

## Cottontail By Mike Erwood

So anyway, I said to him - can you pass me that carrot? Thanks dear - I said to him, look: you got thirty seven children at home. What are you trying to prove here, being so reckless? Just go home, den up for a while, try to be happy. But do you think the bastard listens to me? Of course not. And when I say bastard by the way, I'm not just being insulting. I mean it literally. His dad was gone before the first one of them popped out. Is it any wonder he's a lousy father with an example like that? Not one of them ever sticks around. It's over so quick each time and they disappear so soon after I wonder if some of them don't even realise anything else actually *happens* from it. Maybe they think the little ones just pop spontaneously out of the ground.

Anyway, what was I saying? Oh right, so I'm asking him, Peter, why keep going back into that garden? There's plenty of food out here, and you know what those creatures are like. You're better off taking your chances with the lynx. At least they won't turn your skin inside out and then wear it like a coat. Those beasts are so macabre. I'm a vegetarian myself, you know. And I know everyone will say that it's only because I don't have the choice but it's not true. You could give me the claws and fangs and all the rest, I'd be just as happy with my buds and leaves, thank you. There's no need for it. I know what it's like to be hunted, alright? That's why I'm Careful. A lot of you don't understand that. Think about this man who's garden Peter kept getting into. Now that's someone who's Careful. Not trusting to the whims of the wild. Say what else you will about them and lord knows I'm not their biggest fan, but humans are all Careful. They don't let the world sneak up on them.

That's exactly what those gardens are for you know. They grow their own food. They don't wait for it. They plan ahead. And they protect themselves. They don't get Hunted anymore and it's not because they're any faster or stronger than all those ones that eat the rest of us. If anything, they're more clumsy and gangly than most. It's because they're Careful. They build walls around themselves and they clear out big spaces so nothing can sneak up on them. And you know what else? Humans don't breed every chance they get. They have their children one at a time and they make damn sure they survive. Now that's being Careful.

Us, we all treat our young like they're disposable, which they might as well be given how few out of each litter even get to see a winter. I don't want kids myself. Oh, I have my fun like everyone else, but I know which plants to eat afterwards. I couldn't take it. My friends, I've seen them lose dozens of them like it's nothing. They don't even name them. So I make sure it doesn't happen to me. And like I said, it's not like any of the men ever stick around to see what happens anyway. Except Peter of course. He was different. Or at least I thought he was. I'm not naive. I knew he already had over a dozen

bunnies with at least three different mothers, but I didn't care. He came on the same way any of them do, all nice bright coats and flashy tails, acting like just getting to watch them is some kind of gift and you should thank them for all the little ones you're going to be stuck raising on your own in a month's time. But Peter didn't leave right after. At first he acted disappointed when he realised what I'd done, realised we weren't going to have a little family, but I think secretly he was relieved.

I didn't begrudge him for moving on. I know a lot of people think that and I've heard the whispers that I somehow put him up to going back into that garden, but I know the truth and I'll tell you. I didn't hold it against him. He was only doing what his body told him to, what all of ours tell us to. Sometimes I think we only exist to be breeding machines, incubators. I just won't do it, but I don't blame anyone who does. And like I said, I told him, if not for me, if not for her, at least stay away from there for your kids. These humans, they're clever. I guarantee you won't even know it's coming. But Peter always thought he was cleverer of course. I might as well have been daring him.

He told me the food in there was better than anything we could get outside. He said the thrill of making it in and out each time only made it taste that much better. He could never convince me it was worth it. Truth is, all along I think he was mostly trying to convince himself. I'm not sure he even entirely understood why he did it. I think some part of him maybe even wanted it to happen. I'm not saying he was suicidal or anything like that. He was never depressed. More like curious. Or even just bored. It seems like a strange motivation, but he didn't want life to be just some game of survival, of pumping out dozens of kids to be fed to the wild in the hope that *something* lives on. He wanted more. Who could blame him?

I was watching him when it finally happened, you know. I wouldn't follow him in but I couldn't stand the thought of something happening to him on his own so I stayed back and watched. I didn't see the wire either until it cinched around his fluffy neck. He just hung there, twitching awfully and staring at me. I couldn't help it. I went right up to him and I looked into his eyes. I'd thought he was staring at me, but they weren't really looking anywhere. He was just twitching. Only the tiniest bit of blood came out. I know they say the twitch is just a reflex, some muscle thing, but how do we know? How do we know he's not still stuck there, trapped and looking out into nothing? This is why I'm Careful. Because we don't know. How do any of us know about so many things in this world?