Rabbit People

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Abstract

It was obvious the girl was drunk...
Rain
Margret Wallace

Winner of Ames
High School Sketch
Contest

Stop.
Listen to the rain—
Far above us
Whispering
to the ropes and pullies,
to the curtains, heavy with dust and weights,
to the dead scenery, waiting in the shadows,
Holding us close,
Remembering
the rains before.

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IT WAS obvious the girl was drunk. She frowned slightly to
hide the effort of focusing her eyes. And she walked with the
cautions of a small youngster. All her movements suggested the
battle she was waging to appear soberly nonchalant. But Miss
Kilgore wasn't fooled. She watched critically as the girl ap­
proached the counter. Another cheap little nobody, she sniffed.
These women parading around in service uniforms—they made
Miss Kilgore tired. What business did they have even entering a
smart shop like this? They were worse than the men. At least
men didn't confuse Miss Kilgore's sales technique.

This girl, for instance . . . probably she expected to buy a sou­
venir of the Islands for a few cents. Miss Kilgore happened to
know she was a guest at the Royal Palms Hotel—this girl and
another just like her. The two of them on a furlough, or 'leave',

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as their exacting branch chose to term it. What it really amounted to, in Miss Kilgore's opinion, was a license for a five-day brawl. They could stay at the Royal Palms. In all these bitter years, Miss Kilgore only worked here—here in this glassed-in, little gift shop off the lobby.

She'd noticed these two girls being shown to their room. And she'd not been surprised when John, the bell-boy who'd served them, immediately went back with cracked ice and an armful of 'mix' for them. She'd questioned John. But he, like a man, only grinned and stoutly insisted, "They nice girls!" No wonder he thought they were nice. They probably tipped generously.

"And what may I show you?" purred Miss Kilgore, sliding along the counter to where the girl leaned slightly away from the glass showcase. She made no attempt to restrain a discouraging inflection.

"There's a particular piece of—of jade, I guess, that I remembered noticing—I'd like to look at it, if I may." The girl was searching the case as she spoke. "Yes, there it is! That little rabbit. On the bottom shelf, there. May I see it . . ."

Miss Kilgore remained motionless. "It isn't jade, you know."

The girl only smiled. "Oh? Crystal, I suppose. It's hard to tell until you . . . may I see it, please?"

Miss Kilgore leaned down with a shrug and deliberately unlocked the sliding doors of the case. She couldn't remember the last time this case had been opened. Ordinary shoppers—mostly service men, merely pointed to the articles they were curious about, and inquired the price. After that, they usually strolled off with exaggerated indifference, accompanied by a scornful grimace from Miss Kilgore.

The removal of the small trinket left a clean place outlined in the dust. As Miss Kilgore straightened she felt the girl's eyes lingering on this telltale spot on the glass shelf. The other articles in the collection—the green jade camels, the squat little Chinese Buddhas with the hideously contorted faces, the fragile silver crested salt spoons with Russian legend written on them—all had price tags tucked at angles impossible to read. The little rabbit had no tag. Miss Kilgore handed it over to the girl with a pre-occupied frown. Mentally she was reciting the involved and purely fictitious story she'd once used when displaying these pieces, hoping she'd recall the price of the rabbit.

Still groping, Miss Kilgore hastened around the counter and
followed indignantly as the girl strolled casually to the street window and stood studying the tiny figure.

"It's rather a fine piece of . . . ?" The quizzical tilt of the girl's eyebrows challenged Miss Kilgore to supply the figure's composition. She held the rabbit up to the sunlight. There was no sparkle. She tested its weight. At last she just held it close, cupped in her hand, smiling down at it as she might have smiled at an adorable baby.

"It's cute," she murmured, finally. "I think I'll have it. Do you have gift boxes for such tiny . . ." "But, my dear," protested Miss Kilgore in a slightly less patronizing tone than she intended, "this piece of . . . ah . . . of crystal is rather expensive."

"Is it?" The girl's eyes met her squarely and refused to waver. Even the glassy lustre of alcohol could not disguise the quiet pools of despair, uncommon in very young women. Miss Kilgore had seen such pools before. "Most things of small actual value," the girl said, moving toward the counter, "ARE expensive. One way or another. Will you put it in some kind of box, please. Don't bother with fancy tissue—just a box."

Miss Kilgore hoped her composure wasn't too noticeably disturbed. She gazed jerkily from the girl's stiff features to the rabbit while she fumbled beneath the counter for a box. "We gullible Americans," the girl said, rummaging briefly in her shoulder purse, drawing out a worn billfold.

She tossed several crackling bills on the counter with a gesture of self-contempt. "Or we gullible service people," she amended, "if you like that better. We've just no conception of values, I guess." She lifted her eyes slowly and steadied her gaze searchingly on Miss Kilgore's face. "By the way, aren't YOU American?" she asked. It seemed to Miss Kilgore, it was the same searching look she'd had for the rabbit in the sunlight—approval outweighing disappointment.

"Yes, I am. I did live on the West Coast before . . ." Miss Kilgore kept all her attention on the tiny bright-colored box she was lining with cotton. "I followed a sailor out here. That was fifteen years ago."

The girl watched intently as the rabbit was tucked carefully into the fluffy nest and the cover secured. "Haven't you ever wanted to go back?"

Miss Kilgore tossed her head back, reached for a paper sack
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from the stack beside the cash register. She felt a strange pleasant
glow inside. She picked up the bills, paused as she turned toward
the cash register. "Look, kid," she was surprised to hear a tone
she hadn't used in fifteen years, "don't throw all this money away
on that cheap little trinket. It's nothing but glass."

"I know it."

"You can buy good souvenirs in dime stores. Stuff like this
rabbit here—that's just for the sucker trade."

A suggestion of a twinkle shone in the girl's eyes. She pushed
the bills back Miss Kilgore's way. "This sounds crazy, I know,"
she said, swaying a trifle as she twisted to replace her billfold in
her purse. "But it's not what this rabbit's made of—or what it
costs—but the fact that it IS a rabbit, and that I found it today."

Miss Kilgore felt extremely uncomfortable handing the few
coins of change to the girl. She wanted to comfort the girl, but
she wasn't sure just why. "Yes, certain animals appeal to me,
too," she confided with a kindly smile.

The girl made a weary gesture. "It's not that I like RABBITS,
particularly," she explained, "but just that I'm one of the crazy
rabbit people of this earth, that's all . . ."

She noticed the perplexed expression on Miss Kilgore's face.
"I know—it doesn't make sense. But it does to me. Rabbits do
crazy things without any reason. Things they wouldn't have to do,
just because they're rabbits. But that's the way rabbits are . . .
they must WANT to be that way. There used to be somebody I
knew that was that way, too—doing crazy things he wouldn't
have had to. I guess he must have wanted to . . ." Her voice
trailed off foolishly. She started and realized Miss Kilgore's
glance had become more penetrating. "Anyway," she shrugged,
picking up the little box, "whenever I see rabbits, I'll always
think of him."

Miss Kilgore cleared her throat resolutely. "You'll find that's
packed all right for mailing," she suggested helplessly, "if you
wanted to mail it to—to someone."

The girl adjusted the strap of her purse at a more jaunty
hitch, and turned to go. "Oh, no," she smiled back at Miss
Kilgore, "I wasn't going to send it to anyone. It's too late for
that—now."

She lurched a bit opening the shop door. Oh, she was drunk,
all right!