

Roo, the Real Rabbit

As pets go, my rabbit was more decorative than interactive. When I returned from a day of work, Roo did not greet me with leaps of joy. No, he would continue contemplating the world from one of his two postures, sitting up (the “lump” position) or flopped on his side with his hind legs sticking out behind him. With floppy ears, immense dark eyes set into deep tawny fur, and a flattened face, he looked like a discarded plush toy. Only the little chevron nose that fluttered above his nostrils betrayed his living state. Roo would greet me on seemingly random occasions, hopping in circles around me while issuing his only sound, a low, pulsating hum. He made few demands—no whining, barking, or beseeching stares. He would sometimes nudge my ankles when it occurred to him that a massage would be welcome. When I rubbed behind his ears and under his chin, he settled down and closed his eyes in bunny bliss. When I massaged his back and sides, he would return the favor and lick my hand. Indeed, grooming was one of his few activities, though I fail to see how it contributed to cleanliness. At such times the odd little fellow would sit up on his haunches, turn his stumpy forepaws up, lick them, and then rub his nose, face and head. He would then pull each floppy ear over and lick as much of it as he could reach. While this limited range of activities was charming, friends and I would mock Roo for the contentment he seemed to find in his uncomplicated existence. We surmised that his calm outer life reflected a dull inner one.

This notion was not shared by Anne, my friend and bunnysitter. She believed that his large head contained more than fluff. At the end of July I left Roo in her care for a few weeks since I needed to be out of my house. The day after I dropped him off, Roo slipped through a small hole in her fenced yard. She hadn’t seen him for several hours when she notified me. The bunny had disappeared into rabbit paradise. Anne’s yard is a maze of pathways among islands of dense and varied vegetation. For hours I strolled the paths, peering into every place I thought a bunny might hide. I then enlisted Maggie, a dog of Roo’s acquaintance, to aid in the search, to no avail. Neighbors were alerted, pictures of Roo were posted.



I wondered whether domestic rabbits have any homing ability. I found nothing authoritative on the internet, just one tale of a homing rabbit in England. This rabbit was sentenced to life in the wilderness. His offenses included book-eating and nibbling the mustache of a sleeping guest. Five times he was transported. Five times he returned. If this story were true, Roo could be attempting to hop the several wooded and hilly miles between Anne’s house and my own.

Each day my optimism faded. Then the cats in Anne’s neighborhood began to disappear. I fought disappointment with black humor, saying that Roo was to blame, but in truth I gave up hope for a bunny after the first two cats went missing. Coyotes and foxes were often heard and seen in this neighborhood. Although I consider loose pets fair game for any wild predator, I shuddered to contemplate Roo’s probable fate.

Roo had been gone just a few days shy of a month, so when Anne called me I assumed it would be to talk about an orphaned mouse she was raising. Instead, she reported that her neighbors had spotted Roo warming himself on their driveway at dawn! I drove right down. Anne and her neighbor showed me where they had just spotted the rabbit. He had disappeared over a steep bank grown high with brush and poison ivy. That was the first of several days of rain, yet I clambered into the damp thicket eager in my quest.

You should have seen him! I was standing on a rise partway down the bank when Roo detected my looming presence. Up the bank he flew in mighty athletic

leaps. I saw no more of him that day. The next day heavier rain curtailed the search. The neighbors' children watched their cardboard box-and-stick trap. I left a few jellybeans in his carrier near the place where he had last been seen. When the rain abated the next day, Anne and I resumed the search. From a perch on the bank I watched Anne wade through the brush below. She saw him first, and gestured. There was Roo, noble and alert, with the air of a competent wild creature. As I moved slowly toward him, my old companion bolted. I never dreamed he could move that way, and command so much territory. The terrain that had me clambering awkwardly hindered him not a bit.

I found him crouched in a patch of tall grass. I sat down a few feet away. Over the next twenty minutes, I watched him relax and transform from Roo of the Wilderness back to Roo of the Carpet. When the transformation was complete, he hopped over to me. I grabbed him, an act that once would have provoked panicked indignation, but this time he seemed relieved.

I wondered if Roo would be content to return to his life of domestic simplicity. A few days after his return, I opened the door to the wide world. If Roo wanted to be a wild bunny, I would let him. Roo hopped out and explored his old familiar lawn with animation, rubbing his chin on plantain stalks and following the squirrels. After several minutes, he hopped back into the house and flopped over onto his side with his legs sticking out, his little chevron nose fluttering above his nostrils.

