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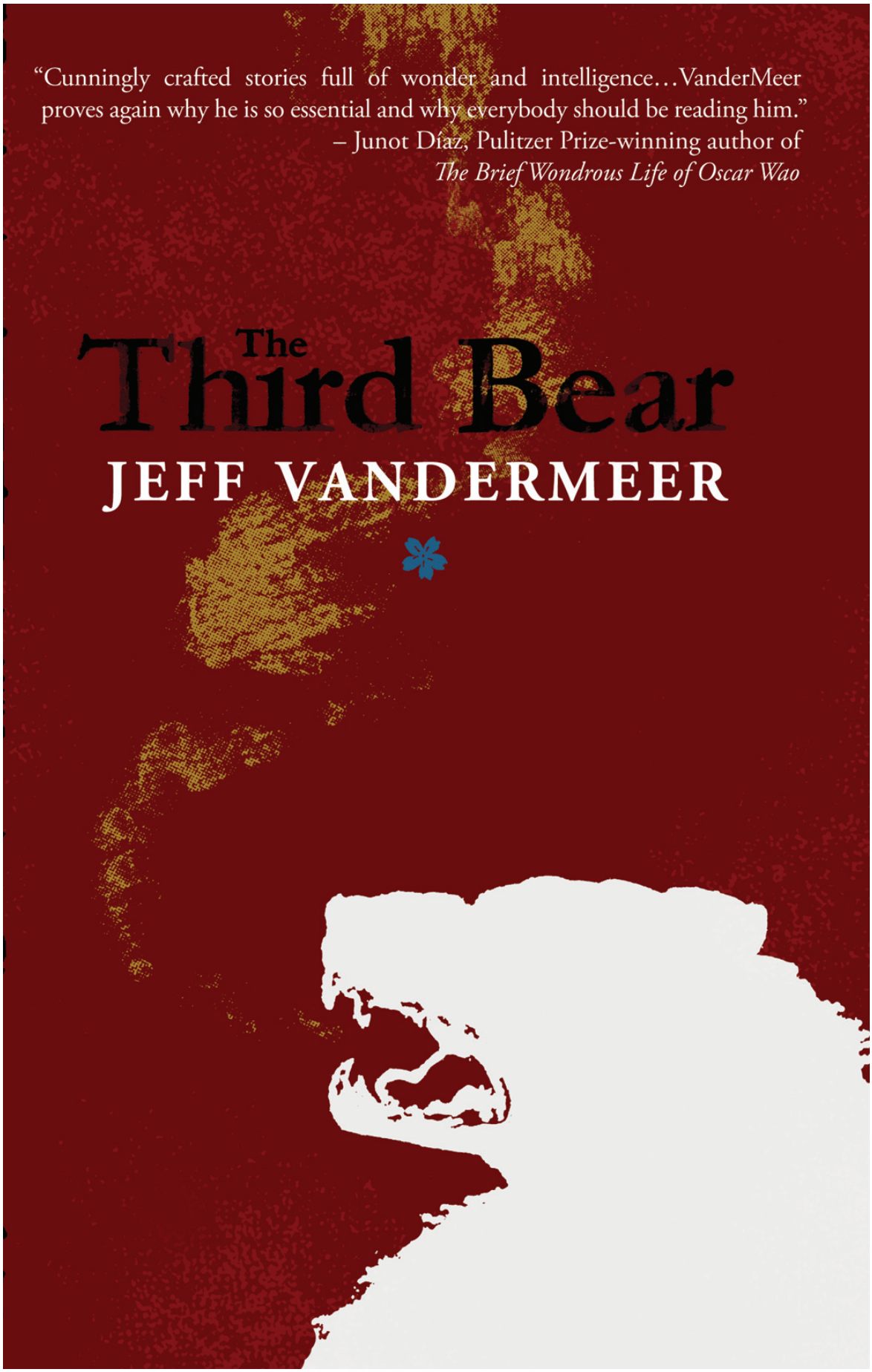
The Third Bear

JEFF VANDERMEER



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THE QUICKENING
BY JEFF VANDERMEER

In the old, tattered photo Sensio has been dressed in a peach-colored prisoner's uniform made out of discarded tarp and then tied to a post that Aunt Etta made me hammer into the ground. Sensio's long white ears are slanted back behind his head. His front legs, trapped by the crude arm holes, hang stiff at a forward angle. The absurdly large hind feet with the shadows for claws are, perhaps, the most monstrous part of Sensio—the way they seem to suddenly shoot from the peach-colored trousers, in a parody of arrested speed. The look on Sensio's face—the large, almond-shaped eye, the soft pucker of pink nose—seems caught between rage and a strange acceptance.

Sensio was, of course, a rabbit, and in the photo, Aunt Etta's stance confirms this bestial fact—she holds the end of the rope that binds Sensio to the post, and she holds it, between thumb and forefinger, with a form of distaste, even disdain? Such a strange pose, delicate against the roughness of Sensio; even a gentle tug and his humiliation would be undone.

Or maybe not. I don't know. I know only that Aunt Etta's expression is ultimately unreadable, muddied by the severe red of her lipstick, by the book-ending of her body by a crepe-paper bag of a hat and the shimmering turquoise dress hitched up past her waist, over her stomach, and descending so far down that she appears to float above the matted grass. (Between the two, a flowsy white blouse that seems stolen from a more sensible person.) I'm not in the photo, but she'd dressed me in something similar, so that I looked like a flower girl at a wedding. The shoes Aunt Etta had dug up out of the closet pinched my feet.

Sensio had said nothing as he was bound, nose twitching at the sharp citrus of the orange blossoms behind them. He'd said nothing as we'd formed our peculiar circus procession from the bungalow where we lived to the waiting photographer. No reporters had come, despite Aunt Etta's phone calls, but she'd hired the photographer anyway—and he stood there in white shirt, suspenders, gray trousers, black wingtip shoes. He looked

hot even though it was only spring, and was so white I thought he must be a Yankee. His equipment looked like a metal stork. A cigarette dangled from his lips.

"That's him," Aunt Etta said, as if Sensio were her rabbit and not mine. Shameful, but that's what I felt that long-ago day: Sensio is mine, not hers. I was twelve in 1955, and big for my age, with broad shoulders that made me look hunched over. I did chores around the orange groves. I helped to get water from the well. I'd driven the tractor. In the season, I'd even harvested the oranges, just for fun, alongside the sweating, watchful migrant workers, who had no choice. But I was still a kid, and as Aunt Etta put Sensio down and bound him to the post I'd pounded in the day before, all I could think was that Aunt Etta had no right to do anything with him.

"Do you have to tie him up like that," the photographer asked Aunt Etta, but not in a caring way. He reached down to ruffle my hair and wink at me. I flinched away from him, wrinkling up my nose. People were always touching my head because of my curly red hair, and I hated it.

Aunt Etta just looked at him like he was stupid. She was stiff that morning—a broken hip that had never completely healed—and further trapped in her ridiculous dress. She grunted with effort and no little pain as she leaned precariously to loop the rope over and over again across Sensio's chest. "Shit," she said. I heard her, distinct if soft. She looked over as she straightened, said, "Rachel, finish it for me."

So it was I who tied the last knots, who knelt there beside Sensio, smelling the thick yet sweet musk of his fur.

"It's okay," I said to him, thinking, *Aunt Etta's just gone a little cracked. She'll be better soon.* I tried to will the message into that deep, liquid eye, through to the brain beyond.

Aunt Etta tapped my shoulder with her thick fingers. "Come away."

"Are we ready, then?" the photographer asked. Aunt Etta wasn't paying him by the hour. He was already looking at his watch.

In the photo, Aunt Etta has the end of Sensio's rope in her right hand, arm extended down, while her left arm is held at a right angle, palm up, thumb against the index finger. At first, people think she's holding a cigar in her hand, because the photograph is so old. Then they realize that's just a crease in the image and they think she holds something delicate—something she's afraid to close her hand around for fear of damaging it.

But I know there was nothing in Aunt Etta's hand that day.

We lived in a land of gentle hills, farms, lakes, and small towns. We lived on an orange grove in the middle of the state of Florida, near a place that's now a favorite truck stop on the freeway, Okahumpka. The attraction called Dog Land lay to the west and Orlando to the

east—a sleepy town that didn't know that Walt Disney's touch would one day awaken it. My parents had died in an automobile accident when I was four. I had a confused memory or two of life with them that involved the snow in Minnesota and bulky, uncomfortable coats, but nothing more. At age five, after living for a few months with a cousin who didn't really want me, I was sent to live with Aunt Etta, who, it soon became clear, wanted me mostly for the modest life insurance my parents had left for me. Etta Mary Pitkaginkel was her full name, but no one dared call her that because no one could say it without laughing.

She worked for A.C. Pittman, who owned over ten thousand acres of orange groves all over the state. She'd started off cleaning and taking care of his big house, which he never lived in because he had taken a mistress in Cleveland. Pittman's wife lived in California, at their other house. Aunt Etta also helped with the orchards next to the house during the picking season, assisting the foreman. Sometimes it seemed like she was the foreman. In the off season, with almost no one around, Aunt Etta took up the position of being in charge almost by default.

I'd like to think that the Aunt Etta I met as a child was very different from the Aunt Etta from before, that the rare hints of good humor and of kindness had once been a fireworks display. She, like me, had come from up north, from near Minneapolis, and she had also been fleeing disaster: a bad marriage, and dead-end jobs afterwards that never matched up with the comfortable, even rich, life she'd had before. She never talked about her brother, my father, but she'd so loathed those crappy jobs that she still muttered about them, couldn't let go of past slights and injustices. Other muttering came from resentment over Pittman keeping an exhaustive catalog of the house's many treasures—and having someone come and check that they were still there every six months, "as if I'm not to be trusted." Revenge for Aunt Etta came in the form of pretending she was related to Pittman, and using that to control the foreman, in a variety of ways.

She had what looked to me like a boxer's hands, all knuckles and calluses, and she used them like a boxer sometimes, too. The pickers, behind her back, called her "Auntie Dempsey" after Jack Dempsey. A tall woman with some meat on her, she used to boss the Mexican immigrants around—she stood over them like a stern, plump statue of liberty. They all feared her, endured her.

For my part, as soon as I had sense enough to understand Aunt Etta, I tried to keep out of her way. The rest of the time, I obeyed her the best I could, and looked forward to each and every day of school at Littlewood Elementary, and, later, Westwood Middle School. I didn't make many friends, never felt comfortable, but at least other kids were around. No kids on the Pittman land, except for the children of the Mexican laborers, and they wouldn't play with me by the bungalow because of Aunt Etta. I had to sneak off into the groves. Even then, they were wary as the deer that sometimes appeared at dusk, while

I, husky and my face ruddy with acne, felt like some clumsy monster barging in on their peace and quiet. Sure, there were kids at the Episcopalian church we sometimes went to on Sundays, but with Aunt Etta it was always go in, worship, and, as she put it, "get the hell out." I always wanted to "get the hell out," too, so in a way perfunctory church-going formed a bond between us.

I guess maybe that's why I said yes to Sensio in the first place—to have someone to play with, even if a rabbit was just a couple steps up from a doll. It was a summer day, I remember. I was just hanging around the pond behind the bungalow, in my bathing suit, watching the water ooze into the soil and wondering how the smell of oranges could have gone from smelling good to being an awful stench, and then a nothing, a scent that had no texture, no impact. I was in that good, silent place where the sun's warm on your skin and the breeze moves lazily over the hairs on your forearms.

The man was a presence leaning over me, and then a shadow through the sunlight from which appeared a darkened face, alongside a voice like the soft rasp of weatherbeaten leather that said, "Would you like a rabbit?" Then through my squint the figure resolved into a withered old man with only one eye and one arm. Where the eye should have been there was just an obsidian-black hole. Where the arm should have been, there was just a blue sleeve flapping in the breeze. He had a strange whispering rasp to his accent that drifts away from me whenever I try to identify it. A vague thought in my head that maybe he'd served in the War, although I didn't know much about "the War" beyond what I'd heard some men at the church say.

He carried a cage full of rabbits with the other hand. His remaining arm was what an adult would have called hypertrophied, the muscle in his bicep, triceps, and forearm thick, the shoulder coming out of the sleeve almost splitting it.

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," I said. For some reason, he was a curiosity to me. I didn't feel threatened even as I said the words.

"Then don't talk," he said, and set down the cage. He reached down and undid a latch, and suddenly there was something soft and white and heavy on my lap. The man said, "His name is Sensio," and then he was lurching away with the cage, saying over his shoulder, "Tell Aunt Etta I said hello."

I stared after the man long enough for him to become a flicker of light and dark moving through the orange groves. Then I turned to the rabbit.

Sensio was nuzzling up against my shoulder as he searched for a carrot or a lettuce leaf. To a bored kid in an orange grove in Florida, he looked like any old rabbit. He looked like my best friend.

I never told Aunt Etta the truth about where I got him. Something about the way the man said, "Tell Aunt Etta I said hello" had bothered me. It wasn't that I wanted to protect

Aunt Etta; in my kid's logic, she was as much of a problem as she was the person feeding me, putting a roof over my head. It was more that I didn't know how the man knew Aunt Etta. What if she hated him? Did that mean she wouldn't let me keep Sensio?

Aunt Etta kept giving the photographer suggestions that he didn't take to, like "Move the tripod to your left, young man, so you can get the trees behind me." She had an odd sort of pride about those trees, I realized later. A kind of pride not in keeping with her actual role as servant, as if she thought she owned the orchard.

"Ma'am," the photographer would say "the light won't be right if I do that." Or, "That will take another half hour."

Whatever patience the man possessed had been used adjusting to the oddness of the assignment. He was a young man, yes, but he had shadows under his eyes, and wrinkles at the corners. I remember thinking that his face shone oddly in the same way as Sensio's as he suffered his humiliation bound to the post.

As Aunt Etta tried to settle down for the photograph, even as she kept primping and fussing, I almost said something to her, but it was Sensio who broke in first.

"Take the picture," he said in his voice, which always had a gruffness to it. "Take the picture and be done with it."

The photographer stepped back, knees bent. The cigarette fell to the grass as his mouth opened so wide his jaw must have hurt. He looked like he'd just realized he was standing in quicksand or something.

Aunt Etta cackled, jumped up and down, which looked less dramatic than it sounds because of the length of her dress. Every utterance from Sensio's mouth must have sounded like a celestial chorus of dollar bills to her.

Sensio first spoke one night in my room, about a week after he came into my life. I had the windows pulled open because of the heat, hoping for a cross-breeze or anything to stop the sweat. I was on top of the sheets, naked except for my underwear. I was in a typical wretched, self-pitying mood. I had no friends. I was bored. I would never have a life in this place. The moon through the window was like a huge round cross-section of bone. The strange cries of nighthawks seemed to come from that whiteness, not the darkness into which their silhouettes disappeared.

Sensio was in the cage in the corner near the closet, next to my old dolls and other toys. I'd told Aunt Etta I'd found him cowering under an orange tree, even attached a crude splint to his paw to support my lie that he'd been injured, needed my help. "He must have been someone's pet," I said.

I don't know if she believed me, but she'd let me keep him, making it clear that

if he became a nuisance, "into the pot he'll go." Although she'd never killed an animal in her life except mice, Aunt Etta loved rabbit stew. She said it reminded her of "her youth" growing up in Minnesota. I thought there must be better memories than that, even if my own childhood hadn't yet amounted to much. Still, four or five times a year, she paid the Mexicans to get her rabbits. They tended to be stringy things, marsh rabbits taken from the shores of nearby lakes.

That night, as I lay there, so uncomfortable, staring out the window, listening to the sound of mosquitoes kissing the window screen, I heard a voice.

"Let me out of my cage," it said, gruffly. "Let me out."

I sat bolt upright in my bed, grabbed a plastic doll for protection. I listened carefully but heard nothing except my own breathing.

After a minute, I lay back down, chest tight and heart devouring my blood.

But a little later, the voice spoke again: "Please let me out of this cage, Rachel."

This time when I sat up brandishing my doll, I dared look over at the cage. Sensio was staring at me, his white fur darkly glowing against the cross-cut shadows.

"Was that you?" I whispered, almost hoping it had been, and not someone who had broken into our home. An absurd little part of me was almost more afraid of waking up Aunt Etta than of a talking rabbit.

"Yes, it's me. Sensio."

I couldn't see Sensio's mouth, but the sound definitely came from his cage.

That's when I thought I must be asleep, and that the heat was giving me strange dreams. I would wake soon.

In the meantime, it was the most natural thing in the world to climb down off my bed made for an adult and kneel down in front of the cage and say to Sensio, "If I let you out, will you go back in when I tell you?"

Those eyes, so full and dark against the ghost-white of his face, *saw* me.

"Yes, Rachel," Sensio said.

Had I, in my loneliness, *created* a voice for Sensio? Something like this thought passed through me.

Watching myself do it, I opened the cage, and even then it was as if I had opened more than just a cage. I flinched from the slight electrical discharge as the latch shocked me.

But nothing odd happened afterwards, not really.

Sensio hopped forward, snuffled against my knee, asked in a low, deep voice, "Do you have any lettuce? Any carrots?"

Just like any rabbit.

The photographer laughed weakly when he'd recovered his composure. He turned to me and pointed and said, standing straight again, a new cigarette held in one shaking hand, unlit: "Nice trick, kid. You should take that act out on the road." While Sensio stared up at him from his position as prisoner at the post.

Aunt Etta became livid, all the cheer dropping from her face and a pink blush steadily moving up her face from her neck.

"It was the rabbit, you idiot!" she shouted at him, her lipstick a ragged blood-snarl in the heat. "You heard it! You heard it *speak*! You heard it and you think she could do that? *That stupid little kid?*"

The photographer stared at Aunt Etta much as he'd stared at Sensio. I was staring, too, but Aunt Etta hadn't really said anything I hadn't heard before.

He worked much faster after that, and Sensio said nothing. Nothing at all. But from the look he gave me, I thought there was must be much more he wanted to say.

At first, we talked mostly at night, when I thought Aunt Etta couldn't hear us. I'd forgotten the strange ways in which that old bungalow could carry sound, or I'd just decided to risk it. I can't remember.

These weren't conversations like the ones between two people. For one thing, I sometimes still believed I'd made it all up and was talking to myself. For another, Sensio sometimes made sense and other times talked in riddles, or with some kind of veil between what I wanted him to mean and what he actually meant. I mimicked Aunt Etta's mutterings for awhile around the cottage, but my favorite phrase was "Just the tip of the iceberg," to remind me of larger mysteries. My forehead became taut with the strain of thinking all the time, trying to interpret Sensio.

"How come you can talk?" I asked him this question the second night; I hadn't had the nerve to interrogate what seemed like a miracle the night before, had been afraid it might turn out to be a dream, or a nightmare.

"I have always been able to talk," Sensio said, with the stiffness of a Russian count from a fairy tale. "It is just that no one could understand me."

"What do you mean?" That was a favorite question of mine at the time, along with "Why?"

"I do not mean anything," Sensio said, and nibbled on a carrot.

"How old are you."

"I do not know. Very old."

For a rabbit? For a person? Sensio did not know.

Then I asked a question that I kept coming back to in my feverishly alert child's mind—about the man who'd brought Sensio to me.

"That man. The one who gave you to me. Who was he?"

"A friend from another country."

"What's the country?"

"A place far from here."

I paused, frowning. I tried a different approach.

"Where did you come from?"

"Somewhere else."

"Where?"

"A place far from here."

"Have you ever been to school?"

"What is school?"

"A place where you learn things."

Sensio had nothing to say to that, but he seemed to give me a disapproving look. I tried again.

"How long have you been able to talk?"

"As long as I have been able to talk."

I really didn't like that answer. Impatient, almost imperious, I asked, "Are you the only rabbit that can talk."

"I am not a rabbit."

And there it was: *I am not a rabbit.* Even now, so long after, it makes me shiver. But at the time, it made me giggle. It seemed like a funny answer. Of course Sensio was a rabbit. He looked like a rabbit, ate like a rabbit, and definitely crapped like a rabbit.

"So what are you then?" I asked. "A ham sandwich? A can of beans? A witch?" I was delighted with myself for these guesses.

"I am not a rabbit," he said again.

This time I didn't giggle. It was said with such a sense of aloneness, that it's impossible to convey. It made me stop asking questions, because I felt I understood him. He was just like me.

That was the day before Aunt Etta found out.

After the photographer had taken his pictures and left along with all of his strange equipment, giving us a brusque promise of samples in a week, we stood there for a little while. It was dusty. It was uncomfortably hot. My throat felt parched and the green of the orange groves quivered in an air thick and humid.

Aunt Emma licked her lips, asked Sensio, "Don't you have anything to say?"

Sensio said nothing.

"Not one damn thing?" Aunt Etta asked again.

Sensio still said nothing. I felt the moment turn, like we were all balanced on the same thin plank high in the air, and at least one of us was going to fall off.

"Not one damn thing," Aunt Etta muttered. "You've got nothing to say to me after all of that. I feed you, I give you shelter, and you won't give me one word when I need it."

"There is nothing to be said," Sensio growled after a moment.

Turning his head to the side in a very unrabbit-like way, Sensio stared up at Aunt Etta. Aunt Etta stared back, just as implacable.

Right then, the rope in Aunt Etta's hand looked less like a leash and more like a fuse.

"Remember, it's just an animal," Aunt Etta said to me, during that first meal after she discovered me talking to Sensio. This was back when she thought she might flatter Sensio into cooperating with her plans. I know she was wearing something else, but in memory she is wearing the same outfit as she did to the photo shoot.

We sat, the three of us, at the dining room table in A.C. Pittman's house, which almost qualified as a mansion. Eating there was something Aunt Etta did rarely, and only when she wanted to impress. Sometimes the foreman—a tall, rangy Mexican originally from Tijuana—would visit, and the two of them would walk up to Pittman's house laughing, with some bottles of beer, and be gone for hours. That was the happiest I ever saw her, and the house had something to do with it.

Chandeliers from Paris, Waterford crystal, decanters of brandy, rosewood chairs and tables, carpet from the Orient, and even an awful lion's pelt rug in the study. Pittman made money from more than just orange groves, and he spent it on only the most obvious things.

The dining room table could seat twenty along its length, and its surface was a rich, shining mirror from which none of us could hide. Aunt Etta sat at the head of the table, me to the left, sullen and on edge. Sensio sat on the other side—balanced atop five cushions to begin with, Aunt Etta having, absurdly I realize now, pulled up Pittman's ornate French chair from the study to impress the rabbit.

After a time, Sensio hopped onto the table, onto his plate.

"Rachel, move that for him," Aunt Etta snapped at me. Since she'd found out Sensio could talk, her whole world had been Sensio, except when she needed something done.

"Isn't this nice?" she said to Sensio.

That afternoon, when she'd burst into my room in the bungalow, and admitted she'd been listening at the door on and off for awhile—when she saw I had neither imaginary friend nor actual friend—she'd at first let out a kind of horrible shriek, followed by the hiss of an intake of breath. Her face had seemed for a moment to crumple. Ever since there had been in her eyes a light that was too bright. Her actions, her movements, were also too

"bright," as if under such tight control that she might at any moment explode.

Isn't it nice?

Perhaps, in that moment, I did find it nice, almost as if I were younger and having a teddy bears' tea party in the orchard by myself. Those bears had talked to me, too, but I'd always known what they were going to say.

But Sensio said nothing in reply. The tock-tock of the inlaid mother-of-pearl grandfather clock in the hall became oppressive. Even the savory but thick smell of dinner cooking in the kitchen added weight to the air.

"Your friend is a little shy," Aunt Etta said to me.

I shrugged, not sure what to make of the situation. Aunt Etta's discovery that Sensio could talk had been a different kind of shock for me. It meant that Sensio's ability was definitely real. There was a kind of relief in knowing I wasn't imagining things, and another kind of relief in hoping that the rabbit might create a kind of truce between Aunt Etta and me.

"What's for dinner?" I asked, but she had already turned her back on me.

"Why are you here?" she asked Sensio.

I sat up straight in my chair. It was a question that would have seemed like nonsense if I'd asked it. Coming from Aunt Etta, it seemed like the only question.

Slowly, Sensio stirred and turned toward Aunt Etta.

"Does it matter?" he replied. "It only matters what you think I'm here for."

Suddenly, a coldness crept into me. Suddenly, I was not Sensio's friend. Instead, it felt as if he were an adult just like Aunt Etta.

Aunt Etta leaned forward, said, almost primly, "I think you are here to make all of us very rich," as if she'd invited an oil derrick or a shipment of gold bullion to dinner. Then she went to get our meal.

That was just the first of three fancy dinners, each more tense than the last. In memory, they are all mixed together, but they each had their own characteristics: in the first, vegetarian lasagne, as Aunt Etta tries to flatter what cannot be flattered; in the second, steamed vegetables, rice and (for us) chicken, as Aunt Etta tries to plead with that which cannot negotiate; in the third, Aunt Etta outdoes herself in more than one sense.

Later, I would think about what she did and wonder if she just had limited ways of coping with the impossible without going insane. Yet, her solution—that Sensio would make us rich—made her even crazier.

The day after Aunt Etta discovered Sensio could talk, she shoved a cot into her room for me to sleep on and also brought Sensio's cage in there. She made sure he only got the best

carrots, lettuce, and other produce.

I was mad about this, and not just because my feet dangled off the end of the cot and my back became stiff from the mattress, or that she didn't care. I was mad because now there was almost no time for me to talk to Sensio without Aunt Etta around. Sensio didn't talk as much during the day.

Then Aunt Etta started to call newspapers. First, national newspapers, from telephone numbers she found rummaging through Pittman's business office, and then the Florida papers, because the national papers thought she was a kook.

"I'll show them kook," she'd say, dialing yet another number.

I admit I became caught up in the idea of Sensio becoming famous, and the thought of it almost made up for Aunt Etta making us sleep in the same room with her. I don't know what Aunt Etta envisioned, but in my daydreams Sensio did make us rich, and we went on the road with him as part of a traveling carnival a little like the one painted in a picture in Pittman's house: all garish reds and greens, and smiling carnies standing to one side of cages with dancing bears in them and jugglers practicing their trade on the other. All sorts of exotic ideas came out of my head. As Sensio's trainer I would be much interviewed and admired. I'd have someone to help me with my makeup and buy me clothes. The other kids in the carnival would seek me out. When we weren't working, we'd take holidays, going to fancy restaurants and staying in swank hotels. I had a fixation with chocolate ice cream back then, so I dreamed of eating mountains of it.

But more important, it began to dawn on me that if Aunt Etta was successful, her attention wouldn't always be on me, and all the things I was doing wrong. That I would have some relief, and maybe even some control, even though I knew that, thankfully, she didn't yet realize this fact. I could also, during those handful of days, pretend that, for once, Aunt Etta and I wanted the same things—for Sensio and for ourselves.

A couple of reporters finally came down, one from the *Orlando Sentinel* and one from the *St. Petersburg Times*, but Sensio wouldn't talk to them. Aunt Etta had made him clothes by then, so he'd look more human, but I thought he looked more foolish that way, like he was playing dress-up, and it didn't help with the reporters, who only cared if he talked or not. The second reporter left angrier at the waste of time than the first, maybe because he'd had to drive a longer distance or maybe because he'd already been having a bad day.

When no one else would come out Aunt Etta made a fool of herself trying to get Sensio to talk to people over the phone, which he wouldn't do. The sight of Aunt Etta, on her hands and knees, holding the phone down to Sensio's mouth and pleading with him to talk should have made me feel bad for her.

When I hesitantly tried to tell Aunt Etta that no one thought of a rabbit talking over

the phone as proof of anything, she snapped, "He still sounds like a rabbit."

Except, I realized he didn't sound like a rabbit. He didn't make a chuttering purr or the kind of warbling squeak I'd heard from other rabbits. All he did was talk in a voice like a man, and he snored sometimes at night, a sound that made me smile because sometimes he formed a chorus with Aunt Etta. Once, waking up suddenly, he made a sound like a high-pitched sonic boom.

"Maybe he's more comfortable staying in my room," I said, but Aunt Etta wasn't having any of that, either.

After the photo session, the moments extended out into a kind of stand-off while I watched, Sensio staring at Aunt Etta and Aunt Etta staring at Sensio. They were like battle-scarred emissaries from two different countries that would never speak the same language, and never admit to the need for an interpreter.

Almost as if to make him stop, she yanked on the rope and Sensio fell over like a child's toy. Silent. Still looking up at her. I was so surprised I just stood there.

Aunt Etta nudged Sensio with her foot as he tried to right himself. Then she kicked him in the side.

I beat on her then, my fists on that impenetrable, ridiculous skirt that seemed made of something more like aluminum siding than fabric.

I imagine I was screaming at her, although I can't remember making a sound.

Finally, Aunt Etta called the Ringling Brothers Circus, which kept a permanent headquarters in Tampa. The woman who came out surprised us both. I'd expected a bearded lady and Aunt Etta had expected a trapeze artist. What we got was a slim, gray-haired woman dressed smartly in slacks and a blouse. Her shoes were flat and black and simple. She had hazel eyes tinged with green. She could have been from Sears, except for her mysterious smile that made everything ordinary and normal about her seem just a disguise. I liked her. She seemed the opposite of Aunt Etta in almost every detail.

We went to the screened-in Florida Room of Pittman's house, a ceiling fan lazily revolving above our heads. The circus woman, whose name I can't remember, sat on the couch and looked out at the orange orchards in the distance while I brought Sensio in and put him on the wicker chair to her left. Aunt Etta had gotten a fancy tea service with a hummingbird pattern out of the basement, and handed the circus woman a cup of orange blossom tea.

From his comfortable wicker chair, even with me petting him, Sensio steadfastly refused to speak. Long minutes passed by in uncomfortable silence, broken only by the staccato, almost garish attempts by Aunt Etta at small talk. I remember feeling a perverse

pleasure at being a kid, at not being expected to put forth the effort. All I'd had to do to prepare was put on a sun dress and let Aunt Etta tie a pink bow in my hair. All I had to do now was smile and pet the rabbit, and dangle my legs off the edge of the chair.

The circus woman was patient, and she waited for longer than most people. She even waited while Aunt Etta squatted and sidled up to Sensio on the side of the chair opposite me, and then poked him in his side as he nibbled on a carrot.

"C'mon, Sensio," she said in a wheedling voice. "Come on. Talk for the nice lady."

I didn't like those pokes. Those pokes were deceptive. When the foreman was around and I did something Aunt Etta disapproved of, she'd poke me in the side like it was a joke, but it always hurt. Sometimes it left a bruise.

Near the end of this thankless and uncomfortable sitting, with Aunt Etta's pokes becoming more like jabs, a strange thing happened. Sensio lifted his head and a look of recognition, almost sympathy, passed between the rabbit and the circus woman, her mysterious smile growing momentarily larger and fuller before fading. It was so quick and so ambiguous, I couldn't tell if I'd imagine it, let alone begin to understand its meaning.

A few minutes later, as if on a pre-arranged signal between her and the rabbit, she rose, giving a nonchalant pat to Sensio that, in my imagination, now is elongated and slowed down so that some kind of communication or comment is occurring there. Then, with a smile of sympathy toward me that I warded off by looking away, she ignored Aunt Etta's pleas to give Sensio another chance with some polite collection of words like "a lovely rabbit, but I don't think it's the kind of act we're looking for."

She handed Aunt Etta a business card and, on the way out, managed to—while giving me the solemn, leaning-over handshake of adult to child—slip a tiny deck of tarot cards into a pocket of my dress. If there was something serious in her gaze, I couldn't understand what it might be any more than I could understand Sensio.

After the circus woman had left, Aunt Etta folded her arms, stared down at Sensio, and said, "No dinner for you." And then, looking over at me, "For either of you."

No dinner because of someone else's failure wasn't unknown in our strange, sealed-off household, but this seemed so unfair I began to cry. Or maybe I was upset because the circus woman had left.

"I'm sorry," I said to Sensio through my tears. "I'm sorry." After all, I had led him into this trap.

"It would all be the same anyway," he said very seriously.

"No, it wouldn't be," I said. I don't know what I meant by that, though. Did I mean if he'd talked to the circus lady or something else?

"I am not what she wants me to be," Sensio said.

"What are you then?" I asked him, bringing his warm fur up to my face as I hugged him close. "What are you?"

"Does it matter?"

After Aunt Etta kicked Sensio, she dragged him through the dirt back toward our bungalow, holding the rope tightly in her boxer's fist. There was no one to see her do it. The workers had the afternoon off and, the foreman was out at a local bar.

I was screaming, kicking at her, but she didn't even notice. Sensio remained silent. Not a squeal, not a squeak, although it must have hurt him terribly.

"Stop," I kept shouting. "Stop!"

But she wouldn't stop. She was caught up in the moment. She couldn't stop. Something hidden at the core of her had come out. She would have dragged him through the rows of orange bushes, choking, until his fur came off and he was raw and spasming. She would have turned him into rabbit stew without any protest from Sensio, as if this was what he had been set on earth to become. There wasn't even anything personal about it, and that made it worse, like she'd planned it all along. Like she'd wanted it to happen that way. Was it because she couldn't stand being turned into a fool? Was it from sheer frustration?

All I know is that I ran back to the post. With a grunt, bending my knees, I put my bulky frame to use and pulled the post out of the ground in an explosion of dirt, splinters ripping into my hands. When I caught up to Aunt Etta, she was still dragging Sensio by the rope around his neck, his paws flopping in the dirt, I shouted "Stop!" again in my loudest voice. But still she refused to hear me, so I had to make her hear.

I hit Aunt Etta across the shoulders with the post. She turned to me with a distant look on her face. I couldn't tell you what that expression meant. It didn't stop me from smashing her in the knees, through that ridiculous armored skirt. It absorbed some of the force of the blow, but she still let out a loose, oddly high-pitched cry of pain. She lurched to the side, but regained her balance.

"Stop it, Rachel," she said. "Just stop it. It's just a rabbit." She was breathing heavy, and her words sounded like they'd been said in a foreign language.

I hit her in the knees again, with all my strength. She cried out again, this time more piercing. She fell almost like a statue, straight down, as if she had no joints, the skirt settling around her like a parachute. She was slapping out at me as she fell like I was some sort of insect rather than a big, clumsy twelve-year-old with a wooden post in her hands. Even then she refused to let go of Sensio, her hand clenched white against the rope. Maybe it was just a reflex, but I saw it as more refusal, more proof that Sensio was in danger.

I hit her in the head. Once, twice. She gasped like all her breath was rushing out of her, tried to get up, and my anger turned to fear. If she got up, she would do to me what she

was doing to Sensio. And I could not let that happen. I hit her one last time.

Aunt Etta groaned and slumped and lay still while I freed Sensio from the rope. His fur had been ripped off in places, revealing pink, bloody skin. There was sand and grass and dirt all over him.

"Are you okay?" I asked him, frantic as I cradled him in my arms.

But he said nothing.

You can see the photograph now, as a postcard, in antique stores and gift shops in Florida. Sometimes it comes with a funny title, like "She dealt swiftly with evildoers." It has been doctored to include shadows for both Sensio and Aunt Etta. Her clothes have been colored, as has his straitjacket uniform. Because of these changes, which make the photo look even less real, there is no chance that anyone would ever believe Aunt Etta really tied a talking rabbit to a post and, dressed in her Sunday best, had someone take a photograph of her with the rabbit. No one will ever know that I was there, too, or what happened after.

I came to my senses a few minutes after I'd hit Aunt Etta for the last time. She was making little broken sounds in the dirt and had a big, bleeding dent in her forehead. Her eyes were open but glassy, as if she had already turned inward. Every couple of minutes her body would convulse. I knew that I had hurt her badly.

I'd dropped the post and was babbling to Sensio as I held him against my chest. We'd escape together. We'd hide out in the orange groves, or we'd make our way to Key West and hid out there, like I'd seen in a movie once. Or maybe we'd even travel to Tampa and find the circus woman and she'd help us out. "She liked you, Sensio," I remember telling him. "She'd definitely help us." As if I was an adult, or had any money, or any sense.

After awhile I realized Sensio wasn't answering, which to me, in that state, meant he didn't agree. Slowly, a cold, clear mood came over me, and I knew what we had to do, what we could do to survive this together.

I scuffed up the trail from the photo shoot to where Aunt Etta's body lay to make it harder to tell what had happened. I used leaves and a branch to obscure any of my footprints. I took the post with me, and later burned it. Then I went back to the bungalow, treated Sensio's wounds, and put him in his cage, telling him, "No matter what questions they ask, don't say anything." I thought I saw him nod.

Then I had the operator call the foreman at the bar and told him I'd found Aunt Etta, "beaten up by someone." The foreman called an ambulance and the police, and came barreling back in his ancient truck. I was bawling by Aunt Etta's side just like a kid of twelve would bawl if she found her aunt brutally attacked and left for dead. I did it because I had to, yes, but also because by then the madness had left me and I was truly sorry.

As the ambulance took Aunt Etta away to three months in a coma followed by brain death, the policeman on the scene asked me, “Have you see anyone you don’t know around here lately?”

Through my sobs and hiccupping and snot, I told him that an old man with a face like weather-beaten leather and missing an eye had come looking for Aunt Etta, but I’d only seen him the once. I figured telling them the man was missing an arm, too, would be laying it on too thick.

“Could you identify him if you saw him again?” the policeman asked. He was in his late forties, losing his hair, and had a kindly voice that made me feel bad.

Yes, I nodded, although I knew they’d never find him.

After they’d finished questioning me, I stayed with the foreman’s family for a few weeks before being picked up and sent back north to live with the cousin who hadn’t wanted me before. I guess the sympathy money A.C. Pittman threw at him made me more appealing. I even got to take Sensio with me, in a little cage in the backseat next to me. No one was willing to tell the girl who had suffered such a trauma that she couldn’t keep her only friend in the world.

I talked to Sensio the whole way up, but in the way a child might to an imaginary friend so the cousin, who smelled of too much cologne and was throwing me strange glances from the driver’s seat, wouldn’t get too concerned. Sensio didn’t answer me. That was okay, I reasoned. He’d suffered a trauma, too. It would take time for both of us to recover.

The same newspapers that had ignored Aunt Etta when she’d tried to sell them on a talking rabbit, now splashed the details of her injuries all over their pages, referring in lurid tones to the mysterious man I’d described for the police. They even interviewed the photographer, whose account of that day didn’t include the fact that he’d witnessed Sensio talk. But the man did leave the strong impression that Aunt Etta had been both a fool and a witch. Then it all died down, and Aunt Etta passed on without them having caught her murderer, and I imagine life went on in the orange groves much as it had before for the migrant workers and the foreman and whomever Pittman got to look after his house full of expensive junk.

It’s been many, many years since that day captured by the photograph, and in most ways there’s been nothing special about my life. I grew up, went to college, mostly on money it turned out Aunt Etta had kept for me in a trust fund. I left my cousin’s house as soon as I could, became an accountant, and did well enough to come back to the small town in Minnesota where I’d been born and have a respectable career, live a respectable life. I found religion and lost it again. I dabbled at children’s stories, but never found the right

voice. I fell in love on a cruise and married to my husband John two years later. He's an attorney, and we have two kids, Bobby and Sandy, who've left home already for families and lives of their own. I used to go to PTA meetings and high school football games. Now I've retired from accounting, serve on the city council here, and do a bit of gardening. My marriage has had the highs and lows you'd expect, but there are some things you can't tell anyone, and the possibility becomes more remote every year. In short, there's nothing unusual about me. I could be anyone, anyone you know and think after meeting her, "She's a nice older lady, but a little boring." I am more a ghost in my life now than as a presence beyond the edge of that postcard.

But even while I listen to some citizen talk about storm drains at a city council meeting, or weed the garden, I am still having conversations with Sensio in my head. So many conversations that I don't know what to do with them sometimes, don't know how to distinguish between what's been said and what's always been left unsaid, so that there are moments when something rises inside of me, unable to get out but unable to rest. Who was the circus woman? What did she say to you with that single look? Where did you come from? Were you sent by God or the Devil? What did you want with us? Were you lost? Were you alone? Are there more of your kind somewhere? Were you a human soul in an animal's body? Was it a kind of punishment for you to appear in that form? Did you come from another world? Were you a test? Did I fail or pass, or wasn't it that kind of test? Did you ever care for me? Were you really my friend, even if just for a little while? What did you *mean*?

Useless questions. Useless thoughts.

That third dinner, the night before the photo shoot, Aunt Etta made a fuss, wanted it to be formal and "just right." She'd suffered what I thought of as a change of mood that I found suspicious; she seemed almost giddy, almost happy. We waited at the foot of the stairs while Aunt Etta brought down a silver serving set. She claimed Pittman had bought it in Paris and kept it hidden in a cupboard on the second floor.

Aunt Etta had put on one of her best dresses: a silvery, shimmering thing that caught the light at odd angles so that one moment it was drab, lifeless, and the next it seemed full of tiny shooting stars. She'd taken special care with her make-up so it wasn't so thick or approximate, and she'd brought her hair up into a bun. A silver bracelet matched a silver necklace, both of which, up close, consisted of tiny dragon heads. I could smell her sickly sweet perfume from the bottom of the stairs as she came lurching down the steps in her black high heels. Sensio could smell it too; his nose twitched like crazy. But, I have to say, I liked her then. There was a sense, for a moment, of an Aunt Etta I barely knew.

With exaggerated care she swept by us with her serving set, giving us a smile of

benevolent regard, and saying, “Sensio, I just know you will love this dinner. You will love it.”

Sensio said nothing.

She disappeared into the kitchen that abutted the dining room. Interesting smells and sounds had been coming from the kitchen for hours.

The table had already been set. The cutlery gleamed in the fractured light from overhead lamps. I arranged Sensio atop his pillows again, to the left of Aunt Etta’s place at the head of the table. I sat next to Sensio, in case he needed help.

“It smells good,” I said to Sensio.

Sensio made a sound between a grunt and a sneeze.

Aunt Etta brought out the first dishes, which were to be served, buffet-style, in silver bowls. Squash and broccoli and green bean casserole, and potatoes au gratin with cheese crisped in frozen waves on top.

We ate silently because it was delicious and we were starving, Aunt Etta smiling at us from time to time from her new found “shining city on the hill” as the church preacher might’ve put it.

Sensio didn’t eat much, but this didn’t seem to bother Aunt Etta. Mostly, Sensio had a sense of watchful waiting about him. But I ignored that, just as I put aside any misgivings about Aunt Etta’s cheer.

Finally, Aunt Etta disappeared once more into the kitchen and came out wearing oven mittens and carrying a huge silver bowl, twice as large as the others, with an ornately etched lid.

She placed it on the table in front of us, and produced a ladle. A stillness had come over her, a kind of grand anticipation.

“This is something extra special for you, Sensio,” she said. “I hope you like it.”

With a flourish, Aunt Etta uncovered the bowl. Steam rose, and with it a smell familiar to me. Rabbit stew.

You might think I would’ve been horrified. But, oddly, I wasn’t. Some cruel little part of me perked up in sudden fascination. What would Sensio do? Perhaps I was mad Sensio didn’t talk to me as much anymore, even though that impulse would’ve been perverse, irrational. It was Aunt Etta who had ruined our conversations, after all.

Aunt Etta placed a generous portion in Sensio’s bowl.

Sensio sniffed it hungrily, jumped onto the table, put his forelegs on the lip of his bowl. With extraordinary grace and agility, he used his teeth to pick out a carrot next to a meat-rich bone in the thick gravy.

“It’s rabbit stew,” Aunt Etta said, as if revealing the twist in a thriller on the radio. Her voice was slick with a kind of self-satisfaction, a sort of smugness.

Sensio sniffed again, looked over at Aunt Etta, said, "I am not a rabbit," lifted a bone out of the bowl, and crunched down on it with teeth never intended for the task. The sound of the bone cracking and then splintering was loud and grotesque. A sloppy, brutal sound that made mockery of the silver dining service, the opulent dining room, and, especially, of Aunt Etta.

The air had disappeared from my lungs without me noticing it, and I took a huge gulp of air. Neither Aunt Etta or Sensio took any notice of me. Aunt Etta slowly sat back in her chair, struggling with emotions that only occasionally broke the surface of her face in the form of a tic, a tightening of the jaw, a strange look that hinted at both hatred and defeat. All those dollar signs were receding from eyes grown small and cold. Except, thinking back, I don't think it was really about making money off of him anymore.

But the crunching continued as Sensio, with great delight and deliberation, ate his stew, sucking out marrow as well as he was able, the pink of his nose, the white fur of his muzzle, soon muddy with the gravy.

It wasn't quite over, but it might as well have been. Aunt Etta attempted a kind of recovery, to overcome the moment with halting conversation, to somehow undercut the enormity of not just one, but *two* things that defied explanation. As I glutted myself to shut them out and became drowsy, I seem to recall Sensio saying matter-of-factly, "…there is no time" or "…there isn't time yet," while Aunt Etta whispered over and over, as if to confide in Sensio, "Don't make me look like a fool. Don't make me look like a fool."

Their conversation seemed to narrow and narrow, like light withdrawing until it was only a single bright point reflected in the darkness of the dining room table.

I know I should think of Aunt Etta every day. I know I should be kinder to her memory. I know I should be sorrier about what happened. But even when I came across the photo again yesterday, while cleaning up the attic, all I could see was Sensio, and all I had inside of me was frustration, and a kind of anger that won't go away. That I didn't ask the questions before, or the right way, and that this would've made all the difference. Whenever I catch a glimpse of rabbits on TV, or at the mall pet shop, I hope to see one more time that great, that animating impulse in a large, almond-shaped eye, but I never do.

Although I had Sensio for another four years after I was sent back north, he never spoke to me again. Not a single word. Not even to tell me, one more time, that he was not a rabbit. I woke one morning and he was dead: just an old white rabbit with patchy fur, lying on his side, and looking out toward something I could not see.