

RABBIT EYES

A Short Story

by

Christopher Gronlund

(For Deacon, the biggest rabbit fan I know...)

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When Simon returned to his hometown after seventeen years away, the first place he visited was the meadow.

He went there after his parents divorced when he was ten, standing in the middle of nothing while thinking about everything. He went there after his first girlfriend, Amber Petterson, broke up with him, back when the cruel hand of heartbreak seemed like it would never ease its grip on everything he knew and hoped for. He went there when his twin sister, Simone, died of leukemia, cursing the dark clouds of early winter that came and covered his world in silence.

He was back where he belonged.

“Seventeen years...”

The wind and clouds and patchwork of leaves looked, smelled, and felt exactly as he remembered. He'd left home after high school with no idea of what he'd become. He returned as the owner of a successful software firm. But none of that mattered as he stood in the meadow.

That's because Simon saw a rabbit.

He didn't like rabbits. There was just something...creepy about them. Something in their eyes that wasn't right. Something in their hollow gaze chilled him to his core.

The rabbit did nothing. That was the problem. It didn't chew on grass, it didn't move when he walked toward it. It just sat there in the middle of the open meadow.

Doing nothing.

The rabbit knew him better than he knew himself. How it knew things, he didn't know, but he was sure of it. It could read his mind.

He woke up sweating.

* * *

Cheryl lay on her side in bed near him. Her body was a crescent moon, glowing blue in the window light, showing off every curve; her hair was a twisted galaxy splayed across a soft down pillow. Simon was an astronaut lost in the vacuum of space, the celestial body next to him his only salvation.

Then it happened.

In the dark, he could make out the little pink cartoon bunny on her tight T-shirt. Below the bunny was a slogan:

*It's All About Me.
Deal With It!*

Rabbit or not, he needed to be near somebody.

The sheets between Cheryl and him were a cold ocean of 1200 thread count Egyptian cotton. He sailed across the expanse like an early explorer and cuddled up against Cheryl's warm body.

"Hmmm..."

Feeling Simon against her side woke her. She rolled over to face him, and when she did, blonde curls fell into her face. He loved that. He pushed them away, tucking them back behind her ear, saving her the effort.

"You had a bad dream."

It wasn't a question. The happy pink bunny looked up from her tight T-shirt.

"Yeah."

She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him closer. The cool sheets gave way to her warm body.

She kissed his nose and said, "Poor baby."

That's when it dawned on him: she had eyes like the rabbit in the meadow.

* * *

The next time Simon woke up, it was to the sounds and smells of breakfast cooking. He made his way downstairs, running his hand along the old wooden banister on his way down. He never got used to it. He was the kid who left his hometown not knowing what he wanted, and ended up owning a successful company in a state he never thought he'd even visit. A two-story house in an affluent Dallas suburb was a far cry from the two bedroom house in New Hampshire where he grew up.

“Morning, sleepyhead!” Cheryl said. He couldn’t get used to the old banister, and he definitely couldn’t get used to how chirpy she was in the morning. “Here’s your *one* cup of coffee!”

He always wanted to tell her to let him ease in to the day, but he knew he was lucky to be with somebody so full of life. So he sucked it up and admired her cute undies and all her curves.

There was nothing cute about the happy bunny T-shirt, though.

“Take your vitamins,” she said. She pointed to his spot at the table.

“I know you tell me these things are good for me, but I’m still always tired.”

“That’s what happens when all you do is work and don’t relax,” Cheryl said.

Ah, the joys of living with a yoga instructor.

“I relax.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Well, I *try*.”

“No...you don’t.”

She brought him a plate of French toast, pirouetting on the balls of her feet as she came to the table. He loved the way her abdomen moved, the muscles rolling and waving with each step and turn. He smelled her hair in the air; it drove him wild. He closed his eyes, but not to savor the moment. He was really trying to not look at the happy fucking rabbit on her T-shirt.

“Vitamins!” she said.

He grabbed the capsules and washed them down with orange juice. He chased the orange juice with his one cup of coffee.

Another pirouette brought her back to the table with her own plate. She plopped down in her chair and smothered her French toast with syrup.

“Are you going to tell me about your dream?”

“There’s not much to tell.”

“I sleep on the far side of the bed because you toss and turn. We should be closer. If you weren’t always working and exercised with me now and then, you’d get a better night’s sleep.”

“I have to work to...keep all this.” He held out his arms, gesturing at the chef’s kitchen and everything beyond.

“This house owns you,” Cheryl said. “You had a bad dream about home.”

It wasn’t a question.

Simon looked at the rabbit on her shirt and said, “Yes.”

“You can tell me anything, you know?”

“I know.”

She pushed a large forkful of French toast through a puddle of syrup and took a bite, somehow not dribbling as she brought it to her mouth and chewed. She realized he was staring at her chest. She pushed her breasts together and then pointed at her face. “I’m up here, you know?”

“I know. I wasn’t looking at your boobs. I was looking at the rabbit on your shirt. It...there’s just something...unsettling about it to me.”

“It bothers you?”

“Yes. I don’t know why, but it does.”

She pulled off the shirt and tossed it on the counter. Her breasts jiggled just enough to remind the world that they were real, but not so much to show any loss of firmness in Cheryl’s thirty-seven years. She took another bite of French toast; this time a drop of syrup fell on her nipple.

“You want to get that for me, champ?” she said.

Ah, the joys of living with a yoga instructor.

* * *

Simon found the vitamins hidden behind the cleaning supplies beneath the kitchen sink. He never used the kitchen—Cheryl did—and he sure as hell never cleaned. Cheryl didn’t have to clean, either. They had people for that.

Simon needed a flashlight. There was one in the garage, but the house was big and kitchen was closer. He remembered a late spring storm that knocked out the power one night; he remembered where Cheryl stashed a flashlight. He remembered the glowing cyclops eye floating in the darkness, riffling through the kitchen drawers like a partner in crime with Cheryl, looking for a lighter and candles. The flashlight ruined the mood, she

told him. It seemed every drawer and cabinet in the house hid candles—scented fugitives that burned Simon’s eyes.

“What the fuck?” Simon said when he discovered the bottle of vitamins.

Who kept vitamins beneath the kitchen sink? Was Cheryl slowly poisoning him?

The label on the bottle was colored an earthy shade somewhere between green and brown, the kind of designer color people used to paint their bedrooms. It was a color that said, “Environmentally hip!” It was the color of the soup Simon threw up during a bout with a vicious stomach bug when he was eight.

A Chinese character that could have meant *arsenic* for all Simon knew was prominently featured on the bottle. Earthy colors and ancient lettering meant a hefty price—people liked paying for the pleasure of feeling they were connected to old times and making a difference. Below the Chinese character, in English: *Hippocampus Root*.

He turned the bottle in his hand, looking at the back.

Manufactured by the Allsage Corporation. Recommended serving size: one (1) tablet daily.

Why did Cheryl always give him two?

* * *

Some research online turned up more than Simon wanted to know. He wished Cheryl *had* just been out to poison him. The vitamin was purported to open the gateway to the mind, allowing thoughts to escape in a torrent of energy. Another vitamin taken by the “receiver” allowed the escaping thoughts to be read. As far as Simon was concerned, it was bullshit, but exactly the kind of thing a controlling yoga instructor might believe.

He found the other bottle hidden beneath Cheryl’s underwear in the top drawer of her vanity. He normally respected the privacy of others, but figured if somebody was trying to steal his thoughts—real or not—he had a right to snoop around. The bottle in

Cheryl’s drawer had a brighter label than the one on the bottle beneath the sink, but there was no mistaking that the two bottles were meant to work together.

* * *

“I want something that looks like these,” Simon said.

“Do you know what these vitamins are, sir?”

“No,” Simon told the vitamin shop woman. “I have no idea. I don’t particularly care, either. I just need something that looks like them.”

* * *

He counted the vitamins in the jar beneath the sink and replaced them with an equal amount of the vitamins he bought at the store. Same thing upstairs. Just to be safe.

* * *

Two weeks later, at breakfast, Cheryl said, “What are you thinking about?” The direct statements that left him feeling unsettled tapered off a week after replacing the vitamins. Two weeks later, they disappeared completely.

“All kinds of things,” he said. “My head’s been swimming with thoughts, lately.”

Simon wasn’t lying, either. He had focus he never had before. He woke up well rested. After his morning vitamins, the energy came. He was a thousand-and-one horses on a windblown prairie, like something out of a car commercial. He even gave up coffee.

Now it was Cheryl who dragged her way through breakfast. She woke up and fell right back to sleep until Simon pulled the blankets from her body and opened the curtains, flooding the room with sunshine. She became even more tired after her morning vitamins. She was a half-buried rock on a prairie watching horses charge by.

Not even coffee helped.

Simon bolted upright from the table, the backs of his legs sending his chair back across the floor. “Know what we should do?!”

“What?” Cheryl looked defeated.

“We should go for a walk! Maybe even run! Exercise!”

“You’ve become far too chirpy in the mornings. You know that?”

* * *

Shortly before the vitamins were about to run out and Cheryl would be the one buying more, Simon said, “You’re right.”

They were eating dinner.

“Huh?” Cheryl could barely keep her eyes open.

“You’re right about this house.”

“What about it?”

“It owns me.”

She put her head on the table. “Mmm-hmm.”

“I’m going to sell it. I’m going to sell everything.”

Exhausted or not, this got Cheryl’s attention. “What?!”

“The house. The company. I’m going to sell it all.”

Adrenaline did more for her than caffeine or any vitamin. “All this?!” She held out her arms, gesturing wildly at the chef’s kitchen and everything beyond. “Why?!”

“Because you were right. It’s like you can read my mind.”

* * *

Simon returned to his hometown after seventeen years away.

The first place he visited was the meadow.

The wind and clouds and patchwork of leaves looked, smelled, and felt exactly as Simon remembered. He’d left home after high school with no idea of what he’d become. He returned the owner of the *Sunshine Vitamin Corporation*. He bought the company and the house he grew up in after leaving Cheryl and selling his life down in Dallas.

“Looks like somebody took a Louisville Slugger to those clouds, huh?”

Amber Pettersen.

“I heard you were back,” she said.

“Yeah.” She looked better than she did in high school.

“Back for good?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

“What about you? What are you doing these days?”

“I teach kickboxing.”

“Aerobic kickboxing?”

“Nah, the real stuff.” She moved her head on an angle and pointed to her nose. It was just a little askew. It drove Simon wild.

“Cool.”

They stared at each other for a moment, neither one able to read the other’s thoughts.

“Do you like yoga?” Simon said.

“Not really. Why, do you?”

“Not really.”

“Well, we can stand here in the cold and talk, or we can talk over coffee in town,” Amber said.

“I don’t drink coffee anymore.”

“All right. How ‘bout you watch me drink a cup of coffee, then? You can get whatever it is you drink these days.”

“I’d like that.”

They walked through the big meadow in silence. It was nice not having anybody ask him what he was thinking. He didn’t wonder what Amber was thinking. They just walked toward the trees, two heads full of nothing.

Then Amber said, “That’s creepy.”

“What?”

“That rabbit.”

There was a rabbit in the meadow. Simon was asleep; he had to be.

“Look at it,” Amber said. “It’s doing nothing. It’s not chewing on grass, and it’s not moving. It’s just sitting there in the middle of the open meadow. Doing nothing.”

“Is this a dream?”

She brought a foot to the side of his head, snapping it at the last moment. It didn’t hurt, but there was enough force to bring him to his senses.

“That feel like a dream?”

“Nope!”

They walked away, kicking leaves along the way. Simon figured, “Why the hell not?” and reached out and bumped Amber's hand with his. She took his hand in hers, just like she did when they were fifteen and he first bumped her hand to see if she really liked him.

Simon stopped and turned Amber toward him, taking her other hand in his. Right before she leaned in for a kiss, Simon said, “I'm glad your eyes are nothing like a rabbit's.”



Christopher Gronlund helps and entertains people by moving words around pages and screens. His writing has appeared in newspapers, magazines, comic books, and the Web. He blogs at thejugglingwriter.com. You can listen to him read his first novel, *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors* for free or buy the ebook (only \$2.99) at roadtripfromhell.com.