

BUNNY

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I remember exactly how the bunny thing started because it was the first time I met John and it happened on New Year's Eve.

We were standing near a keg of beer. A lady started talking about boycotting fur coats and somehow that spun off into John telling us about the bunny.

John said he was standing on a tarmac at the DaNang airfield in 1968 with fifty other nineteen-year-old draftees who had been cramped in an American Airlines jet for twenty hours. They had just stepped out into 100-degree, slimy, humid air that stuck to them like sticky Jell-O and were breathing in for the first time the rotting garbage stink, unflushed toilet smell of Vietnam.

A Dachau-thin sergeant with hollow eyes was walking in and around their loose formation. He was holding a pink-nosed, white bunny that was mewling and writhing in his arms because the sergeant was not holding him gently. The sergeant said things were a lot worse in the Nam than they had been led to believe. He said the casualty figures were much higher than they had been told. He said the Army had been lying to the newspapers because it was the only way they could get stupid assholes like them to end up in this shit.

He told them to prepare immediately for a life that was totally different from anything they had ever known. They were going into a world where they could never relax, not even when they slept.

They would have to be on guard at all times. The sergeant tugged

harder on the bunny and it gave out a small yelp. They were going to see things they had never seen before. The life they knew was now dead and gone, and would be dead and gone for a year and one day, the day they returned home, if they were so lucky. And with that, the sergeant pulled and tore and ripped the bunny to pieces with his bare hands right there.

John said the rabbit screamed and his joints cracked like chicken bones and its guts splashed right out on the tarmac. The sergeant had blood all over him. Some of the soldiers puked.

The fur lady went ape shit. "Asshole! Why would you tell us that?" She stormed away.

John and I looked at each other.

He looked like a Santa Claus in training, a guy getting plump with a cherub face and a short brown beard that hadn't turned Santa white yet.

I think the reason John talked to me at the party—he was a bigwig in the PR department at a bank and I was a guy who stacked cans at night at Fazio's Supermarket—was because someone told him I was a Nam vet.

I lost my arm there. I can pick up a dime with my metal claw so I shouldn't be so ashamed of it. But I am. I never walk without a jacket or a sweater draped over it. I sit on the bus with my mechanical arm away from the aisle. When I'm talking to someone, I try to stand sort of sideways so my Captain Hook is not so visible.

Stacking cans kept me away from people and I didn't really mind that. I used my hook to reach the top shelves. It was good at that. While my metal hand stacked up cans of Popeye spinach, I sometimes thought about how it would be if I went to a club downtown. I am sitting by the bar and a woman comes up to buy a drink. She smiles at me and we talk. As I turn to her, she sees my claw, and, well, there it is.

I have a disability check from the government and my eleven-to-seven job at Fazio's. I've been working there for some time now. Only three of us work the night shift. We don't talk much, which is okay with me. I pull a cart that's as tall as I am loaded with cases of cans and then I stack them on the shelves, making sure they are perfectly aligned. No one sees my bad arm. I work away, humming every now and then to the crappy music the store keeps on throughout the night.

As I said, I keep my bad arm out of sight, but with John telling his bunny story and the way we were drinking, I had to do it. I held up a red plastic cup with my gleaming prosthesis and said what Nam grunts said when they saw shit happen: "There it is."

The phrase was used for a lot of things. When something unexpected happened we would say: There it is. Or, when something expected happened, we would say: There it is. When something inevitable happened: There it is.

We drank our beers. John and I were looking at each other. "It got blown off at Sumdumfucks, April 28, 1968."

We talked, sort of, but we didn't say anything more about the Nam because that's something you don't want to do when you're drinking.

After the ball came down at Times Square, I ate some more crab dip and a couple of stuffed mushrooms. John was eating too and, with greasy fingers and mouths half-full mumbling, we exchanged phone numbers.

I left soon after.

It wasn't six in the morning and my phone is ringing with Kim, John's wife, at the other end.

She said the drinking at the party had set him off and he was throwing furniture, breaking things when they got home. He was sleeping now in the basement rec room, but she was afraid when he woke up he'd start tearing things apart again. "He said that you would understand. I know you don't know who we are, but could you come over? Please?"

I was still pretty high from New Year's Eve. He didn't live that far away. *Why not*, I figured.

Kim was at the door. She was still wearing the sequined thing she wore at the party. "He hasn't acted like this in years. Years! But he's been on the wagon for a long time and it was the drinking, and you, that set him off."

"I set him off?"

"You set him off."

"Why don't you call one of his friends. A work buddy."

"No way. He's never talked to them about Vietnam. And he can't be seen this way."

There was all kinds of stuff from the refrigerator on the floor in the kitchen. He had taken a Honey-Baked ham and thrown it against a wall. He had put his foot through the bottom of two rattan and chrome kitchen chairs. He had not kicked in the TV or destroyed the stereo speakers so I took that as a positive sign that he wasn't totally out of his mind.

The rec room was musty and cold. I took a Dr. Pepper from the downstairs fridge and sat down in the worn easy chair across from John. When I snapped open the can, he stirred, sat up, and rubbed his forehead.

"You want me to get you a pop?"

He took a deep breath. "There's a real good bottle of champagne I stashed for a special occasion. Get it for us. It's in the back."

I came back with a dark bottle of Dom Perignon.

"So what did you think of the party?" he asked as we messed with the bottle.

"Nice. Food was good."

"When you held up the beer, you did it to me, you fucking asshole." Grunts can call each other "fucking asshole." It's a weird term of endearment. "You remind me so much of Wally. His arm was shot off, it was hanging there, spurting blood, and before we could get a good tourniquet on he died."

The champagne was opened.

We drank the first glass as if it were beer, and then the asshole began to cry.

"We lost two guys from sniper fire from the ville. The LT told us to waste it. Roger shot the young woman and then the two kids. The old man watching could not have been her husband. Her husband was a Charlie. The old man knelt down and kept saying: "Ban toi. Ban toi. Ban toi" He was asking us to shoot him. Roger turned to me and said: "It's your turn now." We left the dead kids and woman in the hut before we set it afire.

John cried more.

I looked down at the floor. I felt totally out of place. I shouldn't be in this guy's basement when he's like this, is how I felt.

"It's over, John. It's over," I said.

John perked up. "I thought it was a great party. Roger is now a biggie

in the Boston police department.”

“I thought it was a great party.”

“How did you lose your arm?”

“A grenade landed right next to me. I grabbed it and flipped it away when it went off. It killed Bill. Blew his head up. If I had flipped it farther he might have lived.”

That’s how we met and how I know about the rabbit thing.

John and I became friends, sort of. I mean a bank vice-president spending time with a guy like me, neither of us being gay, is weird. We talked sports sometimes. He said he got inspiration from me.

I was grateful to have someone to talk to.

We met a few times for breakfast after I got out of Fazio’s in the morning. We didn’t talk about the Nam at all, except for a little. John said he never slept very deeply, never had, even before the Nam. Now, in his mind were memories that kept coming back in his half-awake dreams. “I drive Kim nuts sometimes because I’m mumbling and tossing.”

John said he’d put in a word for me at the bank, and sure enough, because of him and my claw, I totally met a bunch of the government’s hire-the-handicapped and challenged veteran standards, so the bank gave me a half-time job delivering the mail in the morning, no benefits. Still it paid better than the supermarket job even at half-time and I guess I like being around people, even though I’m a cripple.

One month the bank’s monthly newsletter asked the question: “What can we do to help you vent the everyday frustrations that come with your job?”

People wrote in the same old, same old trite bullshit they always write for a company newsletter. Seminars. Get to throw a pie in your boss’ face. Hug sessions. Supervisors walk down the hall in their underwear. Noon karaoke. The ideas were all politically correct, stale corporate crap.

John wrote: “Establish a bunny room. We each get one rabbit every sixty days. When we can’t take it anymore, we are given one half-hour in the bunny room with our rabbit. We are supplied with plastic coveralls, tools such as mallets, hammers and axes, and no questions asked.”

What made the idea so weird is that John, a biggie, second or third on

the pecking order in the PR department, suggested it.

Of course the bunny idea was never published. The newsletter people were part of the PR department—they were right across the hall—so John's suggestion never found its way into print. But it was such a great joke that everyone heard about it.

Someone would find a rabbit picture in a magazine and pin it up on the PR department bulletin board with a handwritten caption: "For you, John." People would pin up rabbit jokes like: "Why did the rabbit cross the road? To screw the chicken." For John's birthday, the department took up a collection and bought him a beautiful stuffed rabbit, a realistic white one with a pink nose, black button eyes and long bunny ears.

People came out of their cubicles and sang "Happy Birthday" in the hall before they gave John the rabbit. He kissed it, thanked everyone and then punted it like a football halfway down the hall. We all laughed our asses off.

When the bottom fell out of the economy and the bank started down-sizing, I kept my job because I was part-time, no benefits.

But John and many others were axed.

Everyone had known about the coming cuts for some time. But how deep they were—PR was cut by two-thirds—stunned everyone. Thursday morning, people were called out, one by one into the manager's office and told about the counseling they would receive, if they wanted it, to get them ready to face that they were out of work in a rotten economy. They had to clear out their workstations by the end of the week.

I was pushing the cart through the PR department, the mail bag over my claw, when John stepped out of his office. He talked loudly so the people in the cubicles around us could hear. "This is my life they are messing with, big time." He was holding the big white bunny he had kept on his desk. He walked down the hall. "You want to know how I feel?" People were coming out to watch him. "You want to see how I feel?"

John let out a primal, animal yell that sounded like a man with his testicles in a vise and tore the bunny to pieces with a spectacular intensity. Cotton stuffing, rabbit ears, paws and tufts of white fur flew everywhere as John grunted, ripped and tore. A black button eye rolled across the floor.

Debbie, the redheaded secretary, also fired, grabbed the teddy bear on her desk. "Yeaaaaahuugggyeaaa!" she yelled and tried to tear it apart. But she was only able to pull out one of its paws. She saw I was watching her so she tossed it to me. I put its head between my knees and got my iron arm out into it and pulled it so hard the place was sprayed with its sawdust stuffing.

Friday evening, after work, there was a goodbye party at the spaghetti house. John invited me to be his designated driver, which is something of a joke, but I said I would.

The cuts at the bank were more than just PR and Communications. There were people from Advertising and Human Resources and others were there too. We filled the whole bottom floor and the waiters moved the tables so that we could set up an area for the pile of goodbye gifts people had brought.

Everyone was asked to bring something funny, something that people would remember forever. As the gifts were opened, I saw: praying hand maracas, a *Dewey, Screwem & Howe* legal firm's t-shirt, a black velvet tapestry of Elvis walking his granddaughter down the church aisle to the waiting Michael Jackson, a hula girl with a plastic skirt to shake in the back window of a car, a beer can that played *Ave Maria*, a BAN BUMPER STICKERS bumper sticker, a palm-sized guitar that played loud Jimmy Hendrix music, an electronic turtle with red eyes that turned its head from side to side.

Debbie's boyfriend was a wannabe professional magician. He stepped out of the kitchen, complete with tuxedo, top hat, white gloves, and a magic cane.

He had John stand in the middle of the room.

The magician pulled golf balls from John's ears, and a fiery flash of flame from the front of his pants.

"And now, from all of your friends."

The magician took off his top hat, reached in, and handed John a real, live, pink-nosed bunny.

"When you get home, you do that sucker in," said Debbie, totally stewed and silly.

"When I get home?" John began to pull on the rabbit's legs and I swear it screamed as loud as a man who had just been set on fire. It began to wiggle and then sprayed pee on the magician.

People in the room started moving away fast. A couple of plates hit the ground and shattered.

John loosened his grip on the rabbit and it calmed down and began making loud mewling noises like a kitten.

Those who stayed at their table were quiet and big-eyed.

"Ha, hah, ha," said John, imitating with words the sound of laughing. "We're all being fired, hah, hah, ha. This is all so very funny, isn't it....Hah, hah, hah."

The bunny tried to jump and began to kick and squirm again.

"Don't do it! Don't do it!" John's wife said. "Please John, don't."

"I'm calling the police," said a waiter.

John started out of the restaurant, holding the rabbit. I followed him.

The spaghetti house is right next to an ancient cemetery that was already packed with dead people a hundred years ago. We stepped over a few gravestones before we stopped.

He turned to me. "What do you say?" He was holding the rabbit in such a way that I knew what he meant.

"John, look at your shirt. You got pee all over."

"Son of a bitch," he muttered.

"Give it to me. I'll do it."

I grabbed the rabbit and held it with my good hand while it kicked and peed yet again. I pulled its head back so that its belly was up and white.

I looked at John. He took a deep breath.

I put the bunny down and it hopped away and disappeared among the black obelisks, tiny monuments, and weather-beaten gravestones.

"There it is," I said.