyone else—any other medical men—about my condition?

No. I hadn't.

Dr. Andreas clapped his hands together as if he were praying and bent to press his smiling lips against his fingertips. He asked whether I'd ever had any other unusual births. "Any sooterkins, as you housewives call them? Small, malformed, partly animal in appearance?"

"Nothing like that, sir."

"Any deformities in your other children? Hare lips, for example?"

"We haven't had any children."

"How long have you been married?"

"Ten years."

He asked, hesitantly, were my husband and I having regular relations? In the regular way?

I almost giggled. A louse crawled through one of the curls in his wig and all at once I felt sad. I found myself telling him that the little ones I'd so wanted wouldn't grow in me. Because this was truth: I'd tried to be rich soil, I'd asked to be tilled and sown, but all that took root in me wouldn't thrive in the open air.

All except one, briefly. George, who was so tiny, too early. Too eager to join the world, Joshua said. Oh, but I knew: too eager to leave it, to get his time here over and done with. He had the foggy blue eyes of an old man. His skin so thin—it was wrinkled like an old man's—and tinted orange-yellow. Mama's

bitty carrot, I called him, barely strong enough to suckle. He slept too much, and then, he didn't wake up. My breasts hardened, became rocks weeping milk, alongside my keening. "You'll have more," my mother-in-law said at the time. "There's nothing wrong with you."

Dr. Andreas gave me his own embroidered handkerchief to dry my eyes, then said he'd like to begin the physical examination. I nodded, pulled aside the blankets, and turned my head toward the window. Clouds crept by, like a vaporous menagerie. Rabbits, rabbits, rabbits . . .

Afterwards, Dr. Andreas told me that my fixed preoccupation with rabbits was causing them to continue gestating rapidly within me.

"To continue . . . ?"

"More are growing," he said, "even now."

What choice did I have, but to think of rabbits?

I was taken by carriage to Dr. Andreas's own house, where, as he explained, he could keep me under close observation and provide me with all the benefits of his expertise. Joshua promised to visit as soon as he could get away from the shop. The room I'd been placed in was elegant, but like the doctor's clothes, it seemed to be subsiding into ruin: the enormous drapes and bed curtains showed the haphazard lace-making of moths. I wondered what my mother-in-law would think. At home, she would clean the same surfaces again and again, wordlessly telling me what she thought of my own housekeeping.

Within two days I felt the return of movement inside me, just as Dr. Andreas had predicted. This time it didn't feel like the squirming that had preceded all the other births, but more like the stabs of indigestion. I moaned and twisted until Dr. Andreas gave me a pungent medicine to drink. He even took a tiny dose of it himself. I was still feeling heavy-headed when he brought a group of gentlemen to my bedside. They were elderly men of fashion—scented with perfumes, ruffles bursting from their coat sleeves like cream from pastry—but Dr. Andreas announced them as physicians. "The king's own surgeon is here," Dr. Andreas whispered in my ear while he propped me up on pillows.

In his address to the assembled company, Dr. Andreas claimed that he'd delivered all but one of the rabbits. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to contradict him in front of the other doctors—maybe I felt caught up in his obvious desire to impress them.

"My theory of maternal impression has been dismissed as the stuff of wives' tales," he said. "But surely, even old wives can express an understanding of a true natural phenomenon, if they witness it often enough."

The men nodded and murmured. Each, in turn, laid his hands on my belly. The medicine I'd taken earlier appeared to have made the rabbits drowsy, and they moved sluggishly in response to the doctors' tappings and squeezes.

"Now, gentlemen," Dr. Andreas called over the overlapping conversations' steady rise in volume, "please don't stray far from the house. Mrs. Toft will be delivering soon."

I felt uncomfortable about being exposed to all those men, and I told Dr. Andreas so in private. He patted my shoulder and called me a good girl. "Don't worry," he said. "They're men of science. They won't see a naked woman, but a machine of flesh, operating as it was designed to do. Or in this case, with a fascinating variation."

When the drug wore off, the cramps came back, climbing toward rhythmic pain. It was all I could do to hold off until the doctors had returned.

The rabbits were born dead, the sad, tiny things. The runts of the litter—I'd seen that before. They smelled putrid. The drapes had to be drawn back, the windows opened. In the restored light, I saw the doctors' faces, their eyes narrowed above handkerchiefs pressed to noses. I wished them all away from me, every one, that instant.

One tall doctor began speaking slowly, with formality, as if to someone transcribing his words. I felt like I was watching him from far away.

"... yet in your lecture, 'A Brief Dissertation on an Extraordinary Delivery of Rabbits,'" he was saying, "you spoke of the precocious development and marked vitality of the animals."

My vision blurred, but I recognized Dr. Andreas's voice. "As the illustrious

Dr. Ahlers has implied, this is a new manifestation. It is of note that Mrs. Toft had been speaking of dead children, very recently. And now her morbid thoughts have clearly converged with her rabbit obsession.”

I felt a hand cupped behind my head, and a drink brought to my lips: I'd been crying out. The taste of the drug was familiar, and I drank deeply, despite its bitterness.

When I opened my eyes again, it was dark outside. My bed linen had been changed, and someone had put me in a fresh nightgown. I was grateful for that. Dr. Andreas stood by my bedside, scribbling in a little notebook. With each looped movement of his pencil, I imagined him drawing rabbits' ears, over and over.

“Well, that's the last of them,” I said. Dr. Andreas looked up from his book. “The rabbits, I mean.”

“Perhaps,” he said, and went back to scribbling.

Later, Dr. Andreas's housekeeper came into my room, carrying a bowl of stew. It reeked of rabbit, and I told her that I had no appetite. All the same, she left the dish uncovered on a tray by my bed. As I clapped the lid back over the meat, I saw that the china had a motif of rabbits, chasing one another around the rim. I rolled over in bed, away from the untouched meal, and a picture on the wall, one that hadn't been there before, caught my eye. I had to squint to make out the scene: a gentleman in hunting attire strode across a field of heather, followed by his servant, over whose back dangled three dead hares. With my head beneath the covers, I almost didn't hear the door opening.

Joshua had come to visit me, at last. He carried with him two rabbits in a cage. “I thought you might want to see them,” he said. “Maybe hold them for a bit.”

“You brought these from home?” These rabbits were gray. Not dun-colored as I'd remembered them.

“Yes.” Joshua wouldn't look at me.

“Please take them away,” I said.

Over the next three days, different doctors returned to question me about my rabbit pregnancies and births. “Monstrous,” one doctor called them, although he assured me it was a medical term. Sometimes as many as three men visited at once; during every interview Dr. Andreas hovered in the background, clasping and unclasping his hands. I became tired of saying the same things so many times over. I felt like an actress, mouthing speeches, except that I was never able to leave the stage. I tried to correct the notion that Dr. Andreas had been midwife to the first rabbits, but it was as if no one heard me when I spoke of my mother-in-law, so I stopped mentioning her. The king’s surgeon, Dr. Ahlers, visited me twice, and he grew no friendlier with our lengthening acquaintance. He kept using words I couldn’t understand, kept asking complicated questions that unrolled in several directions at once, like a basketful of bobbins kicked to the floor, and when I asked him to please repeat what he’d asked, he’d move on to the next query.

I’d passed some bloody tissue—the afterbirth, I thought, much delayed. Dr. Andreas believed otherwise. “Altogether, it adds up to another rabbit,” he said. Still, he said I was well enough to get dressed and receive Joshua in the sitting room for his next visit, slivered in between sessions with the doctors.

Joshua began by telling me how well the shop was doing, that he’d barely been able to spare this time away, and I said that I should come home to help him with the customers. He insisted I stay put, and I said that I was sick of the whole business of staying put.

“You need the doctor’s care,” Joshua said.

“What about your mother? Didn’t she tend to me well enough before all this?”

Joshua leaned in from his chair and lowered his voice. “Andreas says he’ll give us money. Good money. This doctor’s no fool. To him, you’re a great discovery. With the rabbits and all.”

An embroidered rabbit smirked up at me from a cushion. In the next

moment I was on my feet trying to rip the thing in two.

“Stop it, Mary! What are you doing?” Joshua held my arms by the wrists. “This isn’t like you. Sit down now, be calm.”

I was bleeding—I could feel it soaking through my skirts. Suddenly I was dizzy and had to sit down, even though it meant ruining the furniture.

That evening, my mother-in-law arrived unannounced. A little maid trailed behind her, saying the master would be angry with her when he returned, which would be soon, that she would be beaten. My mother-in-law turned to her and said, “Bring us a roasting pan of warm salted water, big enough to crouch in.”

Having a soak brought relief to my flesh. That part of my body had been the focus of so much attention, and yet had been offered so little comfort. My mother-in-law knelt on the floor beside me to pour in more warm water. She frowned when I clung to her and wouldn’t let go.

“Ann, I want to go home,” I said. “All the meat they give me is rabbit, I’m sure of it.” I asked her if she thought I was cursed. I begged her to help make the rabbits go away. She had to pick my fingers off her arms. Her hands, as always, so cold.

“Dry yourself off and get dressed,” she said. She would take me home, she promised; she needed to arrange our transportation, and then she’d come back for me.

“Hurry,” I said.

I waited and waited. Once, I thought I heard her calling me from the street below. When I went to the window to look, I saw no one except a poor woman in rags, begging to the air. And someone must have turned the lock on my door because the knob wouldn’t give, no matter how much I rattled it. I felt too weak to go anywhere on my own anyway.

The next time my door opened, two men in blue coats walked through and ordered me to go with them. I was taken to a court of law, or a chamber within some place of learning—I wasn’t sure. The ceilings were high, the floors polished stone, and the bench they allowed me to rest on was hard wood. I felt so light-headed. I wasn’t asked or allowed to speak on my own behalf. Instead,

others—many of them the doctors who’d questioned me before—spoke about me. Dr. Andreas was nowhere in sight. How I’d wanted to quit his company, and yet not this way. Maybe he was now being questioned about the rabbits, those he’d pretended to have birthed. Midwife only to his claims, he. The voices of the doctors swirled around me like a cloud of gnats, and I muttered my own words, my head bent, my hand over my mouth.

“Esteemed colleagues, I must report that dissected, they show to be regular rabbits. The lungs float in water, which proves that they had breathed air. It is a fact: no infant of whatever species, in utero, breathes air.”

I cannot breathe in this room.

“Mothers produce milk to feed their offspring, whether they be monsters or no. If she’s been pregnant, where is her milk?”

All cried out for Mama’s bitty carrot.

“We have found a quantity of scat in the digestive tracts of the two rabbits, and furthermore, this scat contains straw. Clearly, these animals had run in the fields.”

My womb has been a green field through which they have run.

Here is my confession, all that I told the doctors finally, the whole explanation:

I’d put dead rabbits inside myself, and then made a show of excreting them from my womb before Dr. Andreas’s company. A traveling woman had taught me how to do this, following the loss of my child, when my womb still allowed access. My plan was to create a spectacle of myself, and thereby gain notoriety and work this to my advantage. The live rabbits were props, purchased to help sustain the illusion, to support the story that I’d been so intently building.

Did I say these things? I’m ashamed to have told them such lies. I couldn’t find a way around it. Doctor Andreas had never delivered any rabbits—that truth was a relief to tell, but they seemed to give me no credit for it. They badgered me until I wept; they wouldn’t let me sleep or eat. Worst of all, they showed me the scissors, the pointed implements they would put into me to slice and probe so that they could get to the bottom of the matter. Those are the

words they used.

I put my signature on a document and it was done, after so many hours. Then I sat quietly, my clothing unfresh and befouled with blood beneath, feeling like a small animal amidst those men with their delicate attire and poised speech. One doctor, who had not been part of the interrogation, told a page to bring me a drink of water.

“She’s exhausted and clearly confused, the poor creature,” the gentleman said. “She’s not well.”

But another man said, “Don’t be tricked. Everything about her is counterfeit.”

Cony, cunning, cunny, cuntry woman. Merry Tuft. I’ve heard it all now. The jailers slide the latest broadsheets under the door of my cell and delight in reciting choice bits of verse, just in case I refuse to read them. As I understand it, my husband will be punished. My mother-in-law will be punished. Dr. Andreas is disgraced, and that is how men of his stature are punished. The manner in which I’m awaiting my punishment, whatever it may be, is already punishment.

Aches twist through the core of my body, which has emptied out, finally. The rabbits have stopped coming—all I pass now is blood, and more blood. No one’s told me what charges have been brought against me, exactly. I’d so gladly trade what little food they give me for a few drops of Dr. Andreas’s sleeping medicine.

The pictures on the broadsheets get worse and worse. Rabbits bursting through a bush-trimmed doorway that resembles a woman’s hairy slit. Me on my back with my legs in the air, a leering doctor into me up to his elbow. The latest one shows me attempting to fornicate with a rabbit in an alleyway. The rabbit is huge, dressed like a man, his red penis hanging out of his pants.

Baby rabbits rot in the corner of my cell. The jailer said that my little children had come to play with me, and he threw them in. They hit the wall: I wonder if they’d been alive before that.

A fever has come over me, and I’m hot and cold, though sometimes numb. This is a strange kind of mercy, because it allows me something like sleep.

Sometimes the cell spins around me like I'm tied to a wheel, and I have to grip the straw hard to make it stop.

I can feel a new ripening. I know Joshua and I can make a child this time that will live. The meaning of the rabbits is finally clear to me—that anything is possible. I remember reading in the Bible that He created the monstrous Leviathan to show that He could, for the sport of it. And now rabbits. This is not the worldly presumption of interpretation, but a fact that I observe in all humility.

I've finally been given some medicine to soothe me. The kind doctor, the one who gave me water, came to visit. My only visitor. He brought water this time, too, but to bathe me. "One last look around, for old times' sake, Doctor?" I asked, and laughed. He didn't laugh. He mentioned an infection and said he was sorry.

Nobody answers when I call out. There's food and water, only I can't say how long it's been there. Too sick to eat, the medicine all gone. Sometimes I think that the world has died and gone away, and there's only me in this room, waiting.

Tiny feet passed by my cell the other day. Orange-yellow feet moving across the slit beneath my door. Oh, George. Too young for a place like this.

The little ones in the corner are sleeping, heaped in a pile as babies tend to do. I can see their bellies moving, in the dark.

I'm gestating now, and even though my womb is ruined, I will shit out a race that will punish all who deserve it. You have no idea. I asked for so little and have been given so much torment. The truth is, the truth is, the truth is, I am fertile with pain.

The stones all around me, touching me, are quiet and cold.

