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THE MAN WHO RAISED RABBITS

There was no traffic in Ivanhoe by the time Si Franklin fed and watered his rabbits and, slipping through the side gate, headed downtown. He didn't go through the house because the preacher was in there talking to his wife, Ostie, about the boy.

He didn't care for preachers. He had only called this one to the house as a last resort. Ostie would listen to a preacher when she wouldn't listen to her own husband. They had to do something about Isaac.

Si made his way along the roadside, an old man in a black coat who walked with a cane. When he passed the grade school, he noticed the school children were all indoors. Most mornings the playground was full of screaming, red-faced children playing ball and beating each other up. Isaac was noisy that way, thought Si. This morning the school yard was quiet except for Old Glory and the state flag with the bear flapping in the wind.

Si liked quiet places. The back yard with his rabbits. The Tack Room. He knew he would find his friend Jimmy at the Tack Room now. Jimmy practically lived there. He would sit all day and play dominoes or checkers, nursing a single draft for hours. Whenever he felt like it, Jimmy took his nap there in the afternoon, seated against the wall. It was an old man's tavern, especially during the Series when a black and white Philco was brought out from beneath the bar and dusted off. More and more, it was Si's tavern, too.

Si felt himself growing warm from his walk and the two sweaters he wore underneath his wool jacket. He stopped outside the post office and peered in to see if the mail had come. Thornton, the postmaster, gazed seriously out at the street, pretending not to see Si. The checks were late this month, and it irritated Si. He had things to buy, wire to mend the rabbit hutch. He would have to charge his order at the feed store.

There had been bacon in the ice box that morning. A thick slab,

mostly fat. Si had put four pieces in the bottom of a pan and thought, if you fed bacon to a rabbit that had just thrown a litter, she wouldn't eat her young. Why was that?

Wanting something special to add to the eggs, he had taken an onion from on top of the ice box and chopped it up until tears came to his eyes and he cut the table cloth. He had stopped for a moment, staring bleary-eyed at the sampler Ostie had hanging over the door. As long as they had been married there had been a sampler in the kitchen that read "God Bless This House." And now there was another one hanging next to it, a new one with a couple that looked like George and Martha Washington standing over a rhyme.

Women's faults are many,
Men have only two.
Everything they say
And everything they do.

Si threw the onion into the skillet with the eggs, making a note not to give any of the big pieces to the boy.

"You cooking?" asked Ostie as she brought Isaac into the kitchen. "Si?"

"I guess I can fry a few eggs." He was sorry for the tone of his voice but he didn't apologize. Not first thing in the morning.

"Grandpa's cookin'!" the boy crowed.

"Granpa's burning the bacon," said Ostie. "Watch this baby while I get dressed."

"God Bless This House," red the sampler above the door.

"God damn that woman," said Si.

He had heard a rabbit scream in the middle of the night. The old buck. Lying in bed he had listened for it again, half prepared to get up and take a look, but hoping he wouldn't hear anything more. He had pulled the blankets closer against the cold.

Si hadn't been able to fall asleep again, and he'd found himself thinking about the buck, about the day that he bought him from a man at the fairgrounds. Eight years ago—it surprised him to count it up. The buck was older than Si had realized. Could be that was why the does were kindling such small litters. This last time the younger doe hadn't even been pregnant, unless she had done away with her young before Si had a chance to check her. It seemed unlikely. There hadn't been any blood on the wire.

The boy liked those rabbits. Isaac begged to go along every morning to feed them and change their water. He always wanted to carry the coffee can full of green pellets that rattled when he walked, sounding like rain on a tin roof.

"You're not eating those, are you?" Si asked the boy each morning. Isaac was only two and had eaten some of the rabbit food once. The pellets must have tasted . . . green, thought Si. He hadn't interfered with the boy's curiosity that morning, not even when Isaac decided to try the little round turds that fell through the wire onto the ground. Isaac had made a sour face, had tried to spit them out. When he began to cry, Si meant to hush him up but Ostie heard and came out the back door. Seeing the green stain about Isaac's lips, she railed at Si, Isaac cried louder yet, and Si finally had to go to the house and bring the boy a glass of milk and a graham cracker.

"Damn Kid."

Si stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Through the weeds of a vacant lot, he could see the back of the Baptist church. The preacher would be telling Ostie now, making her accept that the two of them were too old. He'd show her the brochures for that place down in Bakersfield. Quote some scripture. Ostie wouldn't be speaking when Si got back home.

Si belched painfully, wishing he hadn't put onions in the eggs. He hoped Jimmy was waiting for him in the Tack Room.

"You're late."

Jimmy sat in the sun filtering through the front window, his thick glasses reflecting the light. He wore his sparse white hair cut short so he wouldn't have to comb it.

"I couldn't get away," said Si, pulling up a chair. He made a face and exchanged the chair for one with four sound legs. "Had to tend to the rabbits."

Jimmy smiled. "How's the old buck?"

"Fine." Si shuffled the dominoes about the table and wiped away a ring of water with his sleeve. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Ok," said Jimmy. "For 74."

"77, you liar."

"I forget."

"Let's play," said Si.

The daytime bartender brought two cups of coffee to the table. Soon the only sound in the Tack Room was the click, click of the large white dominoes that Jimmy brought downtown with him every day in a black cloth bag. His bones, he called them. He wouldn't let you line the pieces up on end and childishly tip them over in one long rush.

Si tended to think of dominoes as a child's game. He remembered playing with his daughter the first summer she'd spent with her hip in the brace.

Evelyn wore the brace for five years. Ostie took her shopping for new clothes the day the doctor told her she could take off the brace for good. She hardly limped. Only a little, when she got tired. Ostie wanted her to look pretty to the boys at school. He should have put a stop to that then, should never have spoiled her over that hip.

"I decided, Jimmy." Si played the 5-6 on the end of a long train of dominoes. He thought about cheating and saying it was the double five, but didn't. Jimmy couldn't read without a magnifying glass, but no one could cheat him at dominoes.

"What did you decide?" asked Jimmy, staring at his bones.

"I'm sending Isaac away. Down to Bakersfield. They got that home down there. Place is supposed to be clean. The preacher's telling Ostie about it this morning."

"Which preacher?"

"The Baptist."

"Don't know him," said Jimmy. He turned his empty gaze out the window and looked intently across the street, although Si knew he couldn't see past the edge of the near sidewalk.

Si drew a tile from the bone yard. "I suppose you think I'm doing the wrong thing."

"Doesn't matter what I think."

"I can't raise him. I'm too old."

Jimmy nodded as he tallied his score in large x's on a paper napkin.

"I'd be almost a hundred before the boy was old enough to vote," said Si.

"You're pretty old," said Jimmy. "Awful old."

Si looked up from his dominoes. "Not as old as some folks I know." He let himself glare into Jimmy's eyes.

"You know what your trouble is, Si?" Jimmy took off his glasses and polished them on his shirt front. There were dents on the bridge of his nose that looked sore and red. "You're a wrongheaded son of a bitch," said Jimmy.

"Well, you haven't got any answers." Si played his domino and drew another.

At noon Si walked across the street to the cafe where he ordered hamburgers and milk shakes for himself and Jimmy. He told the girl behind the counter to hold the onions on the burgers.

"You got a date?" she asked, winking. Somebody ought to smack her, thought Si.

While the hamburgers were being grilled, Si walked down to the post office to see if his check had come. Only one window was open and he had to stand in line. He leaned against the long metal table, reading the vital statistics and the crimes listed on a sheaf of wanted posters. An angry young face reminded him of Evelyn, although Evelyn was older than that now. Evelyn was thirty-four, not so young anymore. Her forehead had been creased just so when she'd last stood in the driveway with her bags, waiting for her friend to come and drive her to the bus station.

Si read the poster. The face on the wall was wanted for tampering with the mail. Evelyn's poster would have read: fornication, child abandonment.

He stopped and got the burgers on his way back to the Tack Room. Jimmy was dozing off when Si re-entered the taven, and in the end Si took most of Jimmy's lunch out in the alley and tossed it over the fence to a collie bitch that lived in the next yard. He had hardly been able to finish his own lunch, used to having Ostie fix sandwiches for him and the boy. He could picture Isaac in the high chair, a dish towel tied around his neck for a bib. Si wondered if they had waited for him to come home.

He raised white rabbits, New Zealand Whites. He had thought at times about experimenting with another breed but had always decided against it. Colorful rabbits were only harder to kill.

He had brought the first rabbit home when Evelyn was nine, a black and white Giant Checker with one droopy ear. One of the men at work had given the rabbit to him. Si had built a makeshift hutch for the doe out of odds and ends laying around the garage, and he'd told Evelyn the rabbit wasn't to be a pet. But Evelyn had named her anyway, would spend hours stroking the rabbit, tracing the black and white pattern of her fur with one finger.

Twice that summer Si carried the rabbit in a cardboard box to a commercial breeder's near Tulare. When she failed to conceive the second time, he told Ostie not to buy anything for Sunday dinner. He tried to ignore the way his wife frowned at him.

Evelyn came home from Sunday School as he was finishing up the butchering. She had known all along it was going to happen, but she cried anyway. Si was stern with her, then ended up taking her into his lap to comfort her, ignoring the way her brace pressed into his legs.

"Good lord, she was just a rabbit," he had told her. He felt his daughter hated him.

"Just a rabbit," he repeated, rocking her back and forth. He only

raised white rabbits after that.

Si and Jimmy played cribbage in the afternoon, and Si began to win when he could keep his mind off Isaac. After taking three hands in a row, he offered to buy his friend a beer.

"Why not," said Jimmy, shuffling the cards slowly.

The bartender set two drafts on the bar and punched the keys on his cash register. Si handed him a creased dollar bill. He counted the money remaining in his wallet and wondered again if his check had arrived at the post office.

Jimmy sat at the table, leaning slightly over the cribbage board, his hands in his lap. Si placed the beer in front of him and waited for Jimmy to drink.

Jimmy closed his eyes and ran his tongue over his lips. "Help me to the wash room, will you."

"You sick?" Si set his beer down without tasting it. "You haven't eaten anything all day."

"I'm quite aware of when I do and do not eat," said Jimmy.

Si leaned over his friend. He smelled a sour odor that reminded him of hospitals and used clothing. "Come on," he said softly, drawing Jimmy's chair back from the table. "I'll help you."

He steadied Jimmy to the back of the tavern and into the men's room. Locking the door behind them Si sat Jimmy down in one of the stalls. "Can I get you anything?" he asked. "You want a drink of water?"

"Hand me some paper towels," said Jimmy. Si felt his throat constrict from the smell of urine and old tobacco as he went to the sink for the towels. He turned on the tap and looked up into the mirror. Jimmy sat on the toilet behind him, watching him. Si was alarmed at how white Jimmy's face had turned.

"You didn't pass any blood?"

"No," said Jimmy. "I'm all right." He took the paper towels from Si, folded them in half and wiped the sweat away from his forehead.

Si returned to his place at the sink. He combed his hair, then used his handkerchief, then combed his hair again, allowing Jimmy all the time he needed. Si helped him with the buttons on his trousers, old and at least three sizes too big.

Jimmy tried to flush the paper towels down the toilet. "I don't know why you're in such a damn hurry to get old," he said.

The Collie Si had fed earlier whined at him from behind a redwood fence. Two boys on bicycles raced down the alley, blue fenders flashing in the sun, and the Collie ran along the fence barking and snapping at them. Si remembered the bicycle he had bought Evelyn the summer her hip got bad. It had been blue, too, but she had never learned to ride it. You had to bend your leg to ride a bike.

He wanted to go home and lie down. That was what old people did in the afternoon. But he wasn't ready to face Ostie about the boy. He walked toward the packing house, wondering if anybody he knew would be there. The men would be quitting soon, and when they quit work, five o'clock, he would walk home just like he had for the eighteen years he had worked for Sunkist. Ostie would have dinner ready and there would be a newspaper. He would feed his rabbits.

He remembered the day a boy named Toland had been crushed to death on the loading dock. Just a young kid, not very bright. The whole place had shut down for the rest of the day. It was the only day Si could remember getting home from work early.

He had walked up the driveway that afternoon, noticing that the car was gone. Thursdays Ostie visited her mother at the rest home. The front door was locked. Si wasn't sure if he had a key to the front door on his key ring, and he had to try several before he found the right one.

As he stepped into the living room he heard the back screen door shut, and he wondered if Evelyn were home. He thought that he smelled cigarette smoke, too. He went through the house slowly until he came to her room.

"Daddy," she said, red faced, as he swung the door open. She was dressing, her bed unmade. "What are you doing home?"

"There was an accident," he told her, thinking, she was only fifteen. He wanted to tell her about the accident and he wanted to ask her what the hell she was doing, undressed in the middle of the afternoon. He could do neither. She asked him to leave the room so she could finish getting dressed. As always he did as she asked. He had sat down heavily in the kitchen, suddenly too tired to even pour himself a beer.

Si kicked the packing house fence. He thought of Isaac and the Baptist home in Bakersfield and his daughter who wasn't coming back. The five o'clock siren blasted from the firehouse, and Si could hear the conveyor belts inside the packing house shut down.

"God damn Sunkist," said Si.

When he walked up his driveway he saw the boy standing on the couch looking out the big front window. Isaac had been looking out the same window the day his mother had left four months ago. She had stood by the hedgerow the last day of the long Fourth of July weekend, refusing to look over her shoulder at her son.

"Ostie thinks you're coming back," Si had said.

"I might come back," said Evelyn. "Or I'll send for the boy."

She was impatient. Her ride was late.

"At least tell me," he had pointed a long calloused finger at her in an effort to freeze her in place, "who this boy's father is. You could at least tell me that." She remained silent, her eyes on the road. "Don't you even know?" asked Si.

Trembling, she turned on him. "Daddy," her voice broke slightly. "Maybe I don't amount to much, but you don't want to raise him either. How are you any better than me?"

A green Chevrolet had pulled into the driveway, a frowsy looking woman at the wheel. Evelyn quickly got into the car.

"You'd rather raise those God damn rabbits than your own grandson."

Si could still hear his daughter's words in the empty driveway. And now Ostie kept Evelyn's postcard on the kitchen table. A picture of two kids riding motorcycles across the desert. On the back, "Sorry. Best this way. Try and send some money." Si didn't know who was supposed to send money to who. He watched Isaac come out of the house now with the coffee can. Si wondered if he should go inside and say something to Ostie. He decided instead to feed the rabbits before it got dark.

When Si opened the door to the garage and turned on the light, Isaac saw a mouse run from the sack of rabbit chow. His eyes grew wide as he pointed under the tool bench where the mouse had disappeared.

"It's all right," he told the boy, dipping the coffee can into the sack of feed. "They don't eat much. Come on." He handed the coffee can back to the boy. Isaac ran ahead of him through the yard.

The hutch was built against the back fence. A few slow flies floated up over the manure piled under each cage. Isaac watched the old buck twitch his nose and stamp his feet on the wire with impatience while Si fed the does and the three young fryers. Si let the boy hold the hose as they filled the water dishes, rinsing the green scum from the sides of each one. He showed Isaac how to turn the water off when they were finished.

The sun began to dip behind the back fence. Si didn't want to go in yet. He watched the young fryers feeding, two does and a buck. They were three and a half months old and needed to be butchered. He had been putting it off.

He left Isaac playing with a trowel in the garden and went to the garage, returning with a bucket and his skinning knife. A short length of wire hung from the lowest branch of the walnut tree that grew beside the hutch. Si set the bucket down beneath it. Reaching into the pen of fryers, he grasped one of the does by the loose skin of her back and carried her over to the tree. He set her down on the grass and checked to make sure that Isaac wasn't watching. When Si was younger, he had been able to snap a rabbit's neck with a turn of his wrist, but he had lost the strength in his arms. He raised a short length

of pipe and brought it down hard behind the rabbit's ears. He hung the rabbit by one hind leg from the wire and waited for her to stop kicking.

Si could see Ostie standing at the kitchen window, keeping an eye on Isaac. Over her shoulder he could just make out the sampler on the wall, the one with George and Martha Washington.

Si had laughed the first time he saw it. Then the thing started to bother him until he'd taken to sitting in a different chair in the kitchen, one with its back to that sampler.

He pulled the entrails from the rabbit, dropping them into the bucket at his feet, carefully removing the tiny sac of bile from the liver. He laid the skinned and gutted carcass on a newspaper on the grass and realized he would have to work quickly to finish before dark.

Pulling another of the fryers from the hutch, he carried it to the tree where he turned it over and saw that he had the other little doe. Her white fur was thick and smooth. Too bad he didn't do something with the fur other than bury it in the garden. This one was prime.

He worked with an economy of motions that came from having done the same chore many times. Setting the rabbit on the ground, he broke her neck with the pipe as before, careful to make a sure kill, not wanting to injure the rabbit and cause her to make the strange, chilling scream that he had heard the night before. He remembered the first time he had heard one scream. It had been the Checkered Giant. He hadn't known how to kill them then. After gutting the rabbit, he severed the feet and dropped them into the bucket, then laid the meat on the newspaper beside the first one.

He removed the last fryer from the hutch and carried it to the base of the walnut tree. As Si searched in the dark for the length of pipe he had been using, Isaac came out of the garden and the rabbit hopped away, feeding on the Bermuda grass that grew thick along the fence. Isaac began trying to catch the young buck, following it across the yard one step behind, afraid to reach out and grab it.

Si caught the rabbit behind the ears and held it while the boy ran his hand along the thick, white fur, then touched the long ears

tentatively. He smiled up at his grandfather, running off a string of syllables that Si didn't understand at first. He wanted to hold the rabbit himself.

"God damn it, Isaac," said Si softly. From inside the house, Ostie turned on the back porch light, spreading long shadows across the yard. Si noticed his hands were covered with blood and fine hairs from the fryers.

He set the boy down on the grass and placed the rabbit in his arms. The young buck found his legs and hopped free, going back to the Bermuda grass with Isaac following him slowly along the fence.

Si watched his grandson chase the rabbit back into the garden. He wiped the knife off on his pant leg and thought, the boy was a lot like his mother. Wanting to hold the rabbit, wanting to change Si's plans.

Nothing Si did ever turned out according to plan. There were no right answers. His life had become like the algebra problems he'd tried to help Evelyn with her first year in high school. No matter how hard they worked, often as not they couldn't come up with the number written in the back of the book. It never bothered her. "I'll find out tomorrow," she'd say, drifting from the room. And he would stay at the kitchen table until two or three, finally going to bed, muttering to Ostie, "This time the God damn book's wrong."

Si looked down the row of cages until he came to the old buck. "What do you think?"

The buck stared back at him with his cool, pink eyes. He stamped his hind legs against the wire, proudly. Si had kept him a long time. He wondered how long a rabbit could live.

"The way I see it," said Si, "there's a decision to be made." He'd left his jacket somewhere during that day's walking, and he shivered now in the night air. "It's either you or that little one running around in the garden. I've no use for two buck rabbits."

The buck loosed a long stream of urine into the manure under the hutch. Si could see Ostie standing at the kitchen window. She would be wondering why it took him so long to come in from the rabbits. She would want to give the boy a bath.

"You shouldn't have got old," said Si to the rabbit.

"God damn it." Some things were even harder to figure than

algebra. And he'd never know if he made the right decision. He'd never see the boy grown up. The best he could hope for was that Ostie would. Trying to raise Isaac didn't make a bit of sense. It was unrealistic and a task only a damn fool could talk himself into.

And he knew, fool or not, he would do it.

"Cause it beats the shit out of just being old," said Si. "Oh Lord," he found himself laughing, "beats the damn hell out of that." He'd probably have to stop swearing so much, too. Ostie had been after him about swearing. He wouldn't mind, but he'd make her trade him something for it. She wouldn't get that exactly free.

"All right," said Si. "We'll start over then." He lifted the old buck out of his cage and carried him to the walnut tree, where he found the blood stained pipe lying next to the tree's twisted roots. He picked it up and knelt over the buck, looking away just for a moment to the house, all lit up against the night. When he was done with the old buck, he would go inside and make it up to Ostie. He'd watch the look on her face when he told her to throw that preacher's papers away. Isaac wasn't going anyplace. He'd call the church tomorrow. Tell the preacher God had spoken through a rabbit. He'd tell him right out he wasn't so old as he'd thought.

Maybe he could get Ostie to take that sampler down.