

## Dumb Bunny

Earl wasn't making his noise. We were in the van, the two of us, following the real estate lady's blue Camry. I had brought him along to show what a dutiful wife I was, concerned with the opinion of my poor, disabled husband.

Bringing him also gave me an excuse to work the lift on the van. Doing it gave me a feeling of power. I pulled a lever and the lift extended out the side door and then lowered down to the ground. I pushed Earl's wheelchair onto it, pulled the lever the other way, and the lift raised up and put him in the back. Hydraulics, it was. That big van was worth a small fortune, though it didn't cost us a cent. If we had to depend on just his disability checks we could never have afforded Earl's wheelchair, one of those mechanized jobs he moved by working the controls on the armrest. After Earl's stroke, when I finally got the lowdown on the big shot's finances, I found that I'd have to manage on \$860 a month.

When I met Earl he was Mr. Big Spender, throwing money around at the casino like a Texas oil tycoon. He was dressed like one too, from the top of his Stetson hat to the pointed toes of his hand-stitched boots. Snakeskin boots — now *that* should have tipped me off. Also, he had a big silver belt buckle with the initials EL — Earl Lassiter. It took me a while to add the H on the front and another L on the end. Yeah, I should have picked up on the warning signs. Maybe Earl was right, later on, when he started calling me Dumb Bunny.

He wasn't bad looking, with a craggy, weather-beaten face like Merle Haggard's. His hair was gunmetal gray, receding at the temples but thick and wavy on top. Long, bushy sideburns. In build he was tall and wiry. And that voice of his — deep, the words flowing like honey. Sweet words. Oh, Earl was downright courtly with me in the beginning. And he wasn't all talk. Such as in the loving department, he delivered.

Not that I cared much about that — about sex, I mean. At the time I met Earl I was on the wrong side of my forties, cocktail waitressing in the casino, still able to look fairly good in a low cut, ass-twitching outfit. Walking around for eight hours in fishnet stockings and heels a mile high, competing for tips with kids half my age. When I got off I was bone tired, and my feet hurt like hell. My days were made up of work and sleep. In a way that was a blessing, because I was too tired to think about how life had turned out for me and where I was headed. Though I sometimes did, and I was scared.

That was how matters stood when Earl started leaving big tips and asking me to have a drink with him on my breaks. Then taking me out to dinner. So, yeah, I swallowed his line without asking many questions. Some lucky people may not know this, but if you're desperate enough you'll see things the way you want them to be, not the way they are.

It was later I did the figuring. Like figuring out why Earl married me at all. Because after the marriage he carried on like I wasn't there, going off whenever he pleased, not a word of explanation. Gone every weekend, hunting or fishing, which were his real passions in life, but other times, I'm sure, holed up in a motel with some broad, putting her through the paces. As for the sex between us, it pretty much ended when the justice of the peace said "husband and wife." Which was fine with me. I'd done enough fake moaning in my life.

What I concluded was that all Earl wanted in a wife was a live-in housekeeper, laundress, cook. Turns out he was used to having a woman around to do those things. A few days after our marriage Earl informed me that I was his sixth wife. To him it was a big joke, with me being the

butt of it. I soon enough found that out why those other five got away. Two weeks after our marriage he first hit me, a slap that came out of nowhere and knocked me flat on my ass. Then he hauled me up by my hair and pulled me into every room of the condo. In a low, calm voice he explained each thing I was doing wrong. He opened the door of the freezer, where I had some TV dinners, and told me he wanted a four course home-cooked meal every night. In the bathroom he pushed my face past the rim of the toilet bowl and said he wanted the water a nice blue color. That type of thing. Oh, I shaped up quick. That very day, swollen face and all, I went out and bought a pack of 2000 Flushes and put one in the toilet tank. I was mighty careful after that, not to give Earl any cause to hit me. Though he still did. That might have been another reason for having a wife around, to let his meanness out on somebody. Yet he prided himself on being a gentleman, saying that he never struck a woman with a closed fist nor kicked them any place but where the Good Lord intended. Yeah, I never mentioned it, but Earl was a wit too.

You may be wondering why I didn't get out too. But that means you still don't understand. I took a hard look at my situation and considered the advantages of being Earl's wife. His condo was small but nice, plenty nicer than the ratty apartment I'd been living in. And I didn't have to put on fishnet stockings anymore. Since Earl didn't care, I could let myself go. It was a relief to finally not have to look good for a man. When I saw Earl loading his hunting and fishing gear in his SUV, or dousing himself with cologne, I knew I'd be alone for days. I'd be able to lie in bed and read or watch TV, microwave all the frozen dinners I wanted.

That was the good side, and I decided it was good enough. Of course, there was a bad side too, because Earl was around more than half the time. But mostly he ignored me. He'd tell me to do something, and that was about it. Except there were nights, usually when he was drinking, when he'd get talkative and go into long stories about how he pulled a fast one on some sucker at his used car lot, or how he dropped an 8-point buck, or how he bluffed the table out of a big poker stake. Those nights he tended to turn nasty, because I never reacted the way he wanted me to. It was also those nights that he'd sometimes want to have sex, and when he was snoring I'd throw up into the nice blue water.

By the way, after our marriage he never called me by my name, which is Dolores. It was "Hey, you" or "Fat Ass." But his favorite was "Dumb Bunny." Sometimes he'd put on a whole act. He'd stick his front teeth over his bottom lip and hang his two hands, limp at the wrists like paws. "Dumb Bunny," he'd say, and pant a little. I'd just smile.

Dumb? Well, dumb enough to stick around for seven years and take what he dished out. Maybe, from the first time he glanced at me when I set a drink in front of him at the casino, Earl sensed that he had found the bunny to his snake. And the bunny wasn't really dumb, just scared. I look back and realize that I've been scared all my life. Earl was one in a long line of people who used and abused me. Mostly men, from the time I started to have breasts. When I was sixteen I got messed up in an abortion and was told I couldn't have kids. I guess I decided then that I was worthless. I can't blame others for what I did, for the choices I made. Bad choices, as if bad was what I deserved. But despite all that, you have to know one thing: I had a good heart. I need to say that because after Earl my heart turned black. How the hate for him grew inside me! Maybe I was waiting for the time to come when I could get back at him. Get back at all the bastards in my life. And that day did come — the day Earl had his stroke.

It happened when he was in the middle of a marsh, in a duck blind with some buddies, and it took them over three hours to get him to a hospital. By then the old Earl was no more. He had turned into a stalk of wilted celery. His whole right side was paralyzed, and he had only partial use of his left side. With his left hand he could work the controls on his wheelchair. But he couldn't feed or clean himself. He was a baby, right down to the shitty diapers. Course, I didn't tend to any of Earl's personal needs — didn't change those diapers, bathe, shave, feed him. I could never have stomached any of that. Nurses came in three times a day to take care of those matters. I didn't have to hardly touch him. We had a sofa in the front room that converted into a bed, and the first night he returned to the condo I slept there. Never again would I share a bed with Earl Lassiter.

But there were two things he could do. One was, he could think. His mind worked fine. The other was he could make his noise. Earl's song, I called it. It was a strangled, moaning sound, rising and falling, going on until it got wet-sounding and he'd have to stop, saliva rolling down his chin. He'd gulp hard and start right up again. On and on. He couldn't make words, but he was saying something, and I knew what it was: He was in hell and wanted to get out. I knew that and — didn't I say my heart was black? — it was a pleasant song to me.

I'd say to him, reassuring-like, "Can't understand you, Earl. But don't fret, sugar" — or I'd call him "baby doll" or "lover boy" — "the doctors say you can live like this for years and years." This would get him started, and he'd flap his left hand, he'd shake his head no, and his eyes looked like two little animals trapped inside his skull. Yes, he understood every word I said, everything I meant behind my words. It tickled me, the part I played. A doctor once suggested that I move him to a full care facility, but I acted shocked. No, I said, I could never turn Earl over to people who didn't love him.

Though Earl's song gave me a lot of pleasure, sometimes it got on my nerves, especially at night. The condo had one bedroom, so even when I put him in the bathroom, turned the fan on and shut the door, I could hear him. I didn't dare tape his mouth or gag him because Earl had sinuses and could only breathe through his mouth. I sure didn't want Earl dead. Sometimes my arm just itched to slap him quiet, to give him a taste of it back, but if I started hitting him I couldn't trust myself to stop. I didn't want any cuts or bruises for the nurses or doctor to spot. Earl could feel pain, was on strong pain medication, but the thing that made him suffer the most was to stay alive. In fact, he wanted to die so bad that he said "Please."

Well, he couldn't say it, but he wrote it, the only thing Earl ever wrote me. I never once got so much as a birthday card from him. But one day I heard him moaning — his asking-for-something moan — and I saw that he had a pencil in his hand. I was curious, so I got a tablet and put it on his lap. Then I sat in a chair across from him. It took nearly an hour, but it was like watching a good comedy show, watching Earl try to write. On top of all his other problems, he was naturally right-handed. Yes, Earl worked mighty hard to write those five words. Finally he let the pencil slip from his fingers and fall to the floor. He looked at me, exhausted. I got up, took the tablet, went back to my chair. What I saw on the page was like something a two-year-old would do, or a monkey. Probably nobody but me could make out those crooked, wobbly block letters. But the thing was, I already had a good idea what those words were.

### HELP DIE LEAVE PILLS PLEASE

I looked at it for a long while, as he looked at me, and I thought how it must have taken him an extra ten minutes of labor to add that “PLEASE.” And how it was the first time in our marriage that he had used that word to me. Finally I let out a deep sigh and shook my head.

“Sorry, honey, I can’t make out one word. But if you’re worried, don’t be. Because I’m going to take the best care of you. I’m going to make sure that you live a long, long time.”

I smiled my sweetest smile, crumpled the paper into a ball, and Earl started his song.

It was a mercy killing that Earl wanted. A full bottle of pain medicine left out, along with a glass of water. With him able to use his left arm and hand fairly well, he could do the rest. Mercy. But there would be no mercy for Earl Lassiter. How could he have thought there would be, him being so smart?

Still, after that note I got to thinking. I already kept the pills out of reach, and his rifles were locked in our storage room downstairs. Though, actually, I didn’t believe that he could use a rifle on himself, not even if one was handy and he could manage it. You get to know someone after living with him long enough. Earl took pleasure inflicting pain on helpless animals and women, but he was mighty fearful of any hurt coming his way. Burning, cutting, the tearing of a bullet — no, I had Earl’s number, and he didn’t have the guts to do violence to himself. Even with him wanting to die so bad, he couldn’t. Hell, he could have tried to starve himself instead of eating all the nurses fed him. Part of Earl’s trap was his own cowardice. He wanted me to provide the easy way out — a nice trip to bye-bye land. Earl wanted one of those gentle deaths. Pills he’d take, but if I left a straight razor right in his lap — could he use it?

I truly doubted that he could, though I wasn’t positive. Then something happened, the day after the note, that got me thinking some more. I came into the kitchen and found Earl on the floor, slithering on his belly like a snake. He could slide right off that wheelchair if he wanted to. What he was up to I couldn’t figure. But the next day I checked out all the rooms in the condo. Earl followed me, watching as I looked into each drawer, each closet, and took up every knife, pair of scissors, every damn thing that he could possibly use to harm himself, and locked it up or put it on top shelves. When I was done that condo was a hundred percent childproof.

Earl surely understood that this was another answer to what he asked for in his note, because after that he started making his noise worse than ever. Did he think if he pestered me enough I’d give him what he wanted?

You could say it was that noise that had me following the real estate lady’s Camry, looking for a house to rent. A place with plenty of room, so I could get off by myself, have peace and quiet. Nothing expensive — I couldn’t afford to pay much more than \$600 a month. Which maybe leads you to wonder about what I said before, about the cost of the van. And nurses coming three times a day, seven days a week. The wheelchair, everything. Wondering how we could afford it. Well, the thing is, I got some surprises after the stroke.

Earl’s older brother Carl came over from Houston. Earl had a will, and Carl was executor of Earl’s estate and full beneficiary too. Only he could get into Earl’s safety deposit box. One of the papers he found there was a catastrophic illness insurance policy, the gold-plated deluxe version. It seemed unlike Earl, who lived purely for the moment, to have that kind of policy, but Carl figured it out. Earl had purchased it nine years ago, right after Carl had a bout with colon

cancer. Now he, Carl, had a similar policy and had gotten a lot of expensive treatment which he otherwise could never have afforded. He had fully recovered, and obviously Earl must have figured that if he got sick a policy like that would help him get well again, get back to his carousing ways. Of course, the joke turned out to be on him, because the policy was just going to keep him the way he was.

As for his other finances, Carl filled out the papers for Earl's disability — he was an accountant and knew his way around those things. The rest of the news was all bad. There was only about \$30,000 equity in the condo, and when Carl checked the books on the used car lot, he found that Earl was waist deep in shady deals. He'd been doing whatever he could to get the quick cash he needed to support his life style — the SUV, the clothes, the casino outings. Carl decided we had to sell the lot for whatever we could get, to someone who would take on all outstanding obligations. So he did, and we got a measly \$22,000, and that included the cars. I say "we," but when the money went into a CD it was in the name of Earl and Carl Lassiter, and Carl made it clear that I wasn't going to touch any of the capital. The only thing with my name on it was a checking account. That's where the government checks and the CD interest payments were direct-deposited. I had under a grand a month to work with.

Which, actually, was OK with me. In all this I was no gold digger. I don't have expensive tastes. I just want to live in a decent place and have enough money so I don't have to work at some crappy job. The scary part was, when I checked with the social security on what I'd get if Earl *did* happen to die, I found that the \$860 a month would end, just like that. And I couldn't draw a penny of widow's benefits until I was sixty-two years old, which was eight years down the road. Hell, I'd be working at Waffle House. I had no looks left, no skills, and I'd gotten lazy. All I wanted was to idle my days away as I pleased. So I was pretty much satisfied with things the way they were, but they'd stay that way only with Earl alive.

Satisfied except for that damn noise — so I sat in the real estate office and told the lady what kind of house I wanted. This gal was in her late forties, all dressed up like Ms. Woman Executive. I figured her for one of those subdivision types with plenty of money and the kids off to college. She tapped away at her computer, ran off some sheets, clacked around the office in her high heels, giving orders to the receptionist. When we were outside she went to the van, to meet Earl. I opened the side door and she held out her hand and introduced herself — Susan Laird — and I got a kick out of how he just stared at her with his little black eyes. She hurried to her Camry.

The first place she showed us I didn't get out of the van. Did she think we belonged in a dump? I called her over.

"Look, honey, if you can't do a lot better than this, I might as well go home now."

Seems she got the message, because the next house was nice, though it was \$675 a month. It was built three years ago, situated on a corner lot, neighbors set off. So I got out, did the hydraulic lift bit — the dutiful wife, including her poor husband in the decision making — and we went to the porch. The two of us had to pull the wheelchair up the four steps, Earl groaning at every jolt and Susan saying that she was sure the owners would allow me to have a ramp installed. Inside I found that the front room was in the process of being painted, with drop clothes covering the floor, paint cans against the walls, Venetian blinds stacked in corners. A

mess, but you could see that it would be like new when they were done. Actually, both bedrooms were completed, and they were bright and fresh. They were separated from one another by the bathroom, which meant that I probably wouldn't hear Earl's moaning. As we took the tour he peered around, alert, as Susan did her non-stop spiel.

"Ceiling fans in the bedrooms, they really save on heating bills, and look at the space you have in this walk-in closet. The bathroom has all modern fixtures, and there's a forty gallon water heater, so you'll never run short of hot water." And so on and so on. We went into the kitchen/dining area. "All modern conveniences — dishwasher, microwave, garbage disposal. It's an all-electric kitchen, I find that's so much cleaner than gas. Full-size refrigerator with ice-maker, and look at how much cabinet space you —"

It was then that Earl started up with a wail of disapproval. He'd been quiet til then — quiet all morning — so that sound was a shock. Susan and I just stared at him. He wailed and tossed his head from side to side. What the hell was the matter? We'd never know. He worked the control on his armrest and the wheelchair moved out of the kitchen and stopped at the front door, waiting for us to open it.

So that was it — Earl didn't like the place. Well, I did, but what could I do? Me, the dutiful wife? I looked at Susan, shrugged, not saying a word, and the two of us hauled the wheelchair down the steps. I held back from giving the chair a few extra good jolts.

When the Camry was far enough ahead, I starting cussing him out, letting him know that next time I'd leave him home, pick what I liked, and to hell with him. I was so pissed by his stunt — did he want to stay in his precious condo? — that I almost decided to call it quits right there. But I knew I had to go through the motions, see a few more places.

The next house I didn't get out. I waved Susan over and told her how I had specified that I wanted something set off by itself, with no close neighbors, and that Earl wasn't feeling well, so maybe . . . But she jumped in — I noticed how strained and tired she looked, and I suddenly wondered if her life was as easy as I imagined — and said that she wanted to show me one more house. She thought it would suit me fine, and it was only \$550 a month, utilities included. Why so cheap? Because it was almost in the country, though just a fifteen minute drive to the Century Square Mall. So I followed her again, and this time we went a long way.

And you know, it *was* what I was looking for. As soon as I saw it I knew I didn't want all the modern conveniences. This place was old, but had been kept up real nice. The yard was huge, with oaks and magnolias and lots of bushes — azaleas, hydrangeas. The lot on one side was empty, and the house on the other side you couldn't see for the trees. Across the street were all trees. Hell, woods. Yeah, we were out in the country for sure, and I liked the fresh smell. It seemed quieter, cooler.

I pulled the van up the driveway to where the walkway began, and when I did I spotted something set off in the back. It was one of those aluminum sheds you keep a riding mower in. And the moment I saw it — ugly in that beautiful yard — a thought popped into my head.

While I was getting Earl out of the van Susan came over, and I asked her who maintained the property. She said that the owner, Mr. Jenkins, did. He loaded his riding mower on his flatbed. He and his wife had once lived here, then their daughter and son-in-law, until their third child. It had always been lived in by family, until now.

It was funny how, in this old house, Susan changed her spiel from “modern” to “quaint.” And “quality.” Heart pine floors, twelve foot ceilings. Standing in the front room, which was painted a soft green, she suddenly said, as if on inspiration, that there was a little “extra” room that could serve many purposes. She opened a door off the living room.

“Mrs. Jenkins did her quilting here. She could spread out her materials, set up the quilting frame. It’s the perfect size for an office. Or just storage.” I peered in and nodded. It was only about eight feet square, and windowless.

The two bedrooms were on the opposite side of the house. No walk-in closets, but everything was tidy, pleasant. It seemed more of a home than a rental, and that appealed to me. The bathroom had an old tub on lion claw legs. I imagined myself stretched out in there for hours, adding hot water when I needed it, reading and listening to the radio while Earl would be in his little quilting room. Or maybe out in his shed. I had already assigned Earl his special places for when he was a bad boy.

As for him, he hadn’t made a sound. He looked about, listened. What if he started wailing again? Well, this time I’d put him in the van and come back and do what I wanted.

We got to the kitchen. “Would you just look at that view!” Susan flung her arm at a row of windows. “And these curtains” — they were bright, checkered, the old-fashioned kind — “they’re so homey, and they stay, as do all the window treatments.” There was no dishwasher or microwave, the refrigerator had no ice-maker, but everything was well cared for. “These cabinets are solid oak, none of that cheap pre-fab stuff they slap in nowadays. Gas stove and water heater, the house is heated by gas, you’ll find that’s a real money-saver in the long run. And the stove’s been recently cleaned” — she opened the oven door — “but the real surprise is here” — and she clacked across the tile to some louvered doors, swung them open, and inside was a laundry room, with a full size washer and dryer.

All this time Earl was gazing steadily out the windows, kind of like in a reverie. Susan noticed this. There was a back door leading outside, and she opened it. Earl immediately wheeled over and looked out through the screen.

“See that big pecan tree? You’ll have tons of pecans soon. And can you smell the sweet myrtle? It’ll be so nice to sit outside on these fall days, Mr. Lassiter.”

Earl moved his head up and down in a slow nod.

Maybe it was the yard that Earl liked. He was an outdoors man, though he left blood and death and suffering wherever he went. Still, maybe he did picture himself out there. Which was fine with me, whatever he might suppose.

Susan turned to me, as if the deal were closed. “I’ll call Mrs. Jenkins from my cell phone. I’m sure it’ll be fine with them to put in a ramp.”

“OK. Do that. Because this place suits me.”

The next week I got a buyer for the condo. Carl came in for the act of sale, and \$32,000 was put into another CD. Again, the monthly interest was to be deposited in the checking account — around \$200. Carl wasn’t being a hard ass about it, he even allowed me a thousand bucks for moving expenses. He also didn’t ask what I was paying at the new place. I figured that I could salt away some money. I could open an account, one in my name only, and maybe in a year I would have over \$2000. I’d never in my life had a thousand dollars to call my own.

There were all these tasks to take care of — packing, arranging for the movers, getting a carpenter to build a ramp from the back door, connecting up with a new nursing service — but the good part was shopping. I bought throw rugs, pictures to hang on the walls, towels, knickknacks. I'd never done that before, never shopped for a home. I'd always lived in trailers or apartments, even growing up. Always temporary stops. Never a home.

It irked me that the furniture we'd have to live with would be from the condo, but I figured that gradually I could replace it with my own stuff. Though I did buy two new pieces: a twin-size bed to go in Earl's bedroom, and, for me, a new mattress — along with new sheets and pillowcases, ones with a floral design — to go on what was now my double bed.

Earl was quiet during all these days. I had decided to make the move because of his noise, and now he was quiet. He seemed resigned. Or lost in thought. Maybe he was thinking of that big backyard, of sitting under a tree and hearing the birds chirp.

I spent a lot of time at the house before we moved in — the owners gave me a key. One day I brought a radio and put it in Earl's bedroom, turned up the volume, then closed the door and went to my bedroom. I couldn't hear a thing.

The aluminum shed had a ramp for the mower. It was empty except for bags of fertilizer, and it smelled of fertilizer and gasoline. I went in and pulled the door shut. In minutes I felt the heat build up. I came out of there in a sweat. Also, there was a big padlock on the door — that would be a nice touch, for him to hear the click of the lock.

I went through the house carefully, to see what new dangers it might hold for Earl. One thing was that the windows had real glass, while the condo had plexiglass. Could Earl somehow break the glass and use a piece to cut himself? I decided no. Like I said, he wouldn't do it, being the coward he was. Anyway, in the kitchen the row of windows was set far back behind a deep counter. He could never get to them. In his room there was a window, but I'd get a metal grill to screw over it. I liked the touch that would add — make the room more like a cell. In the living room I could put heavy pieces of furniture in front of the windows. I needn't lock him in his room when I left. I could just lock the doors to the front and back doors. The door into the kitchen didn't have a lock, but I'd make sure the kitchen was childproof. Earl wouldn't be able to do anything to himself, no more than he could in the condo.

Moving day came, and after a short while I settled in. It was like a new stage in my life began. Like a new me began. In the first week I did what I intended — took long baths, read — but I found myself getting interested in gardening. I weeded around the bushes, pruned. I bought some vases and for the first time in my life I had fresh cut flowers.

As for Earl, when I put him in his room and shut the door, I could hear him making his noise. Earl's song again. Seems things hadn't worked out the way he wanted. He never got to go outside, except when a nurse asked me if she could take him. Otherwise he stayed in. Which he moaned about. It was the fourth or fifth day we'd been there, and he was in the kitchen making his sound. Sudden-like I grabbed the handles of his chair and wheeled him out the back door, down the ramp and across the yard, him groaning at the bumps, and then directly up the ramp and into the shed. I slammed the door and snapped the padlock. All the while I hadn't said a word. I left him in for fifteen minutes that time. The day was hot, in the eighties, the sun glaring off the aluminum, and I imagined that it must be like an oven in there. Like being cooked in an oven, 'til



brown and ready to stick a fork into. When I let him out his face was dripping with sweat and his clothes were stained with it. He stared at me with real fear in his eyes. And there wasn't a soul about to see anything.

"This is where bad boys go, Earl. Where it's real, real hot."

Earl didn't believe in hell. If he did, he would've been afraid to die. But he didn't believe in God or any kind of afterlife. Probably that allowed him to live the kind of life he did — because, to his mind, there would be no day of reckoning. I didn't believe all that about heaven and hell either. Maybe if I did I would have helped Earl die, to hurry him off down there. Course, that would mean the end of my heaven, which was this nice house, this soft life.

As for hell, to my thinking it's here on earth. It's what I got from men, the meanest of them being Earl Lassiter. So if Earl was to have a taste of hell, it would have to be me who gave it to him. Which kind of made me the devil. You'd think that would bother me, to say it like that, but it didn't. At least the devil had power.

Anyway, after Earl learned that he would be put in the quilting room or the shed, he stayed quiet. So I was content in my little heaven. The only bad thing was that I sometimes felt stuck in the house. I did the shopping at the mall when a nurse was there, but otherwise I stayed home. Why? I wasn't a prisoner. I had left Earl alone plenty of times in the condo, and I could leave Earl alone here too. So when I saw in the newspaper that a Julia Roberts' film was playing at the mall, I decided to take in the 2:30 matinee. I could be back before the nurse came at six. I locked the back door. Earl followed me around. Standing at the front door I turned and smiled at him. "Be a good boy, Earl. Don't invite no hookers over while I'm gone." I left, locking the door behind me.

The movie was "Erin Brockovich," and I really liked it. Though, in a way, it made me sad. I mean, she was such a tough, brassy gal, not afraid to go up against powerful people. She was everything I wanted to be and wasn't.

To cheer myself up I bought a pair of summer sandals and a wide-brimmed straw hat to wear when I was gardening. At a little after five I headed on home.

When I turned into the drive, I immediately sensed something different about the house. It seemed still and silent, like it was waiting for me. That was why, after I started walking toward the front door, I suddenly broke into a run, letting the hat fall to the ground, fumbling to get the key in the lock. As soon as the door swung open, I knew.

I dropped my purse and package and ran straight for the kitchen. The door was closed. I pushed on it, but it only opened a little, and I looked down and saw water squeezing out from wet towels that were getting bunched up as I pushed. The door would only open inch by inch, but the smell poured out in waves, making me light-headed, and I knew that it was too late. In those moments I saw things, heard things, like they were flashing in my brain. I saw and heard the real estate lady in the kitchen, going through her spiel, heard the words that I hadn't understood at the time, but that I did now:

"Gas stove and water heater, the house is heated by gas, you'll find that's a real money-saver in the long run."

And then she had opened the yawning door of the oven.

And last, before I saw him in death, I saw Earl Lassiter in his prime, and he was grinning at me, his front teeth stuck over his bottom lip, panting, his hands hanging like paws, and I heard him say it again.

“Dumb Bunny.”