

Kittens and Bunnies

Everything was a mess for a while, but the kittens and bunnies turned out fine. Well all right, technically, three kittens did get burned up, and three bunnies did disappear and probably got eaten, but they're fine too in death's everlasting peace. The survivors, all they needed was a little food, a little water and a little space to frolic. Ours had that, so there you go.

The fire was a fiasco for everyone, but the disappearance of the bunnies was Sola's personal nightmare. It was a hard lesson for a young girl. It happened the morning after the second night, when she went out to feed them their Purina Rabbit Chow® Garden Recipe® ... a product my wife and I selected on the basis of its claim to *be formulated for all breeds of rabbits and bunnies at all ages. It's the fun way to feed your rabbits the very best!* I didn't even know bunnies had breeds, and as for their ages, all I knew was they were little, so it was comforting to know the feed people had those bases covered. Plus, the feeding certainly needed to be fun because their feedmistress would have a new chore for a long time, and she needed to stay motivated. Obviously, motivation wasn't the only thing she needed, but mistakes are the way you learn when you're seven.

When you're twenty nine too, come to think about it.

I got blindsided by the bunnies. When we approached the flea market table with the cage on it and I saw what the lady was selling, I voiced my advance veto of anything beyond looking and petting. This worked while little-girl fingers poked through the mesh and wiggled against the fur, and it continued unchallenged through the opening of the cage door and the lady pulling one out for Sola to hold.

Right there. Letting that happen is where I made my first mistake. Fingers petted, nose nuzzled arm above elbow, tongue licked; daughter tugged at sleeve, looked up the way she does and said, “Daddy, please, please, can’t we?” Well, I was toast. Rhonda rolled her eyes and chuckled; I stammered and whined about “commitment” and “responsibility”, but I ended up buying the whole litter, cage and all. Cheaper in the long run, I thought, than shopping for cages and the little gadgets they had attached. The gadgets’ purposes were not intuitively obvious, but I figured they were important or they wouldn’t be there, so besides the money there was the avoidance of that learning curve.

We brought seven bunnies home, and four remained in the cage that night despite Sola’s open invitation to freedom when she failed to latch the hatch. I like to think she played a small part in the evolution of the species *rabbitus domesticus* ... or whatever the eggheads call bunnies ... by weeding out the individuals genetically inclined toward exploration, but what do I know, I’m no biologist. We do know coyotes prowl the neighborhood after dark because we hear their yips and squeals in the hills, so my guess is they’re who got the bunnies. Coyotes, loose dogs, or even feral cats, it doesn’t matter; three bunnies got gone.

The morning-after discovery was a big deal; I’d never seen her that upset. We’d talked about the coyotes, so when she counted noses and saw the open hatch, she came in screaming and sobbing about being a bunny killer.

Bunny killer? My first thought was, “We just got them! And who taught her how to kill bunnies, anyway?” Her mom dealt with it sensibly and calmly, though, coaxing the story out and then hugging and rocking until the sobfest settled into sniffles, which

dried up upon Rhonda's description of Bunny Heaven: a magical place with infinite carrots and lettuce, endless clean water and unlimited places to hop.

Heaven wasn't new. Rhonda manufactured a human version a few months earlier when Sola brought home questions about religious myths she'd heard from playmates. With Sola standing in wide-eyed innocence, Rhonda threw me a smile and proceeded to conjure up a word picture of a perfectly happy place in the sky where you go when you die. I guess my expression told her I wasn't really on board with feeding a line of bullshit to this girl we were trying so hard to bring up healthy, because in bed that night she aligned it with Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. "Maybe next year we should tell her all that stuff was just for her entertainment and imagination."

Roger that.

"Heaven" was one of many waypoints along our stumbling path through parenting. The books are full of advice, but we're discovering that improvisation is, in the end, all you've got. We hope we're producing a healthy, well-adjusted adult, but my mom always said you can't know; kids don't necessarily turn out the way you expect.

When Rhonda was pregnant Mom came by to drop off some baby clothes, and Rhonda said she spent the afternoon telling her about her own childhood to drive home her point about unforeseen consequences. I already knew Mom's story, of course, and all I can say is I hope the way Sola turns out isn't as far from our hopes as Mom says she turned out to be for Grandma.

Grandma was a strict, rah-rah, fundamentalist Christian, and she ran her home accordingly. With no help from Grandpa, apparently. He ran off when Mom was in her

early teens, and when I finally met him and saw his relaxed attitude, I understood the part about running off. The way Mom describes Grandma? No doubt.

Mom said she started her own breakaway when Grandma told her dogs don't go to Heaven. She was 11 when her dog "Shep" died. She says Shep meant more to her than any human being ... especially Grandma, whom she characterized, both to Rhonda that day and to my sister and me when we were kids, as a scheming martinet. We've all had to take her word for it because we never met Grandma; to her we don't exist.

Mom says the Dogless Heaven Dogma, or "the DHD", as she calls it with a sneer, rose from Grandma's belief that humans aren't part of the animal kingdom; they're godlike creatures put on Earth to run things. Heaven is reserved for the god-clones who heed preachers like at Grandma's church ... men who were ordained to be the explainers of the many contradictions in His Baffling Scriptures. So, quod erat demonstrandum, dogs could not be permitted ... even if they fetched and rolled over.

Hoping it would restore her beloved friend to God's welcoming arms, Mom said she brought the news home from school that humans shared most of their DNA with other mammals, including dogs. But she said Grandma was not moved. Her response? "I just wish your tightwad father would cut loose the money to send you kids to New Life Academy ... where they teach Scriptural Science instead of that public school hogwash."

Mom told of a picnic in a river gorge, where a discussion arose about the rock strata in the walls above. To Mom's school-trained eyes these were the result of sediment deposited over millions of years, but Grandma advised, no, God had carefully crafted it to look that way when He created it 6,000 years ago; He devised the ruse to test our faithfulness to Him, she said. Mom said she started to wonder why if the 6,000-year

story worked, couldn't it just as well be that God created everything one second ago and implanted all our memories? She didn't throw that out, though, because she said around Grandma you learned to keep your mouth shut.

It's one thing to shut your mouth, but it's not so easy to shut off your thoughts, and the idea that Grandma and her church were out of touch with reality kept growing. Gradually, secretly, Mom evicted the whole thing from the center of her universe, replacing it with nothing. Life is an unfathomable mystery arising out of nowhere, and all the attempts like Grandma's to explain it, she says she decided later, are just pathetic head trips and ways to get people stirred up.

But to get back to Mom's point about unexpected consequences, obviously Grandma expected the DHD to buttress her theory about the god-clones, but it backfired. Mom started asking around the church, and nobody could quote a Bible verse in support of it. Bible verses are everything to those people, so that was big. Whenever she tells the story of her path to liberation she always cites both the DHD and the rock story because together they proved that Grandma could believe anything. Lack of Bible verses or observation of the obvious, neither one could get in the way once Grandma decided to believe something. However, those two things weren't in themselves what pushed Mom out the door. She said Billy Graham is who did that.

Billy was a big deal in that day, hobnobbing with Presidents and putting on giant church services in stadiums around the world. Mom told of the family sitting around Grandma's floor-mounted radio set every Sunday night listening to his "Hour of Decision", and how Grandma closed her eyes whenever Billy prayed or George Beverly Shea sang in his deep baritone voice. She said Grandpa bitched about the money she

kept sending to “Billy Graham, Minneapolis, Minnesota; that’s all the address you need,” but Grandma always came back about how it was her money and she’d send it anywhere she wanted, so after a while he shut up.

Billy’s “Crusade for Christ” was where Mom had her epiphany. It was at Wrigley Field in Chicago, and they just barely got there on time, which she said made Grandma furious. The whole way up from Peoria, she kept harping about how they weren’t going to get good seats, and it was all on account of their dad’s dilly-dallying: cleaning the windows, checking the oil level, using a hydrometer to test the specific gravity of the battery’s electrolyte and correcting the tire pressure with the compressor he rolled out from the garage ... all at the last minute, when he had plenty of time to do those things earlier in the day and which was so typical of both his self-centeredness and his lack of organization, unfortunately. Mom said this was the year before Grandpa ran off with Leona, a girl just a few years older than her.

Grandma was right: they ended up high in the bleachers behind center field, and not only could you barely see Billy, there was a girl right ahead of Mom who kept turning around and sticking out her tongue. Mom thought it was funny, and after a while she stuck hers out in return, but Grandma, presumably thinking she was directing the gesture at Billy, slapped her face. She says Aunt Rachel and Uncle Amos put on beatific smiles, looked straight ahead at Billy and pretended not to notice the sin or the retribution.

When Billy called for people to come forward and accept Christ as their personal savior or rededicate their lives to Him, and when his sidekick cued the grand pianos and the stadium organ to lead the 1,000-voice choir in singing the altar-call song, Grandma got up and marched the whole family down through the maze of stairs and hallways, out

onto the field and up to the throng at the foot of the stage. Mom says they had people moving around praying and counseling people, but she doesn't remember what they said or she said. What she does remember is the girl, who had also gone down there with her parents and ended up at the same place in the crowd. Mom saw her bow her head and mouth some words along with the counselor, so she's sure she got saved, but as she and her parents were walking away the girl gave Mom the finger behind her back. Stroked it up and down a couple of times, like she wanted to be sure Mom didn't miss it.

Mom says that's when she decided the whole "saved" thing was bogus, although she had to keep quiet about it until she moved away to college because she didn't like getting slapped ... by Grandma or Uncle Amos, either one. Uncle Amos is twelve years older than Mom, and she says after Grandpa left he acted like being grown up made him responsible for Grandma. Moved all his stuff into the master bedroom, as if taking Grandpa's place would atone for the way "Dad" ran off with Satan's legions. Mom said there was a lot more to it than just that, but she never went any further, and my sister and I were so horrified that our great uncle might be our real grandfather that we've never pushed the issue. With uncertainty there's at least the possibility that you're normal.

Mom's public rejection of the Jehovah-god story became a huge fault line in our family ... a tectonic shift forever separating our side from the uncles and aunts and, we presume, cousins, all of whom apparently stayed true to Grandma's party line. We don't even know where they live or who our cousins are because they took Mom off the mailing lists for their Christmas newsletters, which was how everyone stayed in touch back then. I never saw that as a completely bad thing, though, because the newsletters we got from Dad's side were always tedious at best.

Anyway, Mom said she got Leona's phone number while she was helping Grandpa carry his stuff out to her pickup, and that's how she kept in touch with him. Years later, the year before Sola was born, Mom got Rhonda and me to take her for a visit, and he told us Mom was the only one in the family who seemed to care.

It was a place called Pahrump, Nevada, which is about as nowhere as it sounds. He never got Leona pregnant, and by the time we arrived she had long since wandered off to younger pastures, but he didn't seem bothered about it. He was in a fairly nice double-wide on a fenced acre he was renting for "next to nothing", as he put it, and he was taking care of his needs at The Chicken Ranch down by where the road dead-ends at the state line. "They bring in fresh ones every week from out of state," he confided on his porch, "and they're not skanky either, like in those places up by the highway." He invited us to let him treat at The Chicken Ranch restaurant, which he claimed was one of the best in the valley. Mom seemed up for it, but Rhonda politely declined and then looked at me with pursed lips and squinty eyes that said, "Don't you dare say yes!"

He had retired with a generous Federal pension, and although they cut it in half for Grandma, apparently half was enough for him to afford his Chicken Ranch parties. He never got his own phone and seldom wrote letters, but Mom searched the Pahrump Valley Times website a couple years later and learned that he had died of a heart attack during some extreme physical exertion. There was nothing about a funeral, but she said that's the way he would have wanted it. Nobody knows what happened to his ashes either. Maybe the whores scattered him in the sandy dirt behind the brothel. From having met him that time, I think getting laid in death where he got laid in life would have amused him.

But we've strayed again from Mom's point: the way Grandma's rock and dog stories and the tongue sticking and face slapping and bird throwing at the Crusade for Christ led her to atheism, and how it illustrates that you rarely see the results of your parenting until years or even decades later.

I've thought about that a lot in the years we've been reinventing our lives to accommodate the little one growing and changing in our midst. What if I hadn't given in about the bunnies? And what if, instead of caving in to the begging and whining after Trixy-the-cat followed Sola home, I had taken her straight to the pound and been done with it?

But I didn't. We got Trixy spayed after she surprised us with the litter, but at that point the damage was done, resulting in four soon-to-be-grown cats underfoot in the RV where we'd had to move after the house burned down. We'd begun rebuilding with the insurance money, but even with the additional space, Rhonda and I agreed five grown cats would not be a happening thing. Three bedrooms, two and a half baths, about half an acre; a dog would fit into that picture, the bunnies would still fit out back although they had their own issue about outgrowing their cage, but more than one cat? No. If they didn't get eaten by coyotes, the kittens would have to go to the pound.

Sola had of course named them all by then. What unseen resonances would be enlivened in her head if she witnessed her daddy dropping her little friends off at a place they both knew would be their execution chamber? Would she see me as a callous, unfeeling monster and grow up to be an ax murderer? Or even worse, become a lawyer or politician ... all on account of my original nonfeasance in the handling of the mama cat?

There was a big missed opportunity ... logic would say, anyway. I could have solved the problem by just not rescuing the kittens. But it doesn't work like that. Trixy had skedaddled out the pet door in response to smoke rolling in from the garage hallway, leaving her litter to fend for themselves. Nature's harsh way: the mama can make more if she saves herself. When I arrived and started crawling in below the smoke to see if I could find anything to save, I heard mewling coming from the box next to the mop closet. You don't make a rational decision at a time like that. I put my hands around as much fur and paws as would fit or attach themselves to my sleeves, held my breath and ran in a crouch out the door. I was dumping them next to where Trixy was curled up in the grass by the fence when I turned around and saw flames consuming the doorway. Three lost, but four saved. A victory at the time, but later I realized it was just more stupidity. I had blown a perfectly good opportunity to get rid of the damned kittens!

The same could have been said about the bunnies, except maybe more so on account of the way Sola had started showing boredom with them: I could have let them burn to death, but I didn't. I pulled their cage away from the house, because watching bunnies catch on fire and listening to their tiny screams, however briefly, would have been even further from where my humanity abides.

Our temporary home was parked right next to the foundation of the house I burned down. Not intentionally, not arson; just stupidity ... which seems even worse. One assumes arsonists have their reasons, however lame, but I had no excuse. I had noticed and Rhonda had commented on the heat radiating from the breaker panel, but I got distracted by a pending acquisition for our company and forgot all about my promise to call an electrician. When I got back from an urgent meeting at the office, smoke was

roiling out of the upstairs windows. Luckily, Rhonda had taken Sola that day to help her mom take care of her dad, who is permanently in a wheelchair from a stroke. Or maybe unluckily, since if she had been home she would have been able to call 911 before things got out of hand. Maybe. Life is full of maybes and what-ifs. They're both safe, that's all that matters.

The house was fully insured, so money wasn't a problem. The problem, or problems, were the heirlooms Rhonda's parents entrusted to us the year before. They included pictures of her great, great, great, great grandfather with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and a signed thank you note her grandfather-with-umpteens-greats got from Thomas Jefferson for helping with the harvest of his hemp crop. The note also contained some revealing comments about his slaves, so it and everything else should have been in a museum, but her family was very private, and they had developed a quasi-religious tradition in which each generation took the utmost care in preserving the precious artifacts before handing them down to the next.

Rhonda and her younger sister Stella were the only heirs, and Stella had turned into something of a black sheep, drifting around from honky-tonk to honky-tonk, living, she told me the time I met her, off what she could earn with her guitar and her ability to remember song lyrics. The guitar and the lyrics weren't what impressed me, though. The main thing was the way her ultra-short cutoffs rode way up on her ass cheeks and the way the front kept folding up and sinking between her bald pussy lips and how she'd keep reaching down while she talked and running her thumbs inside to re-spread the fabric. As if to say, "See, I'm trying to be a lady!" I thought about asking if she'd ever been to Pahrump, but Rhonda was right there and she didn't look like she'd be amused at

all. The family didn't disown Stella, it's just that whenever an innocent bystander such as myself would mention her, this big silence would descend until somebody thought of something else to talk about.

So by default Rhonda became the custodial heir to the sacred relics. After we got home from the dinner party with the big presentation, she gave me the box and said, "Here, put this someplace safe." Later she would claim she said, "Here, put this in a safe," but I heard what I heard. I took it up to the attic, and I did make a mental note to get a fireproof safe for it and some other important stuff we had, but I have lots on my mind with running my business, and the mental note never made it past that point. Yes, I could claim that Rhonda should have reminded me when she noticed that I never got a safe, but the fact is I should have gotten a safe. I accept that. And besides, things with Rhonda were bad enough without starting a blame game.

The conversations had withered to life's necessities: *Don't forget to pick up some more of that Asiago at Costco. I told Roberta the sleepover with Anita was okay. I'll be a little late coming home tonight on account of the meeting I told you about.* Stuff like that. New lines had formed in her face, and the downward inflections at the ends of her terse sentences always signaled a conclusion. I didn't blame her, just like I had no answer that day when she screamed into the phone: "Are you an idiot? I was counting on you to call the electrician! And what about the safe? You never got a safe! What's wrong with you? You are an idiot!"

Time drained the emotions, and invisible gargoyles moved in to fill the silence. They leered down from their pedestals, mocking my incompetence, grinning about my miserable future if I failed to put this right. I begged for forgiveness, but it wasn't just

her, it was her parents and the slow burn the rest of her family was apparently going to do forever. I had become the new Stella, and I had dragged Rhonda down with me. I could see it was a hard pill for her to swallow, and I wasn't sure I could forgive me either. Suicide, once a distant word about drugged-out rock stars and priests indicted for child sexual molestation, began to sound relevant and feasible, just when and how.

Our lives were reduced to the rituals: getting up in the morning, getting Sola off to school and going to work. Later, I'd pick her up from Boys & Girls Club, and on the way home she'd play along with my strained attempts to tell jokes and pretend we were normal.

Except last week she was serious. "Are you and Mom gonna get a divorce?"

She caught me off guard. I said, "Why do you say that, honey?"

She looked away to the window. "I'm not blind, you know."

"We're going through kind of a tough time ... on account of the fire."

"I know. Will I go with you or Mom?"

"We're not divorced!"

"If you do."

"If anything like that ever happened, we'd make sure you got whatever you wanted."

"I want you and Mom to stay together."

"That's what we'll do then."

"I don't want you to go around hating each other, though."

"I don't hate your mom."

"Well, you know."

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Why don’t you get her some flowers?”

“That seems too easy. ‘Sorry I burned up the stuff; here’s some flowers.’”

“She’d like flowers.”

She seemed so sure! How can she be? Maybe it’s a girl thing. It’s worth a try. I pulled off at a florist, and she helped me pick something out. Not just a dozen trite roses; a nice bouquet with carnations and baby’s breath and some big, blossomy, sticky-uppy yellow and blue things I don’t know the names of. She smiled when we got back in the car, and she held them in her lap the rest of the way home.

She was right. Rhonda and I got naughty that night for the first time in months. Afterward on sweaty sheets, she reached over, stroked my thigh and said, “You know what? Fuck the heirlooms.” I said, “Them too?” She laughed. I rolled toward her. We got naughty again.

The next afternoon on the way home I said, “Thanks for the idea about the flowers. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re both just trying to do what’s best for you, you know.”

“I’m okay.”

“How about if we had to get rid of the kittens?”

“I don’t care that much about the kittens.”

“Really? You’re always playing with them.”

“If you and Mom are gonna be okay, they won’t matter. I want to keep Trixy, though. I can keep her can’t I?”

“Of course you can.”

She smiled and leaned back against the seat.

I said, “You’re sure you’ll be okay if we get rid of your little friends?”

“What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know. I just know we won’t have room for them much longer, and you seem to have lost interest in the bunnies too. And by the way, there’s no Heaven, Bunny or otherwise.”

“Yeah, I know.”

We stopped in traffic. The light turned green, but some moron up ahead must have been texting because our lane just sat there, and when the semi ahead of us finally pulled forward enough to reveal the light, it had turned red again. On the curb, grim-faced people stared past us, as if doing so would magically hasten their bus. A toothless guy with a long, filthy white beard pawed through a trash can, spilling the contents out onto the sidewalk. A wet pee stain ran down a leg of his pants. Everybody kept far away, nobody daring to approach ... even to try and stop his major littering. A black leather cap sported the Harley-Davidson logo. His biker gang had left him behind.

She sat up in her seat and turned with a big smile. “Would you let me try to give them away?”

“Give them away how?”

She was staring across the intersection at a shopping mall with giant logos plastered along the top of the building complex: Macy’s and Target and Staples and PetSmart. “Maybe we could come down here this weekend,” she said, pointing. “If we

brought lawn chairs and sat next to the pickup with them, people might come around and look. We'd probably meet some fun people, too, don't you think?"

"I'd like that a lot, honey." I reached over and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back, and the light turned green. First the flowers, and now this? Having your young daughter become your life coach is not what you expect. It lit a warm glow.

We did it, just like that. Rhonda stayed home to take care of some stuff, but she packed us sack lunches, and we went and sat in the parking lot with both kittens and bunnies in cages next to the truck. No sign, no nothing, but I guess it was pretty obvious because people did come around to admire and pet, and every now and then somebody would take one along. I was surprised.

Right after the last bunny left in a little girl's arms, a cop car pulled up and a couple of big fat dudes got out wearing uniforms and guns. They said I was a criminal on account of some city code about vending live animals without permits and whatnot. I explained how everything was free, but the one guy explained back about how the price didn't matter and he was obligated by law to issue the summons he was already writing. But he said he wouldn't run me in and make me post bail because of the kid and I was probably trustworthy anyhow, what with my company and everything. "Sign here."

A guy on the city council owed me a favor, and that's how I got out of there for only \$2,824.36. Including administrative fees.

But what's done is done, we're all fine.