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Rabbit Wrangling

Michaela Barnett

creative nonfiction

The weeping willow that housed bunny school rested on a small divot on the north side of our country pond. The willow's branches, clad in fronds as soft as feathers, swept the ground in a circle around its trunk and created the perfect summer fort to train the baby rabbits born on our farm that spring. On that soft carpet of grass, I learned the art of rabbit taming from the school's founder and headmistress herself, my older sister Kelsey. It felt like a fearsome honor, as I was the youngest rabbit wrangling neophyte since bunny school's inception.

As the youngest of four children, my earliest task on our farm was the care of our show rabbits. My older sisters were tasked with the more laborious chores of horse care and barn maintenance, which they completed without complaint while I grouched about my own work. They toiled in the horse stalls, shoveling manure from the sawdust bedding laid the day before, freshly soiled with the acrid smell of urine. They lugged five-gallon buckets of water, threw hay from the upper loft, distributed feed, brought the horses in from pasture, and swept the long rubber mats that lined the inner corridor of the barn. Meanwhile, I dawdled, meandering in and out of the rabbit hutches, knowing that the time I spent watering and feeding our small pets was time I didn't have to spend on the more difficult and dirty tasks. I dreaded the day that came once a month when I would have to strip the layers of rabbit dung from underneath their pens and scatter lime and fresh sawdust in place of the removed manure. When this day inevitably arrived, I cajoled and complained and waited sufficiently long for my sisters to finish their own chores and help me with my once-monthly tribulation. I was a rabbit governess, after all, and I belonged in the sweet-smelling schoolyard training my wards, not in the dark corner of the barn, scraping out poop.

The real magic occurred only when the nitty-gritty of daily care was finished and, even then, only in seasons. In the months that ushered spring into summer, we trained our rabbits for the months that would pull summer into fall. My sister, chief rabbit wrangler, would slip out to the cover of the weeping willow to ready the school for the day's instruction. I would come a few minutes later, bearing babies softer than smooth velvet tucked anywhere I could carry them, cradled under my arms and balanced beneath my chin. If the sheer quantity exceeded my capacity to embrace, I would fetch a wicker basket and emerge from the barn, a perfect image of country childhood nostalgia with my basket full of bunnies.

The first lesson of the curriculum obliged the babies to recognize the weeping willow as their home base whenever outside of their hutch. To this end, we started at the willow and each day placed them farther and farther away, encouraging them with treats and cheers until they bounded back to their schoolmarms and mates. Before long, I would no longer need to carry our students to class. I could set them down right outside the barn and they would lope the hundred feet, without any coaching, to where my sister waited. In our self-proclaimed schoolyard, we taught our young charges to hop in a line around the base of the trunk, bunny-butt to nose. When they accomplished this (after weeks of instruction), we proclaimed them playing "Ring Around the Rosie" and would cheer our own teaching aptitude. Some of our rabbits were tree climbers, a novelty in the leporine world. When we placed them in a crook of the willow, the slightest bit of upward movement was touted as proof of their special abilities and merited extra attention during free time.

By the time our babies turned to adolescents, it was fair time. Each fall, my three sisters and I donned our white medical coats, embroidered with dark green four leaf clovers and club affiliations, and swept the county and state fair's Dutch and Mini Rex divisions, as well as each age bracket's showmanship category. It is rumored in some counties of Ohio that families with children of similar age turned to showing other breeds, so as not to compete against the four formidable sisters. Victory was sweet and filled me with a childish pride I could not yet disguise in polite deferrals, but the county check with earnings gained from championships which came weeks later was sweeter. It was the first money I ever earned, but the satisfaction of that first paycheck held none of the riches I gained under the branches of the weeping willow, playing with my older sister and a troupe of baby bunnies.