

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

I was doing my laundry one morning at Tierra de Zia apartments in Santa Fe, New Mexico in June of 1993, when an Asian chick ran into the laundromat and cried out: “COME HELP CATCH THE RABBIT!”

“Is it your rabbit?” I asked.

“No, but it’s been running loose for days with dogs trying to kill it.”

We have jackrabbits in New Mexico, and cottontails. But this was a domestic breed known as a Californian. Bred in California, Californians are a mix of New Zealand White, Himalayan, and standard Chinchilla rabbits. This terrified little bunny was white with a grey nose, grey ears, and tail. Something had torn a chunk out of her right ear.

I watched the rabbit deftly evade her pursuers before I made my move. Instead of chasing her, I coaxed her in a soft voice, and she let me pick her up. Boy, did she pick the right person.

A cheer went up when I solved the rabbit problem. Now I had a homeless bunny, so I made up some flyers and posted them around the neighborhood.

With two cats, “Scraps” and “Rugby,” I wasn’t keen on a new pet. When no one claimed the little waif, I made a home for her, feeding her fresh fruit and vegetables. She gratefully devoured everything that was offered, from apples to bananas.

This went on for a week. By then, like Henry Higgins, I’d grown accustomed to her face. I named my bunny “Babs,” but she was more often called “Rabbit” and “Pooh.”

My best friend, newspaper editor Bob Quick, helped me get a rabbit hutch. Bob is the business honcho at *The New Mexican*. We used Bob's truck to haul it home to my place.

At first, Babs spent the night in her hutch on my second-floor porch. Before she went outside, I'd let the living room temperature adjust to the outdoors. Eventually, the cold air killed my house plants. A new approach was needed. I settled on making Babs an indoor bunny, letting her roam free, day and night. This was a happy plan for Rabbit, but not such a wise idea for my furnishings.

Babs even learned to use the litter box. "GET IN YOUR BOX, BUNNY!" became the law of the land.

Friends would marvel at what a well-trained bunny I had. Rabbit would dutifully use her litter box when I hosted readings of my plays, *The Splendid Wren* at The Santa Fe Playhouse in 1996 and *Baby Rugby* at The Armory for the Arts in 1998.

Babs was our Santa Fe Theatre Guild mascot. She loved playing the beggar and went from actor to actor getting petted and cadging little bits of crackers and her all-time fave, chocolate chip cookies.

Juvenile rabbits are exuberant clowns. When she wasn't vandalizing my tasseled loafers, excavating the carpet, or amputating headphones, Babs delighted me with rehearsals of escape maneuvers.

These acrobatic feats of derring-do were often performed at the expense of my cats, "Scraps" and "Rugby." One evasive skill rabbits practice is known as "helicoptering." This is the bunny version of a moonshiner turn—only performed in midair. And all the more fun if Babs could kick the cats on the way by.

In our eleven loving years together, little Babs never bit me once. Her teeth were powerful enough to take the end off an oral syringe, but she was too gentle to harm me, or my roughhousing Burmese cat, “Cabby.” The most aggressive thing Babs would do was threat-charge any human or feline that invaded her space under the low table in the living room.

When later I lived in Mom’s cottage in Upperville, Virginia, Rabbit stayed at the top of the carpeted staircase. From here, she had a crow’s nest view of the house. It was also the perfect spot for her little tollbooth, and she loved to panhandle goodies from me every time I used the stair. You couldn’t go upstairs without a raisin or a cashew. Babs wouldn’t allow it.

It was funny how easily Babs trained me to be her human. If I offered her a treat that wasn’t to her liking, she’d gently nudge my fingers with her nose. It was her way of saying, “I appreciate the offer, but no thank you.”

Nudging me was her *polite* way of turning down food. Babs could also express herself with flare-ups worthy of a Dublin fishwife. If the service was not up to snuff, she would fly into a rage and with her teeth throw water and rabbit pellets all over the living room. I tried taping her bowls down, but the little sorehead chewed through the tape.

If Babs reduced me to being her footman, I didn’t mind. She earned her keep as a member of the Home Guard—as a dauntless watch rabbit. Any unfamiliar sound or smell would make Bunny thump in alarm, raising me from the deepest slumber.

In her twilight years, a lot of Rabbit’s alerts turned out to be false alarms. I’d come out and comfort her until her boogeymen were gone, and she was able to go back to sleep.

And sleep well we did. For those high desert nights in Santa Fe were enchanted, with each breeze bringing in the scent of a Russian olive blooming right outside my window.

I loved taking my sleeping bag out on the porch and drifting off to dreamland under a mantle of stars. I'd awaken to Babs licking my head or to the persistent sound of her shredding the pages out of a magazine. For eleven years I slept on a futon and my needs extended no further than a pot of coffee and a typewriter. Life was good, and I knew it was. Tennessee Williams put it best. He said, "When I'm writing, I'm alive. The rest of the day for me is posthumous."

If Babs had delicate needs at home, they were amplified when she had to travel. For some mysterious reason, you're not allowed to have your rabbit in the cabin with you when you fly on commercial airlines. One explanation cited a ferret that had gotten loose at Dulles Airport.

"I can't put my best friend in cargo. It's a hundred degrees. And I have to change planes in Denver," I insisted on the phone to the clerk at United.

"Rabbits fly cargo only. Company policy."

"Bunnies can't tolerate heat. Cargo is too risky."

"Sorry, pal. I don't make the rules."

I blew in disgust, and hung up.

"I'll call Karen," I said to myself. "She's a nurse. Nurses can figure anything out."

Karen had made umpteen flights to cat shows. If anyone knew how to get Bunny airborne, she did.

"Buy a Sherpa bag," she advised me. It's like a suit bag. Only it carries cats."

“Right. I get a Sherpa bag. Then what?”

“You put Babs in first, then Cabby.”

“Okay.”

“Then at check-in, you tell them you have a cat and present Cabby’s health certificate.”

“What if they open the bag?”

“They never open the bag.”

“Thanks, Karen. I’ll try it.”

It seemed a sound plan. My stepsister, Karen West, was no slouch lump in the brains department. Indeed, she was such a dynamo her nickname at Foxcroft School had been “Cyclone.”

I had no trouble at the Albuquerque Sunport. We tootled through the ticketing procedure. No problemo.

Karen’s plan went without a hitch. Everything was Copacabana. We breezed all the way to final boarding and were about to hear the ticket taker say, “Thank you for flying United,” when I heard the distinctive sound of rending nylon. Babs had torn open the Sherpa bag and was poking her doofus head out for the world to see. Oh, hell.

Before I could react, it really hit the fan.

“SECURITY!” blurted this alarmist chick over a microphone. “WE’VE GOT A RABBIT AT FINAL BOARDING!”

Babs was rubbernecking the other passengers, and they were looking at her to see what all the fuss was about. I could not believe how furious United Airlines got over a

little pet bunny. I tried to stop the panic-mongering ticket taker, but she went even more batshit.

“Hey, toots,” I pleaded, grabbing her sleeve. “It’s just a bunny. Chill out, man.”

“STEP OUT OF LINE, SIR,” she barked, turning meaner than a snake.

“Hey, be casual, man,” I said, to no avail.

“LEAVE THE BOARDING AREA, SIR.”

“Hey, man. Don’t hand me that bag of noise. I’m boarding here.”

“NOW.”

What was up with this nutcake chick? I was doing my best to push Rabbit back in the bag. Enraged, Rabbit was doing a psycho number trying to get back out. Animals and children are always “Take Five” cool at home, but the instant you take them in public, they go berserk.

“Hey, get off my case, lady. Can’t you see I’m trying to get Bunny back in the bag?”

“SECURITY,” she blats again over the loudspeakers.

“Hey! Have you lost your mind?”

“SECURITY TO THE BOARDING AREA!”

Each time I push Rabbit’s head down, it pops back out—like she’s spring-loaded.

“SECURITY IS COMING. MOVE AWAY.”

Oh, shit. Now she’s blitzed the rent-a-cops. They rush in and read me the riot act. I try reasoning with these shlubs, but they jump ugly on me.

“STEP THIS WAY, SIR.”

I can’t move. Babs is playing jack-in-the-box, and I’ve got my hands full.

“Is there a problem, officer?”

“WE’RE DEPLANING YOU, SIR.”

“Deplaning me? What for?”

“FOR CARRYING A CONCEALED RABBIT.”

“How can you deplane me? I haven’t been enplaned.”

“COME ALONG, SIR. STEP THIS WAY.”

“Hey, what about ‘the friendly skies,’ man?”

Stonefaced, they removed me from the boarding area. Christ, I missed my plane.

Now I was really screwed.

As God is my witness, I’ll never fly United again.

Freed from the rigors of flying, we took to the open road. Hertz rented me a dark-blue Ford Contour, and we headed out on I-40. Driving is the only way to go. If I want to breathe stale air, I’ll ride the bus.

“*Vamanos, muchachos,*” I said to Cabby and Babs as they huddled in the shell of the ruined Sherpa bag.

They were devoted companions. Rabbit loved to lick Cabby’s head, and he returned the favor. Burmese are the sweetest cats, and Cab was a typical Burm. He went overboard grooming Rabbit. He would lick her head until it was soggy. She’d pull away with a disgusted look and hop around shaking off the saliva. She’d be grossed out, but never enough to resist Cabby’s little love fest.

Driving east, I spent the first night in Amarillo. Not having any clothes, I bought tee shirts, socks, and undies at the Old Navy store. Billboards dared you to try to eat a 72-ounce steak, but I was content with a Chinese take-out.

The next morning found us in Oklahoma. I used the cruise control to eat fried rice and sing “By the Time I Get to Phoenix,” “Wichita Lineman,” and “Galveston” in the happiest songbird voice. Cheered by the expanse of blue skies and smooth roads, I sang those Jimmy Webb songs better than Glen Campbell.

Arkansas is another story. The never-ending road work is a trial. Like Othello I found myself among anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders, which prevents them from cleaning the restrooms.

Then, all is forgiven in Tennessee, where they have Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, Graceland, a Nissan plant and some of the dreamiest girls in the New World. Finally, I’m back home in Upperville, Virginia, smelling like a cat, a rabbit, and Taco Bell. Mom greets me at the back door, and I’m her little boy again.

Rabbit finally did get to fly—albeit under the direst of circumstances.

Later, when I was still living in Santa Fe, during a family visit one October, Mother fell ill and, having been a nurse, refused to be admitted to the hospital.

“I am not going in any hospital,” said Mother flatly.

“But, Mom. The doctor says....”

“I am not going in the hospital, Ross.”

“You have no choice. You’re gravely ill.”

“I am not gravely ill, Douglas,”

Ross and I took Mom to see Debra Higginbotham, a gracious and capable physician she warmed to and whose advice she followed, to a point.

We got Mom x-rayed and found she had a blocked ileum; she was then rehydrated twice at busy St. Vincent’s, but she still balked about being admitted.

“We could take you to Albuquerque, Mom.”

“I am not going anywhere, Douglas.”

“You have no idea how sick you are.”

“I know my own body, Douglas.”

Ross and I were stymied. The next morning, Mom was having trouble breathing.

“She’s gonna get pneumonia,” I told Ross, “if she doesn’t have it already.”

“If we hospitalize her against her will, she’ll get worse.”

“We need to fly her home to Virginia. She needs to be in her comfort zone, with her friends sending flowers.”

“What should we do?”

“You call the bank. I’ll have Bob Quick locate a medevac jet on the Internet.”

The Middleburg Bank was top-notch. Their customers have included everyone from Caresse Crosby to Sam Huff. They wired us sixteen thousand dollars as I scrambled a Lear jet out of Houston that afternoon. Our life-or-death mission was bound for Winchester, Virginia, with a refueling stop in Evanston, Indiana.

Watching the Lear jet land was like something out of James Bond. It was a brilliant October afternoon at dinky Santa Fe Airport. Mom was deathly pale as we helped her wamble into the shimmering sunlight. Our rescue team was comprised of a pilot, a co-pilot, a nurse, and a male EMT.

“Your mother may not survive the flight,” the nurse apprised us. “You need to sign a waiver.”

“I’m her guardian,” I said. “I’ll sign it.”

“She’s critically dehydrated. We need to get some Ringer’s in her ASAP.”

Mother was given an IV of Ringer's solution as the Lear glimmered on the tarmac, preparing for dustoff.

Our captain was Richard Theriault—a name that resonated hope with me, having been a huge fan of the French-Canadian full-contact karate champion, Jean-Yves Theriault.

Flying in a Lear jet is a rush. Imagine going a thousand miles an hour in a camper. Cabby and Babs were beside me in the aft of the plane. They were models of good behavior, enduring four hours without a peep. Medevac flights are spartan. Rabbit and I shared an oatmeal cookie and some bottled water.

"Pets are not allowed in an ambulance," I was advised at the airport in Winchester.

"I can't leave them here. I'll follow you in a taxi."

"Okay. Get in."

"I'm sorry."

"We'll notify hospital security that a cat and a rabbit are en route."

We were met by two burly security officers who got around the rules by draping a sheet over the pet carrier.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

Cabby and Babs were ringside when the doctors and nurses flew into action, stabilizing Mom.

One doctor gave me a scare when he lifted up the sheet to see what was in the mysterious box.

"My kids have nine guinea pigs," he assured me with a wink.

For eleven years my favorite sound was Rabbit thundering into my writing room so she could mooch most of my breakfast sweet potato.

Sadly, I'll never enjoy that sound again. Babs passed away on May 24, 2004, and I haven't been the same since.

Our gardener, Richard Holmes, helped me bury Rabbit in the corner of my mother's garden, under the cool shade of an elm beside a stand of swamp irises.

Richard is a lean, wiry black man in his early seventies. He's been our gardener and devoted friend for half a century. Richard is quite the amusing fellow. Back in the day, his CB handle was "Loose Rooster."

"That's three feet, Doug," he panted, pausing to catch his breath.

"Just about," I agreed, staring into the hole.

Richard and I put our backs into grave making. Together, we dug deep into the red clay until we hit a big rock.

"Deeper, Rich, deeper. We need to dig as deep as we can."

I leaned into my shovel. Richard let me tire. Then he bore down with his sexton's spade.

Babs had spent her entire life trying to dig a hole. So I made damn sure she got a good one. We weren't finished digging until we reached four feet.

"You're going to have to go get her, Rich. I can't..."

"I know, Doug. I know."

With Babs at rest, and the section of sod neatly replaced, Richard strode over to get me. We walked back to the grave and stood under the trees as I prayed for Rabbit. Animals have souls. Anyone who disputes this can go hang.

“It’s a nice spot,” observed Richard thoughtfully.

“It really is. She belongs here.”

Mother’s yard was home to many animals. There were deer, skunks, possums, squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, countless birds, woodchucks, foxes, voles, moles, mice, even a solitary black vulture that Mother blamed for ruining her satellite reception.

“Well, that’s all we can do.”

“Thank you, Rich.”

“Okay, Doug.”

I caught an errant tuft of downy, white hair as it blew across the grass. It’s all I have left of my California lassie.

Richard draped a comforting arm around my shoulder. I clasped his waist, and thus we walked away, leaving Rabbit to God.

A stone monument of a recumbent bunny marks her final resting place. Mother helped me pick it out. She said it was better than a tree. I tried to compose an epitaph, but it seems inadequate:

You made my heart your home for so many years.

I adored you, Pooh,

From your pointy little feet,

To your big, silly ears.

I knew Rabbit was going to die, but I couldn’t prepare myself for the actual moment of unendurable loss. I can’t help but cry when I think about Babs. I still cannot even bring myself to walk out in the yard. I can only find a measure of peace in my mother’s words: “She loved you, Doug.”