

SMALL TOWN RABBIT

The employees of the Copper Kettle Tavern file out together at 12:45 a.m. Ray Wyatt, the tall, affable Saturday night bartender holds the door. “Goodnight Mary, night Rose, see you Monday Lydia, night Tom...,” he says. It’s the same routine he does weekday afternoons at the door of his third grade classroom.

The night was a good one, busy enough for decent tips, not so busy that anyone freaked out. Usually Ray pours everyone their favorite drink after cleanup, but not tonight. It’s snowing hard. A foot’s expected and it’s almost April for crissakes. Once everyone’s out, he locks the door. Ernestine Flint waits and walks with him to his car. “Ray, I need to bring something to your barn tonight,” she says flatly.

Ray looks down at the tiny woman. “Can’t it wait, Ernestine? It’s snowing like crazy if you haven’t noticed.”

“No, it can’t,” she says. “It’s a rabbit. It’ll only be at your place a week. I’m moving to Londonderry next weekend.”

“You need to bring a rabbit to my barn at one in the morning?”

“It’s an abused rabbit, Ray. It doesn’t have anywhere else to go.”

The words *abused rabbit* strike Ray as funny, but he knows better than to smile. Talking to Ernestine always reminds him of talking to his students. “What about to your apartment?”

“Can’t have pets. And I said, I’m moving at the end of the week. I’ll take the rabbit and the rest of my stuff then.”

“That sounds familiar, Ernestine. Weren’t you moving a year ago? And it seems like the year before that too.”

“It’s definite this time,” she replies, lacking the emotion to be convincing. “You don’t have to wait up, I’ll just put the rabbit in a stall. I’m only telling you so you don’t come out and shoot me.”

“Fine, Ernestine, but you’re taking care of it, right? I don’t know anything about rabbits.”

“I didn’t ask you to take care of it,” says Ernestine, and she walks away.

“You’re welcome,” Ray mutters. He watches her march across the parking lot, her stick legs connecting her snow boots to her oversized down jacket. He’s never seen the woman smile. It kills the rest of the waitresses. Ernestine makes more tips than any of them and they knock themselves out being friendly. But Ernestine is strictly business—no jokes, no flirting, no giggles—and yet her tip cup is always fullest. Ray figures most people are like him and feel sorry for her because she looks so unhappy. A perpetual pout—it’s Ernestine’s secret weapon. It’s why he’s been letting her store stuff in his barn for the past five years. And that woman can collect some stuff. He’ll believe she’s moving it all when he sees it.

#

At 4:45 a.m., Rosemary Hoffman walks from her house to her bakery directly across the street. Both buildings date from the 1800’s and are considered *antiques*, a big deal in New England towns—the stuff calendars are made of. The house is an old mill converted to a three-family. The bakery was once a supply store that sold goods to

farmers. Neither belongs to Rosemary, but she's happy being a tenant of these old places even if they aren't well insulated. She's become an expert at stoking wood stoves. But still, she's ready for winter to wrap up.

In the distance, she hears a plow scraping the main road into town. The driver will be happy to have coffee and a muffin, and will no doubt plow her parking area without being asked. She turns on the outside light so he'll know she's open, grabs the shovel from just inside the door, scrapes the step clean, and knocks the cap of snow off the tarp covering the rabbit hutch. Back inside, she swaps her boots for clogs, pours a pot of water into the coffee maker and flicks it on. She ties her white bib apron behind her and covers her hair with a blue bandana.

The big black gas oven roars when she lights it, both levels. Then it takes a couple minutes for the tap water to heat up. When it's barely warm, she fills a pitcher and spoons in yeast and a little sugar to make it bubble. She starts scooping white flour from an aluminum garbage can into the giant bowl of the standing mixer. To ease her conscience, she throws in eight cups of whole wheat, just enough to change the color of the dough. As she adds water and beaten eggs, the batter starts clinging to the giant blade. The moment it all comes together and drops to the bottom of the bowl, she shuts off the machine, pushes up her sleeve and slides her arm down to scoop up the smooth, heavy mass. She deposits it in a five gallon bucket and swings it into the proofer. That's the first batch. Time for coffee.

Standing by the window holding her warm mug, Rosemary watches the plow advance slowly down the street. She likes the way its lights illuminate the snowflakes. Everything gives her a little thrill this time of day—she loves the life she's making in this small New Hampshire town.

She starts the second batch of dough, and in a few minutes Mario Clough, one of the road crew, comes through the door and wipes his feet, pulling off his hat and leather mittens. He's an enormous man, about the same age as Rosemary's father, with a red, weather-beaten face, thick black hair, and wild eyebrows. "You open now on Sundays, Rose?" he calls.

Rosemary shuts off the mixer and walks to her counter. "Not officially, but I have a standing sticky bun order for Firemen's Breakfast the last Sunday of every month."

"For which they pay you, I hope," he says.

"Oh, definitely, I just give them a discount."

"You rich?"

"You kidding?"

"Then why are giving a reduced rate to the fire department? You've got kids to support. If the department wants sticky buns, let them pay for them."

"I thought it would be a good way to get more people from town to taste my products so they'd come in."

"That workin' out for ya?"

"Not really."

"Didn't think so. This is a town full of Yankee tightwads and this ain't their kind of place. Don't take it personally."

"You think my prices are too high?"

"Nope. I think you're selling a quality product in a downmarket town. Any of those buns ready yet?"

"Not yet. I have muffins and hermits."

Mario squints into the glass front of the old oak display case. “What are the dark muffins, chocolate?”

“Nope, better—carrot, raisin, bran, and molasses.”

“Sounds too healthy.”

“Oh come on, I’ll split one with you.” Rosemary slices a muffin, spreads soft butter on half, and hands it to the large man.

“Mmmm,” he says finishing in two bites. “I’ll have one of those and a hermit.” He turns to help himself to coffee. “Milk?”

Rosemary fills the metal creamer. “How are the roads? Will folks be able to get to the breakfast?”

“By nine? Sure. Snow’s letting up. Tomorrow it’s supposed to hit sixty.”

“Crazy, the weather this time of year.”

“Say, how’s that rabbit I gave you? She need a friend? Next Sunday’s Easter ya know. I got a new batch of babies. Same pretty color.”

“Goldy’s sleeping in this morning, but she’s fine. Fat as anything—winter doesn’t seem to bother her. And no, she doesn’t need a friend. You know I spend half my day talking to customers about that rabbit. You’d think they’d never seen one before. ‘What kind is she? What does she eat? What’s her name?’ If she stays in her little house, they’re asking, ‘Hey, where’s Goldy?’ She’s a very popular rabbit. I’ll put the word out that she’s got siblings available.”

“Do that. I’d appreciate it.”

“Excuse me, okay? I can’t get behind.”

“Get to work then.” Mario sits at one of the four tables and leans over his coffee and yesterday’s paper.

#

Jenny Wyatt wakes up at 6:00 a.m., like she does every morning, whether she's working or not. It's just light enough to see that Ray's sleeping with his mouth wide open. It makes her smile. She pulls some sweatpants up under her nightgown then quickly swaps the nightgown for a sweatshirt. Downstairs, she puts on her boots and down jacket with a hat and some mittens she knit. When she opens the door, Mighty, Ray's dog, rouses himself from his basket in the kitchen and bounds down the steps ahead of her. The snow is up to his shoulders. He's part Jack Russell and not too big.

It's stopped snowing, and the sun is just perceptible behind the thick padding of clouds at the horizon. Jenny glances at the forsythia hedge that runs from the house to the barn and smiles. When she first moved in with Ray she used to worry that late snows would kill the buds, but she learned over the years that it's one tough hedge. She slides the barn door open and mounts the tractor which starts right up. She told her parents they'd meet at the Firemen's Breakfast, but they won't be going anywhere if she doesn't start clearing snow.

When the long driveway is half plowed, Jenny's ready for coffee. She stops the tractor outside the barn and as soon as she does, she hears trouble. "Mighty!!!" she shouts. She runs into the barn but stops short when she sees there's a hole dug under one of the stalls. Mighty's growling inside. "Mighty, come eer boy, come eer Mighty!" But that dog's never come for her, so she knows he's not coming now. She's too frightened to see what he's after. What if it's a rat? or a skunk? But wouldn't she smell that already? God, what if it's a *coon*? A coon could kill him. Suddenly the dog gives a high-pitched screech and comes struggling out from under the stall and shoots past her yelping. A few drops of blood dot the snow in his wake. At the door to the house, he

growls when she tries to touch him. His face has a nasty scratch and there's blood at the side of his nose and at two points above his front leg.

She runs upstairs. "Ray," she calls softly, "Mighty messed with an animal in the barn and he's hurt."

A couple of seconds go by as Ray becomes conscious, then he's up at once yelling, "Goddam Ernestine!" He hops around pulling on his pants.

"Not Ernestine," says Jenny, "an animal. It's in one of the stalls."

Ray hobbles down the stairs, his ankles hurting like they do every morning. "Damn it," he mutters when he sees his dog licking himself in his basket and whimpering.

He grabs his barn coat from a peg and Jenny says, "Maybe you better bring the gun." He either doesn't hear or ignores her. She follows him out.

The Wyatt barn is a town landmark and qualifies for a tax break as long as they maintain it. It's been more than a generation since there's been any livestock kept there, but last year they put a new roof on the south half. Ray is committed to keeping the farm as *is* for as long as he's able, and Jenny has always loved the place too. It's a lot of work, but without kids, they have time. Side by side they peer into the stall that Mighty dug under. Inside a large rabbit is lying on its side on a canvas sack. "Wow," says Jenny, "that's what messed up Mighty?"

"Jesus, Ernestine," mutters Ray.

"What's she got to do with it?"

"Told me it was an abused rabbit and she had to store it here for a week. She brought it over after we closed last night."

“Well if it wasn’t abused before, it is now.” They enter the stall. Loose tufts of fur are scattered on the dirt floor. “Poor thing,” says Jenny kneeling down. The rabbit starts to stir but gives up. It’s dim inside the barn, but it looks like the animal’s whole side could open like a flap. Not much blood though. “Good grief, what should we do?”

“Kill Ernestine for starters,” he says, shaking his head. “Vets aren’t open, it’s Sunday.”

“Well we can’t bring it in the house with Mighty. You think *he* needs a vet?”

“Only if this rabbit has rabies or something...”

“What about Billy? His kids keep rabbits. Maybe he’d take a look.”

“Yeah, or Mario. He’s got rabbits. Was talking them up at the bar last night, trying to get people to take ‘em for Easter. Maybe we can bring it to him.”

“You finish plowing and I’ll fix a box.”

In the kitchen, Jenny gets Mario’s wife on the phone. “Maude? It’s Jenny Wyatt. Is Mario home?... Oh, right. Listen we’ve got an injured rabbit. Ray’s dog got at it. You think Mario’d take a look if we brought it over?... Well, if it comes to that I’d pay him to put it down, I don’t see Ray shooting it... Thanks. We’ll be over once we clear the drive.”

#

At 7:30 a.m. Ernestine puts her book aside—she’s been reading since dawn. She just heard a crash and then the kids downstairs yelling at each other. The door to the outside slams. *Damn kids, why do they let that door slam Every Time?* She gets up and watches the girl, Nelly, cross to the bakery. Ernestine likes her okay. She’s a serious kid. Too bad she has that little brother. Ernestine can’t wait to move and get away from their noise. She lights a flame under a teapot then starts gathering greens from her refrigerator. She adds them to the bag of pellets from Goldy’s food dish and goes back

to the window. She watches Nelly standing in front of the rabbit hutch. The girl pulls the tarp off exposing a gray quilted blanket, the type moving companies use. *Should have taken that too*, thinks Ernestine with regret. She's planning to use the day organizing the stuff she has stored in the Wyatt barn in preparation for her move to Londonderry, but first she'll sit with Sheena—the new name she's given the rabbit—and see if the bunny will forgive her for scaring her last night. The poor creature fought like hell when she forced it into the canvas mail bag she'd pinched from the post office when she worked there over Christmas. It even ripped the front of Ernestine's down jacket. Ernestine didn't blame her though, poor thing, she wasn't used to being handled.

She watches nine-year-old Nelly stuff the tarp and blanket under the rabbit's hutch, remove the water bottle from its holder, and take it into the bakery.

#

When her daughter comes in with the rabbit's bottle, Rosemary is starting to smell the first sheet of buns. "Better make the water a little warm, Nel, it's going to stay pretty cold out today."

"I *know*, Mom!" says Nelly.

"Of course you do, honey. Sorry." She opens the oven door and sees that the dough has risen well, but the trick with sticky buns is not to burn the bottoms. This is too much merchandise to risk ruining, and she's determined not to become distracted.

"Do we get sticky buns this morning?" asks Nelly, her hand on the door knob.

"Of course!" Just once Rosemary forgot to save any for her kids and they've never let her forget. She hates them to eat really sweet stuff, but her son Bim reminds her, *That's the point of having a mom who's a baker!!*

A second later, Nelly is back inside. "Mom! Goldy's gone! She's not in her hutch!"

“Was it open?”

“No! I opened it just now when she didn’t come out of her house!”

Rosemary remains calm. “Are you *sure*?”

“Mom!!! Come look!”

Rosemary steps out the door and leans into the cage of the hutch. She feels around the wooden house area in the back, but there’s just hay and turds. “Nelly, you’re positive it was latched when you took the cover off?”

“YES!” The girl stamps her foot and starts to cry.

Rosemary holds her daughter’s head against her chest. “I can’t believe someone would have taken her. It’s a mean joke if they did. And it’s not like it would have been easy!”

“I have an idea!” says the girl pulling away. “I’ll make signs!”

“Good thinking,” says Rosemary. “Get Bim to help and you can bring them to the fire station. Lots of people will see them there.”

Rosemary moves the second pan of buns from the proofer into the lower oven. She’s got forty-eight buns on each of three pans, plus a small pan of twelve, leaving six extra for her and the kids and whoever else. Maybe Mario will come back. She can’t believe *he* would’ve taken Goldy, but she doesn’t have another idea. Did he think she was complaining about the rabbit when she was talking earlier? He didn’t seem upset. Last Easter when he offered her a bunny, he’d told her he raised them for training his beagles but sometimes he had too many. That they were part wild rabbit and part some hardy northern breed with a golden coat so the dogs could see them easier. He didn’t seem overly protective of them.

She pulls the first pan of finished rolls out and slides it into the cooling rack, then wheels the rack in front of the door which she opens a little so the rolls will cool faster. Over by the sink, she looks up a number in the town directory and dials the phone on the wall, "Hello? Mrs. Clough?... This is Rosemary Eastman from the bakery. Is Mario there? I have a question about his rabbits... I see, of course he is. Would you ask him to call me later? I'm in the book...Thank you." She feels deflated. Mario is one of the few locals she has a rapport with. If she's offended him, she'll kick herself. But if it wasn't Mario, who else could have taken the rabbit? Still, Goldy in a plow truck? She can't picture it. The rabbit is large, and not easy to handle. Would someone have just let her loose? She walks out and examines the snowy ground around the bakery for footprints. She doesn't see any and gets angry at herself for thinking about anything except her baking.

#

At 9:20 a.m., Maude Clough is sitting with her two sisters at Firemen's Breakfast unwinding a sticky bun with her fork to loosen the pecans which she regretfully pushes aside—she can't tolerate nuts any more. But the honey and the cinnamon and the fresh baked dough fill her with pleasure, and she has to admit Rosemary Eastman's a damn good baker. Maude can see her sitting several tables away with the other new folks in town talking animatedly to some women friends. She's probably nice enough, like Mario says, but Maude's not the type to go into her bakery. She doesn't feel comfortable around the hippie, yuppie types. Nothin' against them personally, but she just can't see their point in making a big deal about having public kindergarten, putting trails in the woods, adding library hours, and every other thing they want that the town has done

well enough without for Maude's whole life. Her kids got on just fine without kindergarten, and they played in the woods fine too, without trails.

She watches Rosemary's kids circulate around the long rows of tables with their sign:

Lost: Rabbit
Color: Gold
Name: Goldy
Reward: \$5.00
Please return to Rosemary's Bakery

At the top is a drawing of a rabbit colored in with gold crayon.

"Excuse me," says the little girl in a loud voice as she approaches. She's a cute thing with long messy hair like Maude's granddaughter's—seems like mothers don't brush their kids' hair any more. The girl's towheaded little brother stands at attention next to her holding the sign. "Our rabbit disappeared," she says, "and we'd like her back. If you find her, please put her in the cage at Rosemary's Bakery. Thank you."

Maude and her sisters nod and smile. Maude realizes the kids must've been to Ray and Jenny's table already. She figures if the Wyatts didn't mention the rabbit they left in a box in her kitchen, then it wasn't her business to do it either. She looks over to where Ray is sitting. Their eyes meet across the packed station house and she nods her head slightly. She's always liked Ray Wyatt, a life-long friend of her son's. They played baseball and basketball for years together growing up.

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When Mario finally walks into the Firemen's Breakfast he's not thinking about how he's been up all night plowing snow, he does that plenty. He's thinking about a cup of hot coffee, some eggs, and a sticky bun. So he keeps a pretty gruff demeanor when

Ray Wyatt asks him to step back outside and makes him walk several yards from the fire station.

“Listen, Mario, I have a problem. You know that waitress Ernestine down at The Kettle? She stashed a rabbit in my barn last night, said it was *abused*.”

“*Abused?* In what way?” Mario raises his heavy brows. His eyes are tired and bloodshot.

“I don’t know. It was after midnight and there’s no arguing with that woman, so I let her. But my dog got at it this morning and tore it up a little. I ended up bringing it to your house. Maude said that was okay.”

“Fine,” says Mario, taking a step toward the fire station, “I’ll deal with it.”

“But listen, Mario,” says Ray, putting his hand on the big man’s arm, “I think that rabbit belongs to the woman who owns the bakery. Her kids are going around the breakfast saying it’s lost. The girl is one of my students. If they find out I know about it, it’s going to look bad. You know, like I tried to steal a kid’s rabbit.”

“Hey, that’s one of *my* rabbits,” says Mario.

“Well it’s in your kitchen, maybe you can sew it up or something. You don’t think it has rabies or anything, do you? It got my dog pretty good.”

Mario doesn’t answer and heads into the fire station hungrier than ever and a little peeved.

#

Arriving home around 10:30 a.m., the Wyatts find Ernestine’s battered Subaru in front of their barn. “You talk to her, Ray. I might lose my temper.”

Jenny goes directly into the house with the *Sunday News*. The sky has finally cleared and she’s planning some quality time on the sofa with the paper and her view of

the mountains. Ten minutes later Ray joins her. “Good news and bad,” he says, “Ernestine thinks the rabbit escaped. She’s in there looking everywhere. It hasn’t occurred to her there aren’t any footprints but ours.” He leans down and pets Mighty who is happily jumping on his legs having forgotten his wounds.

“And the bad news?”

“She’s convinced anyone who keeps a rabbit in a cage is evil. She says she’s a member of the House Rabbit Society. They believe rabbits should run free in their owners’ houses and have litter boxes.”

“You’re making that up.”

“I’m not. She says she rescued the rabbit. She’d been waiting for her chance since they put it in a hutch outside the bakery door. Evidently the House Rabbit people have had the rabbit targeted for rescue for a long time. They’re an organized group. They have meetings!”

Jenny tosses the sports section onto her husband’s Lazy Boy knowing he’ll go after it. “I’m going to have a serious talk with that woman.” She strides toward the door.

“Be nice!” Ray calls after her.

#

Jenny Wyatt is a practical woman, happy with her lot in life. She knows she’s lucky to have Ray and the farm and to have been raised in a decent family. She was brought up to feel sorry for people who were less fortunate than herself. She believes Ernestine probably falls into that category. But she was also taught that sometimes enough is enough. “Ernestine!” she calls from the entrance to the barn. Ernestine comes out of what was once a room for storing grain. She’s got on an old sweater,

jeans, and workboots. Her colorless hair is pulled tightly back and her skin looks like it's never seen sunshine. She blinks at Jenny.

“Ray told me you were out here looking for that rabbit and I just wanted to tell you it's long gone.”

“You saw it?”

“Yeah, early this morning. It ran for the woods.”

Ernestine squints at Jenny like she's doubting her, but Jenny plunges on. “Ray also told me you're moving to Londonderry.”

“So?”

“So I was wondering if you were keeping your job at the Kettle. It's a long drive from Londonderry, isn't it?”

“I haven't decided.”

“Well let me help you.” Jenny folds her arms and widens her stance the way one of her brothers taught her—it makes you look more formidable, he'd said. “Quit your job at the Kettle or I'll tell everyone you stole that rabbit from the woman at the bakery. Her kids were at Firemen's Breakfast going table to table asking people if they'd seen it.”

“They didn't take care of it right,” says Ernestine in her usual flat tone.

“You can explain that to everyone, including the bakery woman. I'm sure they'll be interested to know you saved the rabbit and then it ran away. I don't like thieves, Ernestine. How do I know all this stuff you've been storing here isn't stolen? Or maybe you *rescued* it.”

Ernestine starts to speak but Jenny puts her hand up. “Stop. Stop talking and start figuring out how you're going to move all this crap out of our barn and get your butt to Londonderry. I mean it, Ernestine, quit the Kettle or the word goes out.”

Jenny turns away and takes a deep breath. The blue sky is as blue as possible and melting clumps of snow are tumbling from the tree branches and the forsythia hedge.

#

On the other side of town, Mario had no problem visiting his vet at home on a Sunday. An anesthetized Goldy is again lying in a cardboard box, her shaved and stitched side facing up, a cone around her neck. "Listen, Doc, write me up a bill for the owner of the dog who attacked her. If you don't get paid within the month, I'll cover it."

#

On Easter Sunday it's sunny and in the sixties. Rosemary and her kids walk home from church discussing the rules for an Easter egg hunt. "Mom," interrupts Nelly, "Look! Mr. Wyatt's carrying furniture out of the Ernestine lady's apartment."

"And that's Mr. Clough's truck he's using," says Rosemary. "That's nice of those men. I didn't know she was moving."

As they get closer, Bim notices something in the rabbit hutch and runs ahead. They'd put a For Sale sign on it, but it's gone.

He comes tearing back toward them. "Nelly! Goldy's back! Goldy's in her cage!" His sister runs after him, and Rosemary walks faster. Sure enough, there's Goldy in her hutch, her ears upright, her nose twitching. The rabbit leans her good side against the cage to be scratched. Nelly opens the front and caresses her head.

"Look Mom, she's all scarred up," Bim says.

"I see that. But she's home, and I'm so happy!" Rosemary's voice cracks.

"You're not going to cry, are you Ma?" Her son looks horrified.

“Yes!” Rosemary sputters. She sits on the front step to their apartment as tears blur her vision. She feels foolish but she can’t help it, she’s so relieved. All week she’s worried that someone was out to harm her or her family. She’s even been locking the door to the house when she goes to bake in the morning though she’s only thirty steps away.

Her daughter’s teacher, Mr. Wyatt, walks over. “You alright? Is there something I can do?”

Rosemary bends forward and wipes her eyes with her skirt before looking up at him. She clears her throat and smiles. “Did you happen to see who put our rabbit in its hutch, Mr. Wyatt?”

“Nope. It was there when I arrived.”

“It’s been missing for a week. Nelly told me you let her talk about it to the class. That was thoughtful of you.”

“It’s important for kids to express their feelings. And now she’ll have another story to tell. One with a happy ending.”

“I have no idea what must’ve happened, and I don’t think I want to,” says Rosemary.

“If I were you, I’d just be happy she’s back. All’s well that ends well, right? If you’ll excuse me, I’m moving your neighbor.”

““Well, aren’t you kind. I’ll have to say goodbye.”

“She’s already gone.”

“I see. Well Happy Easter.”

“Happy Easter.”

In Londonderry, NH, Ernestine Flint moves used furniture around her new, dilapidated apartment. Every few minutes she goes to the east window and looks down on the dog tied in the yard next door. It looks bored and depressed. Once she lands a new job, she plans to sneak it some decent bones. Meanwhile, blocked in the bathroom by a moving box, is a tiny baby rabbit, gold in color— a parting gift from the staff at the Kettle. It has its own litter box.

