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Evil Rabbit King

In my head, it's 2006 and not 2022.

I think my only child Jeremy was eight back then.

It was the Easter of 2006 when Jeremy got the idea of building his first rabbit hutch.

I clearly remember how all the crazy shit started. It was on a Saturday, the week after Easter.

That's when Jeremy commenced his campaign to save abandoned Easter rabbits.

Easter rabbits, you know, the white bunnies pet stores sell. Easter is a time of renewal, when Jesus rises, of Oschter Haw's.

Oschter Haw's are the original Easter bunnies. All modern day Easter rabbits are descendants of the Oschter Haw rabbit.

Oschter Haw rabbits were here before Jesus did Houdini.

As you know, Easter is the time of year when loving mothers and fathers across America gift their children a butt load of Easter gifts, including Easter baskets. Each Easter basket is filled with lots of chocolate rabbit candy. Dentists love all the decay that Easter brings.

It's the time of year when hoards of parents give their precious children live Easter bunnies.

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I've woken again in a cold sweat. It's 1:30 A.M. sharp.

Each early morning I attempt to exit the same nightmare, but it's futile.

I'm always a few short breaths away from an anxiety attack. All those years haven't lifted a damned finger to save me. They only exist to remind me of what I've lost.

I've been away from Jack Daniels and a dicey conscience for the longest time.

I've only gotten a few hours of sleep again. But at least I got me some R.E.M'S.

He's standing at the end of my bed, Evil King.

Evil King is a New Zealand, blood red, monstrous rabbit.

Like every night for a few weeks before and after Easter, The Red King shows up uninvited.

I fancy him an executioner. He wears an oily leather hangman's mask over his face.

Evil Easter Rabbit King is exceptionally tall. How tall? Well, his ears damned near touch the twelve foot bedroom ceiling.

Like all the other early mornings, I sit attentively and follow the same lecture. In truth, the other students and I have no choice.

The flesh I can barely see under his shroud, the neck, around his eyes, and the air openings for his nose and mouth is Shar-Peis-Esque, folded skin where fur used to be. The rest of his body is fur, mangy red colored fur. His whiskers appear translucent, iridescent. He's intelligent.

My giant New Zealand Red is fearless and dominant like no other apex predator.

He smells like rabbit hole, putrefied duck fat, sulfur, and rust. The horrible scent is something akin to dried slaughterhouse blood.

My furry monster is ancient. He's been around since the creation of fear.

I'm in survival mode. I'm on edge. The hair on the back of my neck is tingling with low-voltage electricity.

His paws are giant, dingy red oven mitts. Each paw is fitted with unsheathed claws. The daggers appear to be made of barbed wire and fishhooks. Each paw drips blood. The King's blood is viscous, like blackstrap molasses. Everything about him feels ancient and primordial.

His snout extends when he unhinges his long muzzle through his breathing hole in the executioner. He intends to form words. He appears wolfish. I've seen the look before at the animal shelter where I volunteer.

It's the same look I saw in the eyes of this large pit bull a while back. The pit bull had attacked a delivery driver, nearly tearing his arm off. The dog's eyes appeared exhausted and hollow on the day of the execution. It was like the vicious animal was ready to be put down.

Evil Easter Rabbit King's face is angry and menacing this early Monday morning. His teeth are sharp, mainly canine.

I sit straight up in bed. I can feel the heat and the foulness of his breath.

I thank someone's god that most of his early morning lectures only take place each year, one week before and after Easter. He speaks fluent English, but he can also communicate in Hebrew. It's his choice.

When he begins the same lecture, I get teleported back into the sixth grade.

I'm in one of the front row seats in the classroom. The classes are always filled to the rafters with children who mean well.

Evil Easter Rabbit King delivers the same speech each early morning, word for word.

Before class begins, perhaps to get our attention, the Evil lets out this squealing, high-pitched, death trap rabbit sound.

And then he stops.

He looks like one of the creatures in the movie Silent Hill.

It's then we enter his alien world.

Evil Rabbit King begins.

O-o-ok children says The Easter Rabbit King.

It's that time of year again, chumps. Remember. You know, the time of year when you all get sick and tired of taking care of your beloved new Easter pests. You heard me right, bitches. I said F-ing pests, not pets! I'm talking about the furry pets you can't seem to live without each year, dumb shits. The kind of pets your stupid parents purchase at pet stores and the other outlets, always right before Easter.

Okay, for those of you who are too slow on the uptake, I will explain things on an elementary level.

So, it's a week after Easter. Jesus has already escaped from his own rabbit hole. He's ascended into heaven.

After the longest week, your parents have had enough and dumped your baby rabbits in the closest thing resembling a thicket. They've lied to you, told you that some fairy godmother has taken them to paradise.

Evil touches the ceiling, using his middle finger as a pointing stick.

Listen up, girls and boys. Believe me, you have no choice.

For the sake of the Easter bunnies, hopefully, you've already let them starve to death. Trust me, if not, what comes next is worse.

Starve to death, you might ask? Yes, kids, I'm talkin' about when you pet them, your pests, you can feel their backbone and ribs. I'm talking about when their bones damned near stick out of their unkempt, matted fur.

I can hear the awkward rumble in the classroom. Most of the dull students don't know what in the hell the giant New Zealand red rabbit is talking about. It's Kafkaesque. One thing is for sure, we're all going to experience anxiety while doing our homework.

"SILENCE, CLASS, SILENCE!"

Never whisper when I'm out of control!

Okay, darlings, please continue to follow along.

When your rabbits crap the house up, just leave their shit wherever it lands on the floor.

The kids giggle. They say, "Teachers don't say the word, shit."

How do I phrase this? Okay, remember class how your mother and father nearly stroked out when you pissed the bed or brought home those crappy grades? Well, it was a big F'ing deal, right? Damned right, that's what I'm talkin' about.

The kids can't contain their laughter. Evil Easter Rabbit King is so evil, yet funny.

"KIDS, EARS UP! Focus, I'm preachin' here. Don't make me claw your cauliflower looking ears off your cabbage patch heads!"

Oh, and be sure to feed those snowy white little bitches all kinds of toxic grub: Greek Yogurt, dill pickles, Cheetos. Hell, give em' Trix for all I care. Give them anything but certified rabbit food.

LISTEN UP, SHITS! Go ahead and neglect the cute little things. They are all going to die anyway.

A Tsunami of funeral silence floods my bedroom and the classroom.

There isn't a smile or smirk on any of the children's faces. Maybe, just maybe, they've learned a valuable lesson?"

Kids, ask your parents to find a butcher without scruples.

Evil throws his head over his shoulders and laughs at the ceiling. The kid's shutter. Evil drones on.

Let the damned fur-balls stink themselves to death on the porch at night, all alone in the cold in their cages.

Who cares? After all, you and your dense parents have more important things to do, like play video games or drown in social media.

Turn 'em loose, those cuddly darlings, deep in the woods, Yezz the woods, my favorite place!

Oh, before I wink out in a flash and you all go to sleep for the remainder of the night, I want to say one last thing.

Little David interrupts the Evil Rabbit Easter King.

Put your arm down, little David or I will chew it off at the elbow.

The classroom turns morgue quiet again. Going through life without arms is unimaginable.

Next year kids, howza about we do cute, tiny chicks, Yezz, lots and lots of fucking baby chicks?

BABY CHICK's, KIDS, yum de dum! Meat grinders, microwaves, oh my!

After a long pause, and another loud, wounded shriek, Red Rabbit finishes his lecture.

Heads up pukes. You know I'm being facetious, right? Totally sarcastic?

One of the straight 'A' students in the back of the class, on the verge of insanity, politely asks, "Evil Teacher, what does facetious and sarcastic mean?"

Evil Easter Rabbit King races to the back of the class and attacks the student. He ravishes several of the students. He was done being preachy. He's had enough of their naive shit.

I wait until the end of all the carnage. Somehow I survive the lecture, like most of the students.

Maybe I've been spared again for a reason. I figure it's because I owe Jeremy something.

And so I climb out of bed. I grab a smoke and guzzle down a cup of day old coffee. After, I make my way to the manufactured fog in the shower. It's in there I can temporarily disappear.

And after, I'll head to New Sacramento. I have someone I need to see there.

~

"Cody, Mr. Burns? I know it's late. But we have C.P.S. waiting for your son down the hall. We are finished with his interrogation.

They want a few minutes with him, alone, before he's taken to juvenile hall on Kiefer Road. Since he's only 16, they need to prep him for what to expect when he gets to court. Be assured, Mr. Burns, I will comb through my contact directory to ensure he's assigned a competent public defender."

I'd had enough experience as a child with social workers to know exactly how much they really care. In reality, C.P.S. doesn't give two shits about anyone's complicated childhood beyond their underpaid Friday paycheck. Damn it, I just want to show my boy I support him.

I stand just outside the detective's interview room, the so called hot box. From out in the hallway, Trix and I share a glance. In my eyes, he's still a little boy. How could he have done such a terrible thing?

But who am I to judge? After all, I'm a repentant addict, a father who's done his fair share of self destruction and time? My last stint was close to home, at what they call New Sacramento. New Sacramento is an updated version of the historic Folsom State Prison. The prison is about ten miles away as the crow flies from my crappy one bedroom apartment.

We've called him Jeremy Trix, my Ex and I, for the longest time. It's all about Jeremy doing killer tricks on his Arbor's Martillo skateboard. And so the name Tricks, or Trix, seemed appropriate. My Trix has nothing to do with the silly cereal rabbit.

From a distance, I watch as Jeremy uses his fingers like a comb. That's a habit Jeremy's picked up to get the blonde curtain of hair out of his dull green eyes. He pretends to look at anything on the spotless floor, gum, elephants, just about anything else. I watch as he shuffles his black Skechers back and forth. He places his palms on his knee. His hands are caked with dried blood.

They'd read him his rights in front of me. D.N.A. was authorized and collected. I watched when he was photographed nearly naked from head to toe. There were bruises and scars I hadn't seen before. I had been aware of some of the psychological wounds he'd gotten while living with his mother and stepfather. But the other scars were shocking.

They'd taken enough evidence to convict O.J. Simpson again. The detectives recorded Trix's confession the way he described it. It was a horrible event.

Jeremy inhaled long and hard before they walked him down the hall. He looked fresh in his assigned white papery jumpsuit.

They'd kept his bloody jeans and the old school Metallica Tee shirt I'd given him for his birthday. Forensics would need his clothing and shoes to take a second look at the spattered blood patterns.

"See you soon, son," I said. But there's no response. I could only hear the flip-flop noise of jailhouse sandals.

I shed some serious tears on my way back to my hellhole apartment. It's about a twenty minute ride. It's the only kind of rent a former druggie can afford. When your life is a turnstile of good and bad, a revolving door of in and outs, that's what you get, kids. I don't need anyone to remind me that all my bad boy shit caused me and all of my loved ones a lot of grief. After all, a small part of my conscience hasn't been damaged.

Late the following day, I found myself reading the local rag at my favorite donut shop over coffee in Citrus Heights. There's this article in the Sacramento Bee. The headline is "The biggest horror fest since Richard Chase."

Richard Chase had been named the Vampire Killer. He was a predecessor to Jeffrey Dahmer.

I nearly choke on the last of my maple bar.

~

I'd heard about all of Jeremy's new cages. Jeremy and I had briefly discussed all the new cages he'd built in the backyard of stepfather's house. At the time, he had maybe three or four hutches.

According to the Sacramento Bee, the thick wired cages, all twelve of them, were part of the crime scene. Hell, my Ex's entire house was a crime scene, from the bedroom where she'd been tied up all the way out to the street. There were a few photos to go along with the short article.

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Here is how it started, a young boy saving rabbits. It was the week after Easter in 2006.

We'd driven from South Sacramento to Ancil Hoffman Park. It's a county park with deep woods. The park is named after a local gentleman who'd distinguished himself.

Ancil Hoffman Park is considered the jewel of the American River Parkway. The American River meanders north and south through Sacramento County for 23 miles before it joins the blue-collared Sacramento.

Once joined, the Sacramento River twists and contours through the delta as it feels its way into San Francisco Bay.

Marci and I loved the weekend outings with our only child, Jeremy.

After lunch, Jeremy and I would typically walk through the woods near the golf course. After we'd reached the nature center, we spent some time observing the rescued Great Horned Owl. It had a broken wing on the mend. The park rangers were taking care of it.

We trekked an extra half mile from the nature center to the river. It was peaceful and quiet that day, a few deer, some wild turkeys, squirrels, nothing to write home about. We skipped a few stones across the river.

On our way back to our picnic blanket, up the trail, Jeremy spotted something under an oak tree. It was maybe fifty feet away. As we got closer, we noticed it was a rabbit. It wasn't just any rabbit. It was a vast, white Easter rabbit.

Jeremy crouched low and petted the trembling thing. He'd gotten really close, down on his knees. The hapless thing had clearly been released into the gorgeous park after Easter. I'd seen this before.

Our rabbit was just another innocent rabbit, just like the other fragile creatures dumped in the park by loving parents, loving parents who are damned tired of cleaning up after the rabbits, all the pellets.

"Please, pops, can we bring it home?"

I'm not one to pick up after someone else's bad choices or mistakes. Mine keep me plenty busy.

"Son, you know your mom ain't going to have anything to do with this, right?"

"Mom will let me keep it, I promise, pops. She always gives in. She feels guilty because she works all the time."

Looking back, to be honest, that's the last time I saw Jeremy wear a real smile.

"What the hell, son? Let's give it a try?"

"Really, papa, I love you. You've got balls."

And so, Jeremy swooped up the small floppy-eared wonder. The bunny was all eyes and wet nose.

We slowly walked back to the picnic area. We had to plan. Soon enough, Jeremy presented the abandoned rabbit to his pissed off mother.

I thought the thing would keep my son occupied, that it might somehow relieve some of the loneliness Jeremy felt inside, at home and school. The kind of loneliness a sensitive child can be infected with for not having a sister, brother, or close friends.

Jeremy is smart. He knew his mother didn't want to have any more children with me. Of course, it was my fault. I own that. I wasn't a prize. A dark cloud hovered over our family.

After a good amount of verbal arm twisting, Martha relented. She'd agreed to go along with the rabbit experiment. She was reasonable back then. Drugs were just a hobby.

The following week, most evenings turned into purchasing the needed odds and ends at Home Depot and watching Jeremy build his first rabbit hutch. Google and YouTube provided Jeremy with instructions.

Jeremy used scrap wood and fasteners I'd littered about on the workbench in the small garage. Luckily, I'd discovered this leftover partial roll of chicken wire in the garage's makeshift loft. The chicken cage wire had been left there by the previous renter.

We'd purchase rabbit food. At PetSmart, Jeremy insisted on a cheap metal watering bowl. At Goodwill. Jeremy demanded protection, so I bought a small Master lock.

Pop's, "I'm concerned about hawks, coyotes, even cats," he'd said.

There was no way in hell Marci was going to let the rabbit stay in the garage. The garage had become a marijuana dispensary before it was legal. Jeremy would have to keep his cage in the backyard.

Two weeks passed. By now, Jeremy had gotten into the rhythm of feeding his pet rabbit and cleaning up all the rabbit droppings. It didn't take long before he'd twisted our arms to go back to the park since he'd had such a good time that week after Easter Sunday.

After K.F.C. and slurps of gravy and biscuits, Jeremy tugged me up on my feet. He insisted that we hike down to the river again. The greenbelt along the American River is mostly oak forest.

We'd ended up under the same oak tree where he'd found R-1. Jeremy looked sad. It was as if he was at the supermarket and would simply pull a carrot off a shelf, in his case, a rabbit with a carrot. He must have been hoping a rabbit, like Jesus, would appear out of nowhere, better yet, out of a cave, but there was nothing insight. Nothing unless you count the coolest of breezes, breezes that wafted up off the cool back of the American River?

We'd made it to the water's edge, near the skipping stones. We skipped a few. Jeremy chatted up a storm. He was on one of his too few and in between talking jags. I agreed to take another trail on our way back.

Jeremy spotted it. It wasn't more than twenty ahead on the trail. It was rust colored red. I attempted to hold onto my boy with everything I had, but he was strong with too much love. He'd forced himself free. By the time I quickened my step to the horrific scene, Jeremy was balling like a newborn calf at the top of his lungs. It's the wailing you do when you've lost a child.

Just off the pathway, there was a patch of blood stained fur and meat.

It was an empty rabbit skull. Less meat than what's left after you've finished picking the flesh out of the body of a crab, more phlegm than guts. There was fur and part of a dirty foot, more bowels, now dry and dull, half eaten by coyotes and ravens. There was a bloody cotton ball. Under closer inspection, it was the rabbit's tail.

Snot bubbles percolated out of Jeremy's nose and mouth. He'd sobbed himself into near hysteria. His scalp was sweaty and wet, as if he'd been fighting at school again. He was shaking. He turned into a coiled child in a fetal position. He was red faced and angry, homicidal.

"Why, what, who, dad?" he'd said.

"Son," I grabbed him by his bloody hand, "let's go, Jeremy. Your mother is waiting?"

"No, I never want to go home again, pops."

"Jeremy," I was firmer.

"Let's go now. There are coyotes down here, along the river. They have homes in the clay banks and fields up and over the levy. They eat anything they can catch, even cats, lost small dogs, dead salmon."

Jeremy and I set off to the picnic area. It was mostly dragging him along. We had another 100 feet before we'd arrive.

I was certain Marci would be ready to go home. She needed an upper in the afternoon. That's when the damned thing appeared. It was less than ten feet in front of us, under some sagebrush.

The tiny animal was skinny and shaking, hyper venting in the coolness of the shade. Its beady eyes looked weary. We approached with caution.

"Dad looks like this one was pure white too. But it's much smaller. He looks so thin, dad, poor thing."

Jeremy's mother was anxious. Her senses were alert. In the afternoons, she'd had X-ray vision and superhero hearing. Anxiety can do that. She was waving for us to hurry up.

Jeremy and I bent over to look closer. I could see Marci signaling from a distance for the two of us to hurry the hell up.

"You see your mother over there, Jeremy?" I pointed.

"I do, pops."

Well, son, we can't take it home."

I lowered my head, knowing we should have stayed home.

"Please, dad, it's going to die out here if we leave it? You've seen how a lot of these Easter bunnies end up? Please, dad, I won't ask you to come back to the park for a long time, I promise? I won't be able to fall asleep again if we don't save it."

Back then, I told Trix that it was mainly the coyotes that killed the pets near the park. I'd researched it online. It's not that they are vicious. I get that. They are hungry. They are no different than any other of the park's apex predators. Coyotes just wanted to survive like us.

I'd seen other Easter bunnies on our second trip to the park. I also saw a lot of dead Easter bunnies. I wasn't about to show Jeremy.

One had an arrow through its skull. I saw another that had been skinned alive and gutted. Another Easter rabbit was hung with a noose under a small tree. I was confident that human apex predators had done the dirty work.

Bottom line, all those years ago, Marci and I agreed to let Jeremy save another hapless Easter rabbit. We'd let him save a perfect creature that some careless parent had dumped in the woods to be eaten. Jeremy named him R-2.

All the Easter children say, "Please, please, mommy, can we get one? We'll take good care of it. We will feed it and give it love. We will clean up after it, please, please, daddy?" Children are children, after all. It's up to us to teach them responsibility and patience.

Easter rabbits are made to make busy parents feel good. Our precious Jack and Jill think they are damned good Easter presents. After all, they are gifts that keep on giving.

But, after the children stop caring for them, the Easter bunnies become a pain in the ass. And so there is more relief than guilt when these parents sneak out after dark and dump their collective rabbits in the nearest woods. In truth, any location will do, as long as it's far enough away from home and their lowly conscience: local parks, swamps, someone's yard, any remote location away from any responsibility.

On their way home, the responsible, doting parents convince themselves that their Easter rabbits will live happily ever after. Indeed the hapless things will be spared the tooth and claw of the jungle?

Of course, the kids never notice that their loving pets are gone. There's school the next day, homework, sporting activities, anything. And, of course, they'll be off to soccer or maybe for some skating on the weekend. There's always that visit to the mall waiting for them, a Marvel Movie perhaps. Hell, even homework looks more appealing than caring for their little eating shit machines?

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Once the kids at school found out about Jeremy's concern for Easter rabbits, they started to tease and bully him.

"O.M.G., all the lions, tigers, and bears out in the park, Jeremy, how scary?" Haley Thompson was relentless.

Andy Jenkins, the kid down the street, asked Jeremy, "Shit-for-brains, don't you eat meat?"

"Jeremy, you are weak and pathetic, Easter rabbits? Give me a damned break?" said Kyle Jennings, the kid that used to be Jeremy's best friend had said.

Knuckle-dragging Johnny chimed in, "Coyotes, my ass, you dip-shit, there's no such predator's in the park?"

"My father says they hold up on the banks of the river. I trust him!" Jeremy's face went red.

"From now on, Jeremy, we'll keep calling you Trix. Only it won't be because you are a badass skater. It will be because we think you are silly. Silly wabbit, Trix are for kids. Remember that old YouTube cereal commercial, Jeremy? Well, now you are Trix the silly wabbit, dude."

After what Haley said, the growing horde of eavesdropping kids howled. They'd turned into a pack of hungry hyenas. In front of this growing throng of kids, his close friends yelled, "Trix, hay tricks. Trix are for kids, Trix!"

Embarrassed, Jeremy ran all the way home with his backpack, toting his beloved longboard over his shoulder.

That night, after dark, Jeremy ran to the park. At the top of the hill, on Tarshes Drive, Jeremy soaked his skateboard, squirting it good from top to bottom. After, he struck a match, sending the skateboard down the steep hill.

At first, the skateboard wobbled, eventually straightening out.

Jeremy cried and fumed at his beloved rolling pyre.

His beloved pirate ship was altered forever. He'd created a Norse funeral ship.

After the longest time, the skateboard shot into a thicket of scrubs, setting the isolated bramble on fire.

Jeremy had gone from Tricks to Trix, the rabbit. He'd learn to despise his new name. An exquisite pain scorched through his heart as true as any arrow shot from a crossbow.

Over the next several years, all the cool kids insisted on shaming Jeremy into the dark recesses of silence. In a cyclone of building madness, all he had left was his rabbits, his caged rabbits, and his shrinking world.

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Since I had been placed in jail again, Children's Protective Services chose Marci over me, mainly because she was better at hiding her demons.

In 2010, I found myself divorced and incarcerated again.

Marci and I were done. She divorced me while I was in jail. I was left to face my demons alone. Somehow I'd begun to figure things out. I had to choose between getting sober or living a short life.

Soon after our divorce Marci tied the knot with this beefy guy named Jack. Jack made it clear that he hated children, claiming none of his own.

Hanging around Jack and his mother's toxicity caused Jeremy to grow silent with anger. As if his conflicts at school weren't enough? And now, he was terrorized at home too. It hadn't taken long before Marci turned into Jack's coconspirator. When a user and a dealer live together, it doesn't take long until the bottom falls out.

It's my understanding, letters, relatives, year after year, that Jeremy continued to rescue the abandoned rabbits, those damned after-market Easter bunnies that no one claimed.

About the time I got out, Jeremy had turned sixteen. He was a sophomore in high school.

Once paroled, Marci let me take my moody Trix to Chuck E. Cheese, mostly on Sundays. While there, he'd pretend to be happy. As happy as you can feel with other divorced kids eating pizza?

Chuck E. Cheese is the perfect meet-up, a good custody exchange location for divorced parents. It's the kind of place you don't have to work too hard to prove you have little in common with your child. It's easy to watch a teen from a distance while convincing yourself you're a good father.

Occasionally, we'd enjoy a giant pizza once I got Jeremy to sit at the table. Sometimes, I couldn't get the kid to shut up. Everything poured out of his mouth all at once.

There was a time or two when he sounded too excited and faked being happy. The things he'd say were fascinating, maybe a little disturbing. But hey, I'm not a psychologist. In fact, I'm a screwed-up father. What the hell do I know for sure?

And yet, how could I ever have known that evil was heading toward us all. That it was just around the corner.

Trix showed me the old cigarette burns on his arms and back. They'd mostly healed. But I sensed the sinuous scars over his heart would continue to grow.

His mother was adamant. She'd said, "Jeremy burned himself. I think it's something like self harm?"

I wasn't buying that crap. My hunch was that his stepfather was frustrated. After all, he hates kids. Jeremy has HDHD. I was certain that didn't play well in their marriage. My hunch was that Jack had placed significant effort into gaining control over Marci. Maybe it would be easier without Jeremy in the picture?

By the time Jeremy finished his sophomore year, he'd constructed at least 13 rabbit hutches. Each enclosure held two to three of the abandoned Easter rabbits.

Most of the updates regarding Jeremy's care came through holiday cards. She'd send the cards on special occasions. The formality was a way of keeping her distance. The occasional brief note always included a thin veneer of lies describing her happiness in her new marriage, the stability and all.

Her husband was a mechanic. He worked a lot. I was sure she wanted more out of life.

Marci had written, "But it's not like he's in prison, right?" That one hurt.

~

The school psychologist called me once. I'd just delivered a load of mattresses in Omaha.

"Please encourage your son to attend therapy. He really needs it."

"Therapy," I asked?

"Sorry about that, sir. I thought you knew. Your son, Jeremy, told me about a reoccurring dream he's been having."

"Let me guess," I'd said, "does it involve locomotives?"

"Yes, so you've heard about the dream?"

"Yes, he called it a nightmare. In his nightmare, he's been tied to train these tracks by a monster. He watches how this vintage steam engine barrels toward him."

"Go on?"

"Well, I'll do my best. The locomotive is racing toward him at full throttle. It's shiny and black. It has a blood red emblem like a hood ornament."

"What the hell?"

Caleb, the part time school therapist, can't hide his excitement. "Well, Jeremy always wakes up screaming. Almost conscious, he can hear someone else's voice leave his mouth. The voice yells death and destruction."

"Jesus Christ," I yell!

He screams, Mr. Burns, sometimes during our brief sessions. He screams, "Hurry the hell up and run over me. Turn me into body parts."

"Holy crap, doctor, that's some dark shit."

"Yes. Mr. Burns, I'm not a doctor, by the way. I'm a licensed therapist with a Masters's degree in social work. My take, Mr. Burns, is that Jeremy is under too much pressure. He's going to explode someday."

After our brief discussion, I get the chills from an icy wind in the future.

~

The day of the massacre was 2014.

Jeremy was a junior in high school. Trix or Jeremy had returned home. He'd been to Ancil Hoffman Park again. It was on a cloudy Saturday just a week after Easter.

He'd picked up another abandoned Easter rabbit.

From what I'd learned, Jeremy walked into his house. He was carrying a portable animal cage. His mother, Marci, and his stepfather, Jack, had been seated in an adjacent room.

The house smelled like a gymnasium. This meant Jack had put his hands on Marci again.

Jeremy walked past the family room doorway. He was headed straight toward the sliding patio door and the backyard. He glanced over. He observed his mother's black eyes. Dried mascara had streaked and dried down her pretty face. She'd been crying. Her lips appeared puffy and purple. There was a cut.

Jack lay lounging on his favorite oily easy chair.

He shot a sneer at Jeremy. Jeremy gave him the stink eye. Jack couldn't contain himself. He chuckled under his heavy breath. He was drunk and high again.

"Got you another wabbit, hey boy. Don't you know Trix are for kids?"

Jeremy froze in place. He watched as his mother stiffened her back, sitting straight up in her T.V. chair. Her face was a jack-in-the-box about to explode.

"Stick that mangy piece of shit outback with all the rest, Trixie, hehe! You're getting to be quite the hoarder, ain't you, boy?"

Jeremy had an excess inventory of his stepfather's bullshit and bullying. So he kept walking. He didn't want to get into it again with the house troll.

Jeremy turned away. He'd walk away from the dysfunctional interaction. He'd head to the backyard and the quiet of the rabbit hutches.

By now, some kids at school had quit the hurtful name calling, if only to save their pathetic lives. Jeremy had grown tall and strong. Apparently, stepfather Jack hadn't noticed.

Jeremy opened the sliding door. He stepped onto the patio. He turned around. Facing the house, he rolled the patio door shut, locking in all the discourse.

After he began to walk toward the cages, halfway across the lawn, Jeremy raised his head.

His stepfather Jack had pushed all the wrong buttons this time.

The rabbit hutches, up against the backyard fence, appeared disheveled.

As he approached the cages, the small white rabbit inside the portable carrier began to thrash and squeal.

Jeremy stopped in his tracks and looked over all the cages. That's when sanity shape-shifted. It had turned a toad in his skull. The toad wanted out.

The tiny Easter Bunny in Jeremy's carrier gnawed at the door lock, the hinges, it chiseled at the plastic.

Jeremy seemed to float. Now directly in front of the cages, he dropped the portable carrier. The carrier's cage door opened. The tiny rabbit streaked out of site.

He looked left. Jeremy looked to the right.

Jeremy stood transfixed.

He'd arrived just in time for the Mad Hatter's tea party. Somehow, he'd have to go back in time. He'd need to reconstruct reality so he could fit all the disarticulated body parts of his rabbits back together.

Jeremy heard the shrill train whistle in his head. But he wasn't coming out of another nightmare. This was reality. It was the pesky locomotive again. The train that sped through the worst of his nightmares, only this time it was real.

Jeremy watched as the locomotive rounded the familiar corner, the one in his recurrent dreams. The sound was harsh and mechanical, the whistle a blazing fire alarm.

The evil conductor's bloody face grew even longer. The rabbit's skin was sweaty drenched leather. Somehow, Jeremy was able to see inside this thing's head.

Shortly after, his locomotive's pressure cooker exploded. Everything in Jeremy's world ignited. The only thing left inside his skull was toad shit and red vapor.

~

The Sacramento County detectives took extended breaks. There weren't enough vomit bags. A police Chaplin and a county therapist counseled the crime scene detectives. They were sickened. What they'd found in the backyard was a massacre. But it was much more. It was an emphatic statement.

They'd tagged and taken pictures of every rabbit body part: smelly guts, severed heads with vacant and dull Easter eyes, disjointed legs, an unlucky rabbit's foot or two.

Shit and piss, the stench of stool and blood permeated the crisp spring air.

They'd taken photographs. They shot a video of Jeremy's stepfather. Every last piece of him they'd discovered in the different cages. He'd been dismembered with a reciprocal saw, the cord still wrapped around what was his neck.

"Jesus that kid Jeremy was systematic." Jake had seen a lot of crime scenes.

"Yup, and look," Connor's pointed. "This kid, Jeremy, took the time to pin all the white poster board on the rabbit hutch doors."

Using a black Sharpie, Jeremy had written, "Silly wabbit, Trix are for kids."

~

It's 2022. We've seen a lot of ups and downs over the years. But things seem to be getting better.

Today I'm visiting my son, Jeremy. He's serving his time at New Sacramento prison.

But for faith and hope, It wouldn't be worth the trip.

I typically visit Jeremy on Sundays.

Since he was born, I've come to believe there was always an open cell door waiting for him. It waited for the longest time.

Jeremy told me once that he enjoys the cooling touch of the cell door's chipped teal paint. His touch is no longer wanted by his mother or the rest of the family.

Jeremy is ashamed of what he's done. But he's not apologetic. He told me once that his hands remind him of decaying flesh, not fit for touching. He tells me, like in Macbeth, he can't get his hands clean enough.

I visit him on Sundays because he seems calmer on Sundays. He rarely talks. I know he doesn't mind the visits. They're mainly for me.

After visiting hours, somehow I drag Jeremy's clumsy ghost of a heart along with me. It's chained to my ankle. Our relationship has become a ball and chain.

I drag his iron heart out of the visitor's room, clear down this long dark corridor. I drag the heavy thing through the security door. Hell, I pull it all the way out of the exit gate.

Eventually, I reach my car. I unlock the door. Somehow I'm able to unhook the ball and chain, at least temporarily. I watch as it turns into a black balloon with string. It begins to float away. I watch until it disappears into the stratosphere. Only then do I get inside.

I flop down into the driver's seat. Exhausted I contemplate for a moment.

Part of me is sad. I know deep down my son will never live long enough to get rid of his feelings of guilt. And yet, in a sick way, part of me is envious. Why? Because my son, like vampires will live forever. Maybe he won't exist in physical form, but he will surely haunt the dreams of children and their parents each Easter and for centuries to come.

After all, my son is the Rabbit King.

I wake. Inside the car, the sky is dark.

I push back into the seat and start the car.

I can't help but wonder out loud which of us truly needs the grace and comfort of the other.

The End