



BUGS THE BUNNY

by KAYLIE STENBURG

All afternoon, we had been lying on the chicken coop in Lena's backyard, letting the sun soak into our skin, watching the bees that bumbled about the garden, and talking about this and that. Her dog, Rosie, ran around the yard, chasing after rabbits and barking at the other neighborhood dogs. I felt my thoughts drifting toward the same things that they always drifted towards—the story I had been struggling to write, college, and having to say goodbye to my friends at the summer's end—including Lena, who was lying next to me, holding up her hand to block out the sun. I knew that I would miss these kinds of days, these unassuming moments.

Suddenly Lena bolted off the coop and ran across the yard, yelling "drop it! Rosie, drop that!" When she caught up to Rosie, Lena put her hand up to the dog's mouth. I jumped off the coop to catch up to Lena, and when I did, I saw that there was a baby cottontail caught between the jagged peaks of Rosie's teeth. Powerless, I looked on as Lena wrestled the bunny out of the dog's mouth. When she did, she ran inside the house, and I followed.

Down in the basement, Lena set the bunny down in the bathtub. Free of her grasp, it darted around the clean white basin for a few seconds, leaving behind trails of blood. Eventually it stopped to huddle by the drain. It was hurt, though it was impossible to tell how badly from a distance. We stared at each other for a moment, silently asking “what now?” No one else was home. If anyone was going to help the poor bunny, it would have to be us.

I started looking for a solution out loud. “I guess we’ll need gloves... and maybe some bedding for it... and—”

“What should we call him?” Lena interrupted.

“Is there a particular reason that we’re naming him? Can’t we just stick with ‘the rabbit?’”

“How about Bugs?”

Bugs was perhaps the least original name for a rabbit that I had ever heard, but given the circumstances, I wasn’t going to complain.

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Lena bent over the rim of the blood-smearred bathtub and cupped her hands around the little bunny. It was just a tiny thing, small enough to fit in a coffee mug. For the moment it was still in shock. She turned him around, examining his belly and sides. As she did so, one of Bugs’ back legs moved with gravity, twisting at unnatural angles. Poking out through a tuft of red-soaked fur, we could see the tips of bone. She grimaced and drew in a tight breath. “We can make a tourniquet. If we tie it tightly enough then his leg should just...” she shrugged.

“Should just... what?” I asked.

Lena gestured toward the ground and made a plop sound with her tongue. “It’ll fall off.”

“Oh.”

So, we proceeded to the bathroom where we collected the most professional medical supplies we could muster; Q-tips, gauze pads, a bit of sewing string and nail clipping scissors to

cut it with. Before we started operating, I had been the one that pushed for us to call the vet. We had to call twice—because the first time the receptionist hung up on us. On the second call, she told us that there was nothing that their veterinarians could do. She said that it was illegal for them to interfere with the lives of wild animals. With our hope for outside help properly smothered, Lena passed Bugs to me and so I held him close, fearing that at any second he would awaken from his shock and wriggle out of my grasp. But he didn’t. He just stayed still, staring back at me when I stared at him.

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Lena took the string and wrapped it around his leg, above the compound fracture. When it came time to tighten it, she winced and closed her eyes, but nevertheless she went through with it, pulling at the string until it was as tight as she could make it. Then she wrapped the string around the Q-tip and used it as a knob to make the tourniquet even tighter. Every moment I watched Bugs anxiously, waiting for him to cry out in pain, or suddenly jolt up and run away. He never did. He only watched me—or rather, watched through me. His eyes were distant, and I was hoping that he was as far away from reality as he seemed.

“Oh my God,” Lena said without much breath.

I looked down at Bug’s belly and saw a mess of glossy organs spilling from just above his leg—the result of a puncture wound buried in the fluff that we had failed to see. “Let’s use the gauze,” I suggested grimly, but I almost had to laugh, out of stress or worry, out of anything but humor. “After this we could basically call ourselves veterinarians.”

Lena nodded, then we set to work bandaging Bugs’ fluffy skin over the organs that were spilling out of him. This time Lena held him while I did the best job I could of wrapping

gauze around his midsection. It was hard because the gauze was so wide, and Bugs was just so small. Each time I tried to cover up the wound, his legs ended up getting wrapped up too. Finally, I managed to wrap him up and tape the gauze in place.

We took him back down to the basement and set him in the bathtub for a moment so that Lena and I could run to the refrigerator and grab a few handfuls of lettuce. We used the lettuce to line the bottom of her old hamster cage. It was bedding and food all in one. Out of cardboard and duct tape, we made a water bowl for him, and then a little dome to serve as a house. Once the cage was set up, we stuck Bugs inside and set the dome over him, hoping that he would feel safer tucked away rather than out in the open.

It was the best that we could do, or at least the best that we knew how to do. Eventually I had to go home for the night. Over the next several hours, Lena and I sent videos back and forth. She kept me updated on Bugs. He had nibbled at the food in his cage, and he seemed to have come out of shock.

“He survived the night,” Lena told me the next morning over video. “It seems like he’s doing a lot better.” She showed me Bugs, who was nibbling on a piece of lettuce. His eyes were clear and lucid. I set down my phone just to take a moment to smile. It warmed my heart to see that he was recovering.

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But it was that very same night that I got another video from Lena. There was blood all over Bugs’ cage. There had been another puncture wound that we had missed. It was too much. The poor bunny was falling apart at the seams. The gauze wouldn’t be enough. The tourniquet wouldn’t be enough. There was only one thing left for us to do, and ultimately it would have been better if we had done it at the start.

Lena stuck Bugs in her freezer. Not much later, he died. I set down my phone again, only this time it wasn’t so that I

could have a moment to smile. This time I cried, the kind of tears that fall without prompting or urging. Light tears.

Dimly, I wondered what I was supposed to feel. Young girls cry over dead bunnies. What about older girls? The truth of what I felt couldn’t be altered by age; I was sad, and I felt that I had failed.

We had made a series of decisions the day before. At each step we had acted in the way that we thought was best, but good intentions weren’t enough. In the end, I had to wonder if they had been too much. 