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**"The dog has something in his mouth," Melanie says. I whistle for him and he bounds reluctantly to me through the April frost, opening his soft bird-dog mouth to deliver his prize. There, lying moistly in my palm, oddly tranquil and almost warm to the touch, a small, almost hairless being, about three inches long, wriggles feebly. Its eyes are still closed. Mouse? I wonder-but no, the tiny ears are too big for that. I am holding an infant cottontail rabbit, struggling to find any burrow out of the cold-even a dog's mouth or a man's hands. Any port in a storm.**

Body temperature is clearly critical. A heating pad under a cardboard box with some rags in it seems to do the trick. We warm some milk in a pan and add some butterfat and sugar. When we put a drop of it against his mouth with an eye dropper, he licks it off as if in irritation. We feed him at intervals through the night and the next day. Once we heard on the radio that it is not wise to adopt tiny wild rabbits. We are not doing them a kindness, the expert warns us, and infants are not likely to survive. No time to think of that. The rabbit doesn't listen to the radio. His favorite program is the sound of the cardboard box lid opening, and the eyedropper descending. As days go by, he attacks dinner greedily and with gusto. Within a week or so he is consuming several dropperfulls at a sitting, and chewing the tip of the dropper to a pulp.

When I change the newspaper in his box, the small, unexpected movements of my hand agitate him, and he scurries and bounces off the cardboard walls. An eternal quivery restlessness seems to overwhelm him. Daily, his manic energy increases. Whiskers trembling, he restlessly explores every inch of this cardboard burrow over and over. I recall Robert Burns's mouse: "Wee, sleekit, cow'rin tim'rous beastie,/O What a panic's in thy breastie!" Sometimes I wrap him in a bit of towel, and feed him in front of the fire. He wriggles a lot, and snorts in surprise if the milk is too cold. A fine fur covers him now. Each day the little limbs stretch out longer and I am amazed at their force against my fingers -- astonished by his endless determination to feed, to live, to grow. He has this frenzy to become whatever kind of creature he is to become, and to do what they do. But what makes a rabbit, a rabbit?

Watching him consume dropperful after dropperful of milk, I realize my associations with rabbits are literary and largely inappropriate for the present context. Legend and literature depict rabbits and hares as creatures of infinite guile and acumen, with puckish senses of humor. I think of the movie Harvey, the "Trojan rabbit" in Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Then I recall Bugs Bunny cartoons, the March Hare in Dodgson's Alice in Wonderland, Bre'r Rabbit, Aesop's hare and tortoise, the trickster bunny of Native American legend and ancient Chinese tradition. And then there are gentler images: the Easter Bunny, Peter Rabbit, denizens of bucolic landscapes, heralds of spring. Tales about rabbits have infected every continent. I recall reading somewhere that the first rabbits came to England from the continent with William the Conqueror. As I feed my charge, I visualize the famous crossing. There, the fearless conqueror stands astride the deck, gazing north across the English Channel at his kingdom to be -- and at his ankle, a small fierce rabbit in Norman armor -- his ears flapping in the breeze. In my enthusiasm I fence the air with the eye dropper as if it were a tiny sword. But a fierce wriggling in my lap brings me back to reality. This jittery handful will have none of this fantasy. Less rumination and more warm milk, he seems to say, is the order of the day.

Outside, as the weeks pass, things are getting greener. The baby must be weaned, and we want him to become accustomed to food sources from out of doors-but what will he eat? Slowly we pull back on the milk and begin to put green things into his cage for him to chew on. After a few days of tentative chewing, he identifies clover and dandelion greens as his favorites, and begins to devour enormous quantities. Even though we have reduced his milk intake, however, he will not take water through a dropper. In fact he has taken to sitting in the mason jar lid of cool water we give him, apparently to cool off.

Soon he is experimenting with hopping, and we hear him bouncing off the sides of the box at night. One day, I look in the box and find that he has escaped. With the help of the dog, who has fallen into the role of a protective parent, we find him quivering in a corner of the book room, a couple of dust bunnies drifting by his side. Clearly it is time for him to stop being a guest and start being a rabbit -- but is he ready?-and am I ready? For several days, I take him outside and put him in the grass. At first, he seems to move little and not respond, but soon he is darting here and there, nibbling at his favorite foods in their natural state, and sometimes almost disappearing into the grass I have left uncut exclusively for him. His eyes, set on the sides of his head, are wide open now, and scan almost 360 degrees. Crouching down and looking at him from a few inches away I can see the sweep of the landscape reflected across one dilated pupil, clover bobbing in the breeze, the world funneling in. I snap my fingers a yard to his right, a yard to his left. The little ears twitch in response. Nothing wrong with his radar. But will he use it effectively in the wild?

Rabbits, I learn quickly, for all their legendary intellect, have only two responses to danger at any moment: run or hide. I get the dog to engage him in a gentle game of tag, forcing the baby rabbit to run here and there, searching for cover. A neighbor, pulling into the driveway for a visit watches us at our "rabbit-in-training exercises" as the dog and bunny race about on the lawn. Her mouth drops open, and I realize what a strange activity this is. But as I watch the dog race past his playmate several times without seeing him, I know the strategy is working.

The next day the trainee very nearly escapes us during field exercises, and with the weather warming, it is clearly time to say goodbye. I take him to the end of the unused access road near the field where the ground is rich with clover and sourgrass. There are pines on one side, and leafy forest on the other. I put him down, and kneel once more to look into the mirror of that tiny eye in the rippling grass. I watch him pondering the choices of his being. Shall I run or hide? Freeze or fly? Will running make me lucky or transform me into lunch? This is the simple calculus he must master in the days and months ahead. Either choice may be deadly. He may bolt and attract the eye of a predator. He may freeze in the middle of the road as a truck roars toward him.

And now I know I am about to become one of the dangers he must escape. Not one of those dangers that swoops or dashes, but one of the shadowy, towering, two-footed kind. A predator with the eyes in front to hunt-and in front of those eyes, the half moon of a driving wheel, a plowshare ripping the prairie, a rifle barrel aiming at dinner. I wonder how many times I will walk past him this summer, concealed in the grass by my feet. I wonder if he will remember the ride in the dog's mouth, the great dusty cave of the living room, the flicker of the fire, the warm milk descending from a ceiling sky? I glance back as I walk away, but he is already oblivious to me. I have been replaced by the fragrance and mystery of the green field.

I discover I am humming some damn thing from the seventies:

> *I am dreaming of the dolphins in the sea*
>
> *And sometimes I wonder,*
>
> *Do they ever dream of me?*

But behind me, there is rabbit and nothing but rabbit, burrowing deep into the heart of clover.

Rod Clark, Editor