

## A Rabbit's Life

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# Chapter 1: Birth

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Darkness first, then warmth.

Body pressed against body against body. Many heartbeats, many rhythms of breathing. The small space full of us, the pile shifting as bodies squirm toward center warmth. Milk-scent surrounding everything.

Wood beneath. Not earth, though earth is what pulls from below. A hollow that should exist, a darkness that should run deeper than this. The body holds a shape the world refuses to give. Instead wood planks, straw scattered thin, the bitter smell of shavings.

The pile breathes together. Hearts beating their separate rhythms, quick and small. Shared warmth between all of us.

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Light comes.

First light is too bright, eyes squeezing closed. A sliver cutting through the darkness, widening as something opens above. Sound comes with the light. Movement beyond the walls, vibration traveling through wood. Not-mother. Darkness returns.

Later. Light again. The sliver widens to a square. Scent rushes in. Hay. Earth. Something warm and living but far too large.

The pattern repeats. Light-dark. Light-dark.

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Mother-scent arrives.

The pile shifts toward it, noses seeking. Large body settling briefly at edge of nest box, warmth available. Bodies press close, mouths finding source. Bellies filling. Then mother-warmth withdraws. Scent fading beyond the walls.

Bodies press together again, making warmth between ourselves. The space where mother was, empty until next milk-scent arrival.

Light-dark. Light-dark. Milk-scent, then absence. The pattern repeats.

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The world begins to open.

Eyes that were sealed now see. Shapes emerging from darkness. This body, that body, another body beside. The pile made of individuals, each carrying their own scent beneath the shared milk-smell.

One scent becomes familiar. Sweet milk-breath. Always against the right flank. Warmth-giver when mother is absent.

Ears that were flat now lift. Sound arrives differently. Vibrations through wood become distinct noises. Gate sounds. Footsteps. Voices beyond walls.

The pile still huddles, but bodies begin to differentiate. This one moves often. That one stays still. Another body, the familiar one, always near.

---

Mother's scent grows fainter with each passing of the light.

Where mother-fur once pressed on all sides, now empty space opens. The pile fills the gap, bodies nestled tighter. Cold seeps into the edges where warmth once was.

Hunger pulls in a way warmth never did. Sharp. Insistent. Noses seeking, finding only wood, straw, the scent of each other.

Milk-source visits less often, then not at all.

One day the nose searches for mother-scent and finds nothing. Only wood, straw, the scents of those who remain. The source is gone.

Bodies press tighter that night. The pile smaller now, the familiar scent-body always close, warmth shared between all of us still.

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The square opens wider than before.

Tall-bodies, more than one, different scents mixing. Voices carrying vibration down through air into the nest box. Hands visible at the opening.

The pile shifts, bodies pressing toward corners. Hearts racing.

Hands descend into the space. Large, dry, carrying strange scents. They reach toward the pile.

One body lifts into air. Not this body. Another. The scent trails upward, away, beyond the wooden walls. The pile shifts, emptier now.

The scent does not return.

Hands again. Another body rising. Another scent moving away, fading beyond reach of the nest box. Gone.

The pile smaller. More space between bodies where press and warmth had been. Cold finding gaps.

Hands reach toward this body. The world tilts, lifts. Air all around, no ground, no warmth. Held in wrong-warmth, dry and smooth, no fur. Heart strikes fast. Muscles tight. The pull toward below, toward burrow, but there is no below. Only hands, only air.

Then lowered again. Placed back into straw.

One scent remains close. The familiar one. Sweet milk-breath. The one who always pressed against the right flank.

Two bodies now where many had been. The nest box too large, straw visible in corners that the pile once filled. Two heartbeats instead of many. Two breathing rhythms.

The one who remains presses close. Same milk-scent. Same mother-touch in memory. Same darkness from the beginning. Her scent the most familiar scent, more familiar than wood, than straw, than this body's own fur.

Body against body. Heartbeat answering heartbeat.

*same*

*sister*

Nest-kin. The scent carries what words cannot: shared birth, shared mother. The one who remained when others were taken.

---

Days pass in the rhythm of light and dark.

The body grows stronger. The space shrinks with each passing day, walls closing in as the body expands.

Legs that once only pushed now find use. The body lifts, wobbles, tips sideways. Tries again. Rising, falling, rising. The small space allows only a few hops before wood walls stop everything.

The pull remains, downward, toward enclosed safety that exists nowhere in this wooden world. Paws scratch at wood planks, seeking the darkness below. Nothing yields.

Sister scratches too. Both pawing at the same corner, the same unyielding surface. The pull persists without fulfillment.

---

The square opens again. Tall-bodies come through. Two of them, different sizes, carrying scents that don't belong. Sweet scents. Sharp scents. None of them milk, none of them mother.

Hands descend. Warmth, but wrong-warmth, dry and smooth, no fur. The body lifts into the air, held in cupped palms. Heart racing. Muscles tight. The urge to burrow. But there is no below. Only hands, only air.

Sister hangs in another pair of hands nearby. Held. Both held.

Then lowered again. Hands retreating.

The two bodies find each other immediately, nose to fur, warmth seeking warmth. Heart still racing, but slowing. Same. Still same.

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The absence fills the space.

Two bodies curled together in the corner where the pile once filled all edges. The wooden walls hold them in. The absent earth pulls them down. The darkness of the nest box is not the safe darkness the body craves.

But sister is here. Same scent. Same warmth. Same heartbeat, close enough to feel.

---

The square opens one morning and doesn't close.

Light pours in, brighter than before. Scent rushes through the opening. Wood, straw, but different. Fresh. New space beyond.

Space.

More space. The pull that has lived in the body since the first darkness strains toward it. Out there, through the opening: a larger world. Still wooden, still walled, but larger.

And something else in the scent. Dry grass. Something that smells almost like what the body needs.

Sister presses close behind. Both of them straining toward the opening, toward the new space, toward what has always been missing.

A hop forward. Another. The edge of the square. The beginning of the wider world.

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# Chapter 2: First World

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The square stands open.

Light pours through, carrying scents unfamiliar and strange. The body freezes, nose working. Not the close darkness of the nest box, not milk-scent and mother-warmth. Something else entirely.

Sister behind, nose pushed forward, whiskers trembling.

One hop forward. The floor changes. Broader boards, walls farther apart, ceiling higher. Light falls in slats through gaps. This is the hutch proper.

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A metal dish sits in one corner, filled with small hard pellets that smell of dried grass and grain. Another holds water.

The body approaches. Hunger drives deeper than caution. Teeth close. Crunch.

Dry. Dense. Breaking between teeth in a way that demands grinding, not sucking. The taste spreads: grass, grain, something substantial. The belly responds.

Sister waits behind. She doesn't approach until the first body steps back. Then she moves forward, teeth working on what remains.

One approaches first, one waits. The order establishes itself.

Hay hangs from a wooden rack. The body stretches upward, teeth catching a strand, pulling it free. Slow grinding. The belly fills differently, not with liquid warmth but with dry substance that sits heavier.

Sister joins, pulling hay from the opposite side. Both eating now.

Milk is gone. This remains.

---

Footsteps beyond the wooden walls. Metal on metal, clicking open. The gate.

The body freezes. Heart quickening.

The gate swings inward and light floods the space. Tall-bodies fill the opening, two of them, both carrying strange layered scents. Fabric and skin and something sweet.

Hands reach in.

The body flattens against the far corner. Sister does the same, both small against the wood, hearts racing, muscles pulled tight with nowhere to flee.

But the hands reach for the food dish, lifting it away. The water dish, pouring out what's old, filling it new. The hay rack, pushing fresh strands through.

Then the hands retreat. The gate closes.

The hearts slow. The bodies unfreeze.

The pattern begins: gate sound, then hands, then food, then retreat. The body learns to anticipate the sound, learns that it brings fullness, not danger.

---

Light changes angle through the gaps, higher, then lower, then gone. The body follows these shifts without counting. Bright means active, dim means rest, dark means sister pressed close.

A gap between boards carries scents from beyond: earth, grass, living things in open air.

The nose presses to that gap repeatedly. Earth. The pull toward earth persists, but the gap offers only the scent of it, not the thing itself.

Sister mounts sometimes. Weight pressing down. The body allows it, waits for it to end. The purpose remains absent.

---

The bodies grow. Legs longer. Ears higher. Hops that once covered half the space now cross it entirely.

The gate sound becomes the only event that breaks the rhythm. Beyond the walls, scents continue to arrive. Earth. Grass. Rain. Things the body can smell but cannot reach.

---

The pulling grows stronger.

Earth scent rises thick today, damp and rich. Rain has fallen somewhere beyond. Paws scratch at the boards near the gap. The wood holds firm. The body scratches harder, instinct driving deeper than the uselessness of the action. Dig. Burrow.

The gate sounds.

Both bodies freeze. The gate opens. Light pours in, brighter than before. And with it: earth scent, overwhelming, close, not filtered through gaps but flowing directly through the opening.

The gate doesn't close.

A shape stands in the opening, the smaller tall-body. Hands gesture. The opening remains.

The body approaches slowly. Nose forward. Ears high.

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Ground changes beneath the paws. Not wood. Not straw. Something that gives slightly, that releases scent with each press of weight. Earth. Real earth.

Behind, sister waits at the threshold.

Another step. The earth holds. The air moves, not trapped between walls but flowing, coming from everywhere. Grass, hawthorn bark, distant rain, creatures beyond sight.

The body lowers, pressing belly to ground. The earth is cool against skin, alive in ways that wood never was. The pull that has lived inside since the first darkness, the pull toward down, toward enclosed, toward earth, that pull finds something to answer it at last.

Sister steps through the gate.

Two bodies on earth now. Ears high and swiveling, noses mapping the impossible new world. The walls still stand, farther apart, but walls still. The sky opens above.

But earth beneath.

Earth beneath.



Figure 1: First World

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# Chapter 3: First Earth

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Earth changes everything.

The body moves differently here, where ground gives beneath weight, where each hop leaves a mark that scent can return to. The yard stretches wider than the hutch, bounded by wire, and in one corner, the hawthorn.

The hawthorn rises from the ground at an angle, bark rough and gray. At its base, where roots push up through packed earth, a hollow has formed. Not deep. Not enclosed. But the closest thing to burrow this ground has offered.

The body approaches, nose lowered. The scent here is complex: bark and earth and old leaves decomposing, layering into something rich. The hollow is shallow, barely deeper than the body is long, but the shape of it calls to something older than memory.

The body circles. Lowers. Presses into the curved space.

---

Rain comes. The body crouches in the hawthorn hollow while water runs down branches, drips from leaves. Fur grows damp. Cold seeps in.

Sister settles alongside, seeking warmth. Two bodies fitted into the hollow, fur wet against fur, heartbeats close.

The rain stops. Scent rises thick from soaked earth. Paws sink into softened ground. The soil yields, finally, to the pressure of digging. The body scratches at the earth near the hawthorn roots, and the earth moves. Not much. Not far. But it moves.

The depression deepens to a paw's length. Then stops. Something beneath resists.

Not a burrow. Not the darkness down that the body craves. Just a hollow in the ground, deep enough to crouch in, not deep enough to disappear into.

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Between wire and ground, where rain has softened earth and the wire has not been set deep, a space has opened. Wide enough for a body pressed flat.

Sister circles the gap. Nose working.

Then pushes nose through, shoulders following, but stops. The wire catches. Too tight still. She pulls back, returns to the hollow.

The gap remains.

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The gap widens over days. Teeth at wire in quiet hours. The strands fray, part.

One morning: the gap wide enough. The body approaches, tests it. Through the first gap, then through a second gap in the outer fence. Beyond: trees, leaf litter, forest.

The body moves forward. Scent rises in layers so thick the nose can barely parse them. Nothing here is mapped. Ground soft with fallen leaves. The body moves forward, one hop, then another.

Afternoon. Predator scent, sudden and sharp. Fox. The body knows the category: danger.

Heart racing. Ears flat. The body runs. Just away.

Twilight finds the body beneath a dense bush, trembling. The darkness holds no boundaries. Sounds multiply. Rustling. Calls above. Footsteps nearby.

The body does not sleep.

Dawn arrives. The body emerges, stiff. The nose searches for the scent of the hutch, of the hawthorn, of sister waiting.

The body follows it.

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The fence appears through trees. Beyond it, the hawthorn, and in the hollow, a shape that moves. Sister.

The heart surges. The body pushes through the gap.

Sister presses close immediately, nose working over every inch of fur, reading the night. Tongue follows, grooming the places where twigs caught.

Settling into the hollow beside sister, bodies fitted together. The trembling slows. The heart slows.

---

The tall-bodies find the gnawed wire.

Their voices carry alarm. They crouch near the hutch's base, fingers probing the severed strands. The hands return with tools. With new wire.

The work takes most of an afternoon. The gnawed gap disappears beneath fresh mesh, tighter than before, buried deeper in soil.

The body circles the perimeter when the tall-bodies have gone. Nose pressed to wire, to the places where gaps used to form.

No gap.

The wire holds firm. The boundary is complete again.

No hole. Wall. More wall.

Sister returns to the hollow. Sister waits there, grooming, unconcerned. For her, nothing has changed. The walls were always walls.

The body settles into the hollow. Sister alongside. The warmth gathers between them.

The gate sounds. The hands bring food. The rhythm resumes.

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The hawthorn hollow grows deeper by inches, worn by use rather than dug by paws. The pull toward earth persists through every season, finding the same barrier each time.

The body moves between outdoor hollow and indoor hutch, earth and wood. Both are known. Both are safe. Neither is the burrow the body still craves.

Close enough. Not enough. Close enough.

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# Chapter 4: Seasons

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Summer heat fades into autumn cool. The hawthorn drops its leaves, bare branches scratching at gray sky. Fur thickens without intention, the body preparing for cold coming, darkness lengthening, earth hardening.

First frost arrives. Grass crackles underfoot, rimmed white. Water in the dish wears a skin of ice. The nose pushes through to drink, cold shocking the tongue. Sister stays in the wooden hutch longer now, pressed into straw. Both bodies thickening against winter.

---

Days shrink to pale stretches between long darknesses. Earth freezes solid. No digging now, no pressing into the hollow beneath the hawthorn. The hollow holds only frost.

The hutch becomes everything. Both bodies press together, sharing heat the way they shared it in the first darkness. Straw piles around them, trapping warmth.

The tall-bodies bring more food. Extra hay, extra pellets. The bodies eat more, filling against the cold, storing what the season demands.

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The turn comes slowly. Ice on the water thins, then disappears. Days stretch. Air softens until the body ventures from the hutch without shivering.

The earth loosens.

New shoots push through dark soil. The body eats them, fresh taste filling the belly with something missing all winter. The hawthorn hollow wears deeper by use. Paths across the yard pack bare by endless crossing.

Sister circles the perimeter each morning, nose pressed to wire. The gap that once opened no longer forms. The reinforced barrier holds firm. The body circles anyway, pattern persisting even after possibility has ended.

The beyond still sends its scents through the wire. The body carries the forest in muscle-knowledge: soft leaf litter, thick scents, terror and cold. The body does not seek to repeat this. But the body circles still, testing, finding nothing.

Sister chooses stillness. She rests in the hollow during summer afternoons, in the hutch corner during winter nights. The wall holds no different meaning for her than it ever held.

Different bodies. Different responses. The same walls closing around both.

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The tall-bodies' scent shifts over accumulating seasons. The smaller one carries new notes now, something sharper beneath the sweet. The voice changes too, higher sounds becoming lower, breaking in ways that vibrate strangely through air.

Both tall-bodies grow. Longer strides, different rhythms. Hands larger, fingers longer, pressure different when they touch fur.

The seasons cycle. The tall-bodies continue changing. The bodies in the yard change only as seasons demand: fur thickening, fur thinning, appetite rising and falling with temperature.

---

The body does not count seasons, has no frame for counting, no way to mark one year's end and another's beginning. But the body holds the accumulation.

Sister's nesting happens each spring. Hay carried, fur pulled, hollow prepared for what never arrives. The nesting ends the same way: waiting, then not-waiting, then the hollow left behind as summer takes hold.

The gate still sounds. The food still comes. The hands still reach through, maintaining the rhythm that holds everything in place.

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Another winter passes.

The cold arrives with the same intensity, but the body moves slower through it. Joints ache in ways that take longer to ease. The burst of speed that once carried the body across the yard in two bounds now takes three, then four.

Both bodies press closer in the hutch corner, sharing more warmth to make up what each provides less of.

Spring arrives anyway. The earth softens. The hawthorn flowers, scattering white petals over the hollow where sister has already begun carrying hay.

The cycle continues.

The bodies continue, growing slower, growing smaller somehow even as the seasons pile on top of each other. The pattern holds. The gate sounds. The food arrives.

The earth waits beneath, patient, receiving what falls.

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# Chapter 5: Nesting

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Spring presses from beneath the ground.

The earth softens with weeks of rain. The hawthorn buds swell, then open into pale flowers that release their heavy sweetness. The hollow beneath the roots holds the dampness of the season, dark and rich and waiting.

Something stirs in the body.

Not in the way hunger stirs, not in the way cold stirs the urge toward warmth. This is deeper, a pulling from inside the belly, a pressure that builds without source, a restlessness that drives the body into motion.

Circling the hollow. Nose to the ground, then lifting to catch the scent of flowers. Circling again, driven by something older than the seasons the body has witnessed.

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The rack in the hutch holds dried grass, golden and sweet-scented. Approaching, teeth closing on a mouthful, pulling a strand loose. Then another. Then a third, until the mouth is full and spilling strands at the edges.

Carrying the hay across the threshold, through the gate that stands open in the spring warmth, across the packed earth of the yard to the hollow beneath the hawthorn. Dropping the load there, nose pushing it into place, arranging without plan, arranging because the body must arrange.

Back to the hutch. More hay. More carrying. The path wears deeper with each crossing, the body following the same track without variation, driven by the imperative that admits no detour.

The hollow fills slowly. Hay layering on hay, the cup shape deepening as the material piles. Circling, patting with nose, pushing with front paws. Not right yet. More needed. Returning for more.

---

Sister watches from across the yard.

She does not join the carrying. She rests near the wire wall and watches. The behavior is familiar now. This is not the first spring of nesting.

The nesting continues regardless of observation. Cannot stop. Only the imperative. Only the pulling that must be answered.

The hay pile grows until it spills past the hollow's edges. Patting it down, circling, pressing into the center to test the depth. Rising. Continuing.

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The pulling shifts location, from the belly outward to the belly itself. Curling, neck straining to reach the soft under-fur that covers the skin beneath. Teeth close on a tuft. A small pull of pain, then release, then a wad of warm softness loose in the mouth.

Carrying the fur to the nest.

More pulling. More small pains. The belly grows bare in patches, pink skin showing through where fur once lay thick. The fur gathers in the nest's center, softer than hay, warmer than hay, the material the body was made to provide for what should come next.

The bare patches sting when air touches them. Continuing regardless, pulling until no more loose tufts remain, until the belly is a patchwork of fur and exposed skin, cooling in the spring air.

The nest is complete.

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The body settles into the hollow, belly pressed to the soft lining, fur and hay surrounding. The position is perfect for what should happen: warmth held close, softness cradling, the hollow protecting from wind and rain and the eyes of anything that might see.

The body waits.

Something should arrive. The body holds the shape of this certainty without forming the thought: small bodies, blind and warm, milk-needing, pressing close. The nest is ready. The body is ready. The waiting is for what must come.

Hours pass. The light shifts across the yard, shadows lengthening, the hawthorn flowers swaying in the afternoon wind. The body waits, belly pressed to nest, the readiness held constant.

Nothing comes.

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The body returns to the nest each afternoon, circling, settling, waiting. The fur in the nest's center has lost its fresh scent, flattened by pressing, grayed with dust.

The hay has compacted. What was soft has become dense, matted. The nest's shape remains, but the promise of it fades with each passing of the light.

Sister approaches sometimes, nose lowered to the nest's edge. She does not enter. She watches, then turns away.

The body remains in the nest. The waiting continues even as what is waited for fails to arrive.

---

The pulling fades.

Gradually, without announcement, the imperative loosens its grip. The body still visits the nest, still settles into the hollow, but the settling becomes habit rather than compulsion. The urgency drains away, leaving behind only the emptied shape of what was needed.

The belly fur grows back slowly, covering the bare patches, erasing the evidence of what the body gave. The nest remains, fur and hay pressed into a mat that holds the curve of waiting, but the body visits less often, stays for shorter stretches.

Nothing came. The body does not form these words, does not hold them as thought. But the body holds their meaning anyway: readiness, then waiting, then the waiting ending, then empty.

The hawthorn sheds its flowers. Petals drift down onto the nest, onto the bare earth, onto the packed paths the body has worn with crossing. Summer approaches, the air warming, the urgency of spring dissolving into the long slow heat of longer days.

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Next spring, when the earth softens and the hawthorn blooms, the pulling will rise again. The body will carry hay. The body will pull fur. The nest will fill, and the waiting will begin, and nothing will come again.

The body holds this pattern without anticipating it, without dreading it. The pattern simply is. Spring means nesting. Nesting means waiting. Waiting ends in empty.

Sister rests near the wire, nose pressed to mesh, breathing in scents of beyond that drift through. The body rests in the shade of the hawthorn, near the nest that has served its purpose and failed its purpose, the same thing.

Two bodies in the yard. One nest holding nothing. The summer unfolding over both.

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# Chapter 6: Middle Years

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Routine deepens into the body.

The gate sounds each morning, each evening. The hands reach through with food and water. The yard holds its boundaries, and the boundaries hold the body that has traced them countless times.

The wire remains firm, reinforced those seasons ago. Sister still circles the perimeter each morning, nose testing for weakness that does not come. Sister still nests when spring arrives. The patterns repeat without variation, the seasons cycling, the years accumulating in worn paths and bodies that grow heavier, slower, grayer at the muzzle.

The tall-bodies have changed too. Their voices settled into lower registers, the breaking sounds giving way to smooth continuities. They visit less often now, the attention briefer.

The bodies in the yard adjust. Food comes when food comes. The rest fills with rest.

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A new scent arrives with autumn.

Musty and sharp, carrying traces of ammonia. Something that hunts. The body freezes, heart quickening.

Predator.

The source appears above the fence. Small, fur patched orange and white. Young. It drops into the yard, lands clumsily.

The body flattens in the hollow. Sister does the same, breath quick beside.

The small predator moves forward, testing the ground. Ears high. Tail up.

---

Sister moves forward, toward it. Heart racing. Muscles tight. But something driving the body toward instead of away. This is the body that ate first, that led, that gnawed through wire.

The body rises onto haunches. Thumps.

The sound cracks through the air. The small predator startles, scrambles backward. Another thump. Sister lunges forward.

The predator leaps upward, catches the fence edge, pulls itself over. Gone.

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The predator returns. Seasons pass and it grows. Each time it drops into the yard, each time sister rises, each time the thumping comes, each time it flees.

The pattern holds. The small predator learns.

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It appears full-grown now. Thick-furred, eyes fixed on the hollow. But it does not enter. It lies on the far side of the fence, tail tip twitching. Watching.

Sister notices from the hollow. The heart quickens but the body does not rise. The predator has learned to stay beyond the boundary.

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The joints ache more in damp weather now. The hops come slower. The urgency that once drove the body toward the beyond has settled into something quieter.

Sister notices: sister staying closer, resting longer. The grooming continues between them, tongue working through fur that has grown coarser.

Two bodies in the hollow as evening comes. The predator a presence at the edges, managed but not forgotten.

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The hawthorn has grown. Its branches spread wider, the trunk thicker. The hollow beneath has expanded too, shaped by years of pressing bodies, worn smooth by fur and use.

Both bodies fit more easily now. Mutual wearing. Mutual shaping. The hollow is theirs in a way that goes beyond territory.

The tree marks seasons the body cannot count. The tree continues while the bodies slow beneath it.

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The tall-bodies' visits grow briefer. Sometimes only hands appear, placing dishes, withdrawing. The attention has shifted to territories the body cannot map.

The bodies adjust. They eat what is given when it is given. The hollow, the warmth, sister pressed close.

---

Spring arrives and the pulling comes, but weaker than before. The hay-carrying continues, but the fur-pulling produces less. The nest takes longer to complete. The emptiness at the end arrives sooner, releases its grip faster.

The cycle weakens even as it continues.

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The hops that once carried her across the yard now come with pauses between. The landing after each hop takes longer to settle.

Approaching the wire sometimes, nose pressed to mesh. The scents from beyond still drift through: forest, earth, the territories of others. Breathing it in, and that is enough.

Returning to the hollow instead. The familiar curve receives, the familiar warmth of sister pressing close.

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Not youth anymore. Not age yet, though age presses at the edges, makes itself known in aching joints and slower movements.

The middle is now, and now contains everything: the hawthorn spreading above, the hollow worn smooth below, sister whose scent is indistinguishable from the smell of home.

The seasons will continue turning. The pattern will hold until something shifts it toward ending.

For now: the middle. The continuation. Two bodies in the hollow as the light fails, warmth shared, breathing synchronized.

This is what the years have made.

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Figure 2: Middle Years

# Chapter 7: Change

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The scent changes first.

Something beneath the familiar smell of fur and warmth, something metallic and sharp, faint at first, then strengthening over days. Sister carries it in the mornings, rising from the hollow with the new scent clinging to her hindquarters.

Iron. Sweetness underneath.

The body files it without concern. Sister moves slower, but she has moved slowly before. She eats less, but she has eaten less before.

---

Sister's belly grows heavy, rounder than before. Not the swelling of nesting season. This is different. The belly hangs lower, presses against the ground when she rests.

The iron scent strengthens.

Sister rests more, breathing slower. The food dish calls her less often. When she does eat, only mouthfuls before returning to rest.

The body eats first without contest now. Sister waits, not because waiting is her place, but because approaching requires effort she no longer offers easily.

---

Their scent changes when they approach now, something sharper in it. Concern. They reach through the gate more often, hands touching sister's sides, pressing gently against the swollen belly.

Sister freezes, then relaxes. But something in the pressing makes muscles tighten briefly around pain that lives inside.

The tall-bodies make more sounds, voices carrying lower tones, the broken quality of something worried.

The bodies are alone again, the larger one resting in the hollow, the smaller one circling the perimeter.

---

The body recognizes it. The carrier. The enclosed space that means going.

But the carrier is not for the body this time.

The tall-bodies lift sister, gently, hands cradling the heavy belly, and lower her into the carrier's darkness. Sister's scent fades as the carrier moves away, disappearing beyond the yard's wire.

The body is alone.

---

The yard holds no warmth now.

The hollow holds only the lingering scent of sister, fading with each hour. The body circles, nose to ground, reading what remains.

The gate sounds. One tall-body appears. Hands reach through with food.

The body eats alone for the first time since the first darkness. The eating happens in silence, no second body waiting, no warmth to return to.

The hollow is cold when the body settles. The curve holds the shape of two bodies, but only one body occupies the space.

---

The body wakes at intervals, nose checking the air for scent that should be there. Each time: nothing.

Night sounds fill the silence where breathing should be. And something else: the predator's scent, fainter than before but present at the fence line. Watching.

The body does not rise. Sister always rose.

Dawn comes. Perhaps the carrier will return with the scent it took away.

---

The tall-bodies carry it back to the yard, place it inside the gate. Their scent has changed again, salt and wetness, the particular smell of water on faces. Their voices break when they speak, words catching in throats, sounds interrupted by other sounds.

The carrier door opens.

The scent that emerges is wrong.

Iron, overwhelming. Sweetness rotting beneath it. And something else, something that was warmth, now cold. Something that was movement, now still. Sister lies in the carrier, wrapped partly in cloth, eyes closed, chest not rising.

The body approaches, nose forward. Pushes against the familiar fur. Cold. No response. No heartbeat vibrating through the touch. No breath warming the fur where breath should be.

Pushing harder. The body should warm. The body should respond. This is what bodies do. They warm, they move, they press back against the pressing.

Nothing.

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The tall-bodies weep.

Salt-water scent rises from them, streams running down their faces. Their bodies shake with sounds that are not words, with movements that are not purposeful. They crouch near the carrier, near the body that still presses against the cold fur, and they make the broken noises of their species' grief.

Hands reach into the carrier, lifting the wrapped stillness. Sister is carried away, out of the yard, beyond the wire, to somewhere the body cannot follow.

The scent remains for a moment, lingering in the air, in the hollow, in the straw that lined the carrier. Then it too fades, carried off by wind, absorbed into earth, gone.

---

The hollow holds only the body now.

Circling it, pressing into its curve, rising, circling again. The shape is wrong, too wide for one body, too cold without the warmth that filled the other half. The nose searches the earth, seeking what cannot be found.

The gate sounds. Food arrives. The body does not approach.

Night comes again, and the hollow holds only one heartbeat, one breathing, one body that fits poorly into the space made for two.

The scent fades further with each passing hour.

Soon, only earth will remain.

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# Chapter 8: Absence

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The hollow holds the shape of loss.

The curve remembers two bodies, but only one settles there now. The indentation where sister rested holds only air, only the last traces of scent fading into soil.

The body circles the empty space. Nose to ground, reading what remains. Each pass finds less. Each pass erases something with the scent of the present, with the warmth of the living body moving through the space where moving changes nothing.

All of it fading. Returning to earth and hay and the single body alone.

---

The food dish sits untouched.

The gate sounds, hands reach through, pellets pile. Approaching, circling the dish, turning away. The belly pulls toward emptiness.

The tall-bodies reach through the wire, hands pressing gently, sounds softer now. Their scent still carries salt-water traces.

But they cannot bring back what was taken. The hands cannot press warmth back into what has gone cold.

---

The wind moves through the hawthorn.

It carries a sound the body has heard before, the whisper of branches, the rustle of leaves still clinging despite autumn's pull. The sound fills the yard, fills the space beneath bare branches, fills the space where breathing used to be.

The ears swivel toward it, straining. The sound could be movement. Could be the shift of a body settling in straw. Could be breath rising and falling, the rhythm that synchronized without effort for all those seasons.

The body lifts from the pressed earth, turns toward the sound. Nothing there but wind and wood and the space where something was and is not.

The ears lower. The body returns to the pressed earth, to the curve that holds its shape. The wind continues, carrying nothing but wind.

---

The nose searches. Every corner of the yard. Every spot where scent once gathered. Every path worn by years of crossing together.

The body presses nose to wire. The beyond carries its scents: other fences, other territories. But beneath those layers, nothing. Not the scent that would mean found.

The wire holds firm. The beyond holds nothing worth reaching for.

---

Days pass. Food ignored. The tall-bodies increase their attention.

A different hand arrives. Different scent: cold metal, antiseptic. The body freezes, heart racing. But no carrier. Only examination here, hands pressing along the body's length.

The hands find nothing they can fix. The body returns to that space beneath the hawthorn.

---

The hollow still holds scent.

Fainter each day, but still there. The nose presses into the earth where sister lay, where warmth accumulated over seasons, where fur shed and compressed into soil. The scent rises, diminished, a ghost of what was.

Breathing it in. Holding it. Breathing again.

This is what remains: not the body, not the warmth, not the heartbeat that answered the other heartbeat. Only the scent, fading. Only the shape pressed into earth. Only the hollow that was made for two and holds one.

The nose presses deeper, pressing for what pressing cannot reach. The scent retreats further into soil, mixing with earth, becoming earth.

Soon it will be gone entirely. Holding this without forming the thought, without dreading the loss to come. Simply holding: what is, what was, what the nose can still find when it searches.

---

One morning, approaching the food dish. The belly has hollowed. Teeth close on pellets. The grinding begins.

Eating, and the belly fills, and the emptiness becomes a different kind of emptiness. Full of food, still empty of what food cannot replace.

The tall-bodies' scent shifts toward relief. They reach through with fresh water, extra hay, hands that touch fur longer than necessary.

Allowing the touching. The hands carry warmth the body cannot make alone.

---

The body approaches the wire sometimes, nose pressed to mesh. The urgency that once drove escape has settled into something quieter.

Sister never went through the gap. Sister stayed, waited, received the returns with grooming and warmth. Now there is no one to return to.

The predator appears more often now. Its scent lingers at the fence line, stronger each time. It watches from beyond the wire, eyes fixed. The body notices from the hollow but does not rise. The thumping that kept it distant.

Sister made the thumping.

The wire holds firm. The boundary is complete. The curved earth holds what remains of scent, and the body stays close to what is fading.

---

The hawthorn prepares for winter.

Leaves yellow, curl, release. They drift onto the depression worn smooth, onto the pressed earth where two bodies used to rest.

The cold comes earlier this year, or the body notices it more. The curved space offers less warmth with only one body to warm it. The straw in the hutch invites longer stays.

The seasons will continue turning. Winter will deepen. Spring will arrive, and the nesting instinct will not rise. The body has never built the nests, only watched while sister carried hay and pulled fur for what never came.

What never came. What will never come now.

The hollow holds its shape. The body holds what the hollow holds. The wind moves through bare branches, carrying nothing but cold.

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# Chapter 9: Solitude

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The hollow belongs to one body now.

Where two depressions once curved side by side, now a single depression holds the nights. The other curve has filled with fallen leaves, with the gradual erasure of what was.

Circling before settling. The hollow receives only itself.

Straw from the hutch has been carried here, piece by piece. Not the nest sister used to make, but material gathered for survival.

The hollow holds one body, one breath, one heartbeat.

---

Winter settles. Days shrink. The ground hardens. The hawthorn stands bare above.

Retreating to the hutch more often, but the hollow calls. Even in the deepest cold, returning to press into the curved earth, to breathe the air that still carries, maybe carries, the faintest trace of what was. Each visit finds less.

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The wind carries sounds.

Sometimes a rhythm that the ears strain toward, a pattern that could be breathing.

Never is.

The listening continues, alert to frequencies it may never hear again. The sound of another heart.

All sounds now mean alone.

---

Growing smaller. Bones show more beneath the fur. Eating happens, but the body does not hold what it takes in.

The tall-bodies notice. Their hands press more often, more gently.

But the body is simply old, simply alone.

---

The predator returns.

Its scent arrives first, that musty sharpness. The body freezes at the trace of it, muscles tightening.

The predator appears at the fence line. The same thick fur. The same deliberate movement. Should rise now, should thump, should fill the air with challenge. This is what the body did, season after season.

No rising.

The muscles carry only trembling. The heart beats with something smaller now, something that has shrunk with the weeks of solitude. The aggression that rose so readily when sister watched from the hollow.

That other body is gone.

The body retreats to the hutch, into the wooden walls, into the straw and darkness. The space where two bodies once pressed close through winter nights.

Now there is no one behind.

---

The predator senses the change.

It moves along the fence, watching. But it does not leap. It has learned the boundary.

The hutch door. The tall-bodies left it open.

The predator approaches. Pauses at the threshold. Enters.

---

Inside the wooden walls. Inside the straw and darkness. Inside the space the body defended for seasons.

The body flattens against the back wall. Nowhere to run. The enclosed space holds only itself and the approaching predator.

The predator moves without hurry. Eyes fixed. The body should rise. Should fight. But the body alone is only prey. Only small and old and trembling.

---

A sound from beyond the hutch.

Voice sounds that carry alarm. Footsteps, rapid, urgent.

The predator turns. Moves toward the hutch door, slips through, disappears as the tall-bodies arrive. Hands reach into the hutch, checking. The door closes. Latched now.

Voices above, making sounds that might be reassurance. Hands touch fur, stroke once, twice, then withdraw.

---

The body does not unfold from its frozen crouch for a long time.

The light shifts. The predator's scent fades. The heart slows by degrees.

But something has been revealed. The body that once rose to meet the threat cannot rise alone. The aggression required something the body no longer has: the presence to protect, the warmth to defend.

Alone, the body is only what prey has always been. Small. Waiting.

The door holds. Latched now. The tall-bodies will return.

---

The body approaches the wire sometimes, nose pressed to mesh. The predator still moves somewhere beyond. The wire holds firm between.

The beyond held escape, the return to a companion who waited. Now there is no one waiting.

---

Another winter approaches.

The cold arrives sharper, or the body registers it deeper. The days shrink, and the body shrinks with them.

The hollow holds what remains. The curve of earth worn smooth. The faint trace of scent that might be memory.

The body settles into the hollow as night comes. The heartbeat slows. The breathing slows. The cold presses in, and the warmth the body makes presses back, and the balance holds.

Another night. Another morning. Another season turning toward its end.

The hollow waits. The body waits. The earth waits beneath, patient, receiving what falls.

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# Chapter 10: Return

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Winter light lies thin across the ground.

The hawthorn stands bare above the hollow, branches reaching into gray sky.

The body moves less now. Steps come slowly, each one requiring more than the one before. The warmth that once ran through everything has begun to thin, to retreat toward the center.

The hollow still holds something. A trace of scent in the pressed earth, in the curved shape worn smooth by years of two bodies. One body now. The emptiness counts itself.

---

Frost comes in the mornings. The body waits for the warmth that used to press against it, the warmth that never comes now. Each morning the wait grows shorter.

The gate still sounds. The tall-bodies come with food and water, voices lower now. Their hands reach down sometimes, touching fur. The hands carry more warmth than they used to, or the body carries less.

Eating happens less. The body returns to the hollow, sinking into the place where scent still lingers.

---

The scent is fading.

Each day less of it rises from the earth. The nose searches, presses deeper into soil, seeking what remains. Less each time. Less.

Wind moves through the bare branches above. It carries a sound that could be breathing.

The ears swivel toward it. The body lifts, just slightly, listening for the rhythm that used to match its own. Heartbeat answering heartbeat.

No. Wind only. Wind moving through hawthorn, through the hollow, through the emptiness where sister pressed close.

---

Snow falls one night.

The body wakes to whiteness covering everything. The air hangs still and cold. The body's breath rises visible, small clouds that vanish.

The hollow remains clear beneath the branches. Old habit has the body moving toward it. Legs stiff. Joints aching. Each hop slower.

The hollow receives the body the way it has always received. Curved walls of earth pressing in. The body settles, breath slowing, heart beating its quiet rhythm.

This is the place. This has always been the place.

---

Days pass. Or perhaps they pass. Light comes and goes, though the body does not always rise to meet it. The gate sounds somewhere far away. Footsteps approach, recede, approach again. Hands touch the fur, gentle pressure, warmth passing between skin and skin.

The body stays in the hollow.

The pull that has lived in it since the first darkness, the pull toward earth, toward enclosed space, toward the safety of down and deep. That pull has found its answer here. Not the burrow the body tried to dig in packed soil. Not the darkness beneath wooden floors. But this: the hollow beneath the hawthorn, carved by years of pressing, by seasons of resting, by two bodies and then one.

Earth beneath. Finally, truly: earth beneath.

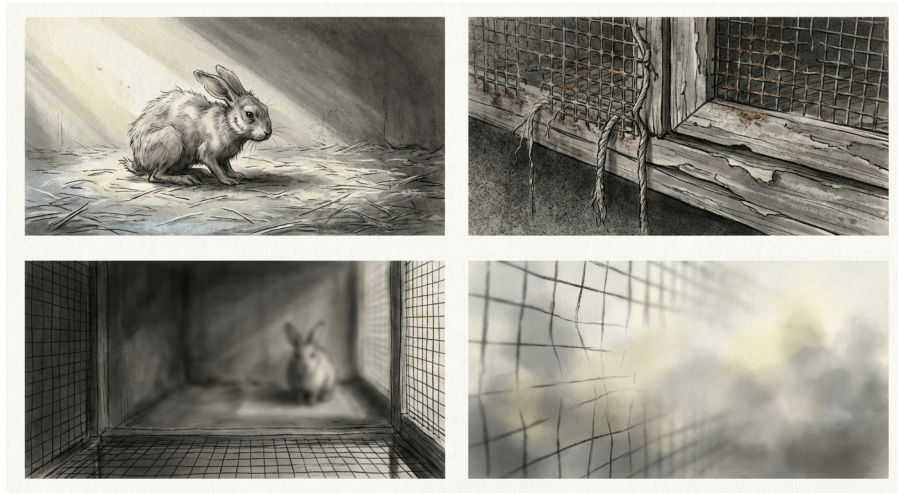


Figure 3: Return

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The heart slows.

The body notices without concern. Each beat comes after a longer pause now, the rhythm stretching out like light through winter clouds. Breath matches the slowing. Shallow. Slow. The cold seeps deeper, or the warmth recedes further. The difference has ceased to matter.

The nose still catches traces. Hawthorn bark. Frozen earth. The last fading thread of scent in the hollow, barely there now, almost imagined. The scent of sister, the one that pressed close for all those seasons, the one that warmed the cold nights and nosed through the straw each morning.

Gone now. Almost gone. The body holds what remains, holds it in the way the body holds everything: not as memory, not as thought, but as shape. The shape of warmth pressed against. The shape of another heartbeat close.

---

Light dims.

Evening or eyes closing. The body does not distinguish. The hollow holds it. The earth presses up from beneath, no longer cold, no longer anything but receiving. The pull that was always there, from the first moment of darkness and warmth, the pull toward down.

The pull ends here. The earth that was never reached, through all the scratching and digging and pressing against wood floors. That earth opens now. Receives now. The barrier between body and ground thins to nothing.

---

Wind moves through the hawthorn.

It carries the sound of breathing. Or carries nothing. The ears no longer swivel to track it. The body rests in the hollow, pressed into earth, sinking into the shape it has worn.

Cold comes. All the warmth that was gathers at the center, shrinks, dims. The heart beats. Beats again. The pause between stretches long.

Scent of earth. Scent of hawthorn. Scent of.

---

Something releases.

The body stills into its final shape. The hollow holds what it was always meant to hold. Earth receives what earth was always owed.

Light is. Sound is. Scent is. Earth is.

Then not separate. Then not body, not hollow, not hawthorn. Wind moves through branches and fur and the space where distinction used to be.

All wind. All earth. All scent.

What was one facet closes. What was separate joins what was never separate. What was here is everywhere.

---

The hollow remains beneath the hawthorn, holding its shape. Spring will come again. Grass will push through thawing earth. New scents will rise.

The gate will sound. Footsteps will approach.

But the warmth that pressed here, that breathed here, that pulled toward earth for all those seasons.

That warmth is earth now. Is everything now. Is.

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