

LEE'S RABBIT

A SHORT STORY

FROM *THIS CHAPBOOK IS (A) GHETTO*



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LOUISVILLE

Lee's Rabbit

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Lee had never talked to a rabbit before. He didn't know where or even how to start a conversation with one. Still, he had to try. And so, for over twenty-five minutes, he stared at the caged rabbit in room A3, thinking of what to say. He did feel stupid, like the very fool his wife Deidra seemed to think he was. But he also felt like a scientist. There was no distance between him and the scientists he cleaned behind every night at the research building. What was so different about him? He had none of their science degrees—sure! He lived in the West End, and these scientist-types and doctors and lawyers and white folks, for that matter, only came to his neighborhood when they wanted barbecue or soul food or weed. Yes, he was only a janitor, only there to mop their concrete floors, where gum, spills, and black rubber streaks were there to greet him daily. He swore to Deidra that he even had to clean up piss one time in a hallway. And yes, he was there to empty their filled-to-the-brim wastebaskets, many with small pools of coffee at their bottoms. Those flimsy trash bags they supplied him with couldn't hold liquids to save their lives, so he carried a rag in his back pocket just in case. But so, what? There was something about this rabbit! He knew it. Since Lee started working at the research building a month before, he'd noticed something odd about the rabbit, how it would stare at him whenever he entered the room, eye to eye, man to man, as if the rabbit knew more than he let on he knew. Lee could be on the verge of a discovery, just like—and he grinned in awe of himself—the scientists who'd wanted to try and put a man up on the moon. Hadn't their mission begun with a hunch? And if Lee could figure out exactly what was special about this rabbit, the scientists would make him one of their own. He knew it! How would Deidra think of him then?

“Not sure what to say to you,” he started. “I'm Lee.” He scratched the back of his head. “Maybe I should've brought some carrots or something?” He laughed at his own joke while the rabbit stared back at him. “Do you know tricks? I guess rabbits can learn tricks just like a dog,

right?” Over the next hour, Lee performed his own tricks, recalled from his younger years. He made a quarter disappear. He juggled some wadded paper towels. He wasn’t bad for a man in his fifties.

He kept talking. He told the rabbit about Deidra and how she’d told him that her grandfather used to hunt rabbits in Lauderdale County, TN. “But those were wild rabbits,” Lee explained to the rabbit. “You’re different.” He then told the rabbit about his last five jobs and how this was the first job he’d had in one whole year. Lee walked closer to the cage, sticking his finger out for the rabbit to sniff. “Deidra says she’ll leave me if I lose another job.” And with the thought of Deidra leaving and as if someone had blown out a candle, Lee’s wave of excitement and wonder died.

Lee was a fool, even if his wife had never said the words aloud. There was nothing special about the rabbit. He couldn’t lose another job, not over a silly hunch. Shame planted its flag, piercing the rocky surface of his chest as he peered at his watch. *I was talking to a damn rabbit.*

Lee turned off the light and closed the door behind him. When he heard the voice—the rabbit’s voice—he couldn’t bring himself to open the door again, not at first. He was too afraid of what he might find behind it. But the rabbit kept repeating the word. It was an awful noise, a siren-like screech in a never-ending loop.

“I-I knew it,” Lee said, out of breath from the mere shock. His trembling hands fumbled with the keys. He couldn’t get the door opened fast enough.

Lee got home early, an hour before Deidra was due to rise. While he worked nights, she worked days: part-time as a store clerk; part-time as a pick-and-packer for a shipping company. Lee shook her until her head parted ways with her pillow. She squinted up his face and called out his name as if he could be anyone other than who he was.

“Lee?”

“I’ve got to show you something.”

“What happened?”

He hurried out, scurrying around the question and darting down the hallway. It would be a minute or so before she herself was in the hallway, scraping the stiff skin of their old carpet with her slippers, her groans reaching him in the living room. Lee put on a big smile for her when she finally entered the room. He pointed at what was there on their couch. A white rabbit with blood-red, glassy eyes. Ears erect. Motionless. Watching.

“Baby—he can talk,” Lee said. “Just one word, but I bet we can teach him more. Now, when I take him back tomorrow, they won’t have a choice but to pay me. You hear me?” The excitement left him winded.

“You brought a rabbit home? From your job? A rabbit?”

“Yeah.” He caught his breath. “He can talk.”

“What’s wrong with you?” She wrung her hands, something she often did whenever Lee was worrying her. “You gotta take it back right now before they find out what you did.”

“But baby, he can talk.” He turned to the rabbit. “Say ‘out’ again!” He whistled at the rabbit. He clicked his tongue. He snapped. “Say ‘out’ for Deidra. Say ‘out.’”

“They are going to fire you, Lee.”

“No, no, no. They are going to pay us. We’ll ask for a big check. First, we need a lawyer. No! First thing we gotta do is call the news station.”

“Why are you doing this? What is wrong with you?”

It’s fine.” To the rabbit: “Say ‘out’ again. C’mon, now!”

“I’m not letting you lose another job.”

“He doesn’t have rabies or nothing like that. All we gotta do is get a big cage. They sell rabbit food at the pet store—we’ll go get him some. Keep him in the gara-”

“Lee, what’s wrong with you?” Her tears weren’t visible in the dim light projecting from a corner lamp, but Lee could tell; he could hear the fragility in her throat. She’d gotten like this many times before, especially whenever the bills began to pile beside their countertop microwave and after his last job had fired him because he couldn’t keep up with the assembly line. And before that job, he was let go because he’d taken an extra smoke break. And before that, he lost his job at the Ford plant after yelling at a supervisor over money missing from his paycheck.

But this talking rabbit meant something better was coming for Lee and Deidra. She was just being dramatic, encouraging him to try a different strategy. That was Deidra—always wanting him to do something different, to be different. Lee picked up the rabbit, thumbs pressing into the area just below its shoulder blades. This was not the correct way to hold a rabbit, with its feet and tailbone dangling, gravity tugging on the weight of its oversized body. But even as the rabbit kicked its large feet and squealed a piercing, unearthly cry, Lee stretched out his arms and aimed the rabbit at his wife.

“Here!” he yelled. “Hold him! Don’t be scared of him!”

But Deidra clamped her ears with her palms and ran away from Lee and his rabbit. He assumed she went back into their bedroom and had likely locked him out of it. Lee lowered the rabbit to his waist. It still kicked and screamed as if to now mock the man. It was all over now, Lee figured. Deidra wouldn’t be coming back into that living room, and she probably was going to leave him for real this time. So, when she did return, his eyes became two buckets filled to their brims with water. What a relief! What a comfort to see his wife standing there, ready to hear him, to give this thing a try. It was worth a good try. He smiled big as Deidra approached him. She

never stopped coming toward him. And she looked terrified, biting her lower lip. It was as if she was working up the nerve to jump headfirst into choppy, freezing, violent water.

“I’m taking the damn thing back my damn self.”

With that, Deidra yanked the rabbit out of his hands, going for the front door. She struggled to open it, juggling the squirming creature, the locks, and the knob. This bought Lee some time. He used it to plead with her to reconsider. But Deidra seemed to not hear him, nor his promises of millions and the Nobel Prize that he was sure would follow. It was as if she’d vanished from his world and had entered another plane of existence, her body either possessed by some alien force or by sheer rage. The door seemed to be the only thing that mattered. When she finally succeeded in getting it open, Lee stopped his begging and rushed after his wife and his rabbit, who were in the front yard in no time. He didn’t see exactly how it happened, how the rabbit was able to sink its teeth into Deidra’s hand. Lee only saw the rabbit plummet and then run as soon its paws touched earth for the very first time in its entire life.

The next day, Lee went to the unemployment office.

About the Book:

A love-sick teen risks everything in the face of a government-enforced quarantine; a janitor believes he's finally discovered his path to recognition with the help of a lab rabbit; a hospital cafeteria worker is offered an escape with the aid of a cutting-edge pharmaceutical, heedless of its side effects; the burden of a name tears a rift between a mother and daughter, spawning decades-long consequences. The characters in this collection linger at the fringes and are boxed in by society. There, we see them struggle, we see them shift form, we see them seek any way out of their ghettos—both real and perceived. In prose simultaneously grounded and haunting, the stories populating *This Chapbook is (a) Ghetto* contort the reader into confrontations with space, language, and society and how these forces consume those ensnared by them, even as they seek new ways to survive.

The book will be released in September 2025. Pre-order sales begin in July. For more information, please visit: <http://www.christianloriel.com/sweetgirlpress>