

Tell Me Not
By
Jacqueline Falcomer

Part 1 Chapter 1

With his heart barricaded and wishing this evening was already over, Pepe hauled a squirming doe from the cage by its ears, and wasting no time delivered a solid tap behind its right ear with the back of an axe.

‘Remember,’ his mother Bella had said, when she first instructed him in the practise of culling, ‘work with your mind and hand; calculate the rabbit’s weight, and deliver a blow accordingly. Not too light.’

In the beginning, when he did miscalculate, the rabbit’s anguished screams caused Pepe’s heart to contract and his eyes to pour copious tears.

On the occasion when a thrashing, furry ball slipped from his grasp, Bella’s tawny eyes narrowed. She raised her voice to counter the rabbit’s decibel levels. ‘Go after it.’

Likely in sympathy with the rabbit’s vocals, Pepe’s throat closed. He stood with his mouth opening and closing like the rainbow trout landed on the mossy-green riverbank. Finally he squeaked, ‘I...can’t.’

Bella handed her son a cloth to wipe his eyes. ‘You must. It’s your doing. The longer you take, the longer that rabbit suffers.’

After some difficulty Pepe caught the rabbit, and by a miracle, for which he immediately thanked God, delivered the perfect blow to end its misery.

‘And don’t permit yourself any sentiment,’ Bella added, eyeing Pepe’s tear-stained face. ‘Rabbits are sensitive. The more you think about killing, the more likely you will communicate your stress to them. Remember, these rabbits largely make it possible for us to live here. The least we can do is ensure a swift and clean death.’

No sooner had his mother issued forth the last words, he vowed never to make the same mistake again.

After the doe’s three frenzied paw and foot jerks – four for bucks – its muscles slackened, its body lengthened. Then a thought, with the mesmerizing grace of a swaying cobra, set Pepe to wondering. Would he ever be able to deliver a blow, just hard enough to knock his mountain-of-a father out, and thereby avoid, what always occurred the day after the monthly rabbit cull?

No sooner had that thought ended, like the oriental flute player guiding the serpent to retreat/withdraw into the darkness of the basket, so too, did Pepe relegate the thought to the back of his mind.

Pepe’s father Lukas stood to his right, a blood-stained apron with extended ties around his ample waist. He attached the body feet-up to small s-shaped meat hooks hanging over a single rail running the shed’s length. He made two small incisions at the feet. With a quick tug he’d strip off the fur like turning a sleeve inside out. ‘Attention,’ he’d call to his slender wife, as he scooted a couple of carcasses at a time down the rail toward where she stood.

Bella unhooked the furless bodies and laid them on the hand-sawn tree trunk serving as a chopping board. She picked up her axe.

Keeping watch Lukas called, 'Fingers,' thus reminding his beloved to pay attention as she prepared to chop off paws and feet.

With the skill of a master surgeon, and using the tip of the finely honed axe blade, Bella slit the taut belly. Inserting her index and middle fingers into and under the top of the still-warm chest bone she gave a quick tug and pulled out the internal organs in a steady motion leaving the belly cavity free. She separated the entrails from the hearts, livers, and kidneys.

Pepe tossed the entrails over the edge of the precipitous cliff, and spread the heart, liver and kidneys of one rabbit on the rocky outcrop for the pair of resident golden eagles.

Once Lukas had chopped the rest of the organs, sage, and dried apple stuffing, he cranked the mix through the meat grinder. Bella turned the mix into sausages that Lukas slow-smoked and laid in store for their consumption during the harshest winter months. The fresh pelts got tossed directly into a bucket of pickled water. At any one time, several buckets containing pelts all at various curing stages, stood upon the floor.

Like an operating surgeon, Bella held out her hand. 'Rosemary.'

Pepe handed over the fresh bunch she'd cut earlier.

She inserted the sprigs into cavities, while Pepe sprinkled a sheet of paper with a solution of water and white vinegar and handed it to her. She wrapped each translucent creamy-pink carcass, now sporting four pointy bones in place of paws and feet in damp paper.

Pepe laid the wrapped carcasses one atop the other, aligning their flexible spines into the curves of the baskets.

Thus, on the last Sunday night of each month, ten-year-old Pepe killed rabbits in his family's Alpine lean-to shed.

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At dawn, in cold air filled with the smell of razor-sharp pine, which, if inhaled too deeply, caused lungs to burn and eyes to water, the Holtzmann family rode down the stony track. Lukas and Bella sat upfront. Pepe, and the dog, Dana, sat in the back of the cart.

All three family members wore leather boots, home-sewn thick calico trousers and rough shirts.

Over his extra-paneled shirt, Lukas wore Bella's wedding gift to him; a waistcoat, fur side facing in. Notwithstanding that it had been made by her and given to him with love, it was a testament to Bella the mountain woman, whose many skills, included tooling rabbit pelts into functional clothing.

Over her shirt and trousers, Bella wore an old, ankle-length knitted coat trimmed with rabbit fur. On her head she wore a matching bell-shaped hat that secured her plaited-in-pigtails golden tresses, and protected her hands by wearing a pair of fur-lined gloves.

Pepe wore the most recent rabbit jacket his mother had made for him. She could hardly keep up with her son's recent growth spurts, despite which, much to her chagrin, he remained skinny. He'd forgotten his gloves, but that was no matter; he buried his hands in Dana's rich neck fur as she lay resting her giant head upon his lap.

An hour later they joined other early morning vendors along the road leading to town, riding through vapor rising from the warming valley floor.

Lukas unhitched the cart, tethered the mare, leaving her in a meadow to graze along with other horses. With a cheery wave he disappeared into the milling throngs of sellers and buyers.

A hawker's son, said to have been touched by an angel at birth, hung about the Holtzmann's cart. Oblivious to everything but Bella, he stared love-struck at her.

Pepe felt the familiar rise of confused emotions upon sight of the hawker's gormless son, his lumbering body and drooling mouth. When Bella was engaged with a customer, Pepe hissed harder than a snake, 'Be off.'

'Leave him,' Bella said. 'He means no harm.'

Pepe grimaced. 'It's disgusting. He can't be in love with you. He's only four years older than me.'

From the cart, now tipped at an angle and serving as their stall table, mother and son sold or bartered whole rabbits, and assorted items of rabbit pelt clothing, for whatever they needed.

Lukas' deep voice resonated over the market's sea of bobbing heads. He jovially greeted and caught up with their mountain ridge neighbours, whose early morning and late afternoon chimney smoke plumes was all he saw of them during the month.

Mid-morning, Lukas left for the canvas tent at the far end of the row of stalls. He joined the queue of men waiting to enter.

By midday, vendors packed up their unsold goods, hitched their carts, and began their journey home. Bella fell silent. The pulse point at her throat throbbed.

Pepe un-tethered and hitched the mare. While the marketplace emptied, mother and son waited in thickening silence for Lukas' return.

Then they saw him, weaving his way back, an index finger hooked through the hole on the neck of a flagon. He raised it to his mouth while still walking, his arm bent at the elbow supporting the glass bottle's weight. He extended his other arm sideways to keep his balance like a tightrope walker. He tilted back his head and poured the liquid down his throat. After a series of hit and miss scrambles – neither Bella nor Pepe attempted assisting him having learned their lesson not to – Lukas managed to climb into the back of the cart.

On their way home, Pepe sat with his mother up front, her spine rigid against every bump. He held the reins, trying not to communicate his own rising tension to the mare.

In no time, Lukas sprawled between empty stacked baskets and covers in the back of the cart, sometimes causing Dana to lose her spot. She'd run alongside and when possible spring back up. He would sing in his baritone voice the nostalgic folk songs of his childhood – indescribable longing to return to his Austrian home – always in the same order, and despite the jars and jolts, keep perfect pitch and tone.

At some point after the turnoff and along the kilometer through the green gloom of the forest, he'd pass out. Bella believed it was then the monster invaded her husband's body. As soon as the mad monotonous chorus stopped, chilling silence – the harbinger of things yet to come – rang loud.

The cart passed a waterfall that was partially hidden by ferns. Its torrent splashed into a clear, pebble-lined pool. For the longest time Pepe begged to swim in it. Despite his father's comatose state, his mother steadfastly refused.

Pepe gave up asking.