

CHAPTER EIGHT



ON LAND, THE OLD FISHERMAN stopped to light a pipe, and then, with the pipe clenched between his teeth, he walked home, carrying Edward atop his left shoulder as if he were a conquering hero. The fisherman balanced him there, placing a calloused hand at Edward's back. He talked to him in a soft, low voice as they walked.

"You'll like Nellie, you will," said the old man. "She's had her sadness, but she's an all-right girl."

Edward looked at the small town blanketed in dusk: a jumble of buildings huddled together, the ocean stretching out in front of it all; and he thought

that he would like anything and anybody that was not at the bottom of the sea.

"Hello, Lawrence," called a woman from the front of a shop. "What have you got?"

"Fresh catch," said the fisherman, "fresh rabbit from the sea." He lifted his cap to the lady and kept walking.

"There you are, now," said the fisherman. He took the pipe out of his mouth and pointed with the stem of it at a star in the purpling sky. "There's your North Star right there. Don't never have to be lost when you know where that fellow is."

Edward considered the brightness of the small star.

Do they all have names? he wondered.

"Listen at me," said the fisherman, "talking to a toy. Oh, well. Here we are, then." And with Edward still on his shoulder, the fisherman walked up a stone-lined path and into a little green house.

"Look here, Nellie," he said. "I've brought you something from the sea."

"I don't want nothing from the sea," came a voice.

"Aw, now, don't be like that, Nell. Come and see, then."

An old woman stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on an apron. When she saw Edward, she dropped the apron and clapped her hands together and said, "Oh, Lawrence, you brung me a rabbit."

"Direct from the sea," said Lawrence. He took Edward off his shoulder and stood him up on the floor and held on to his hands and made him take a deep bow in the direction of Nellie.

"Oh," said Nellie, "here." She clapped her hands together again and Lawrence passed Edward to her.

Nellie held the rabbit out in front of her and looked him over from tip to toe. She smiled. "Have you ever in your life seen anything so fine?" she said.

Edward felt immediately that Nellie was a very discerning woman.

"She's beautiful," breathed Nellie.

For a moment, Edward was confused. Was there some other object of beauty in the room?

"What will I call her?"

"Susanna?" said Lawrence.

"Just right," said Nellie. "Susanna." She looked deep into Edward's eyes. "First off, Susanna will need some clothes, won't she?"



"SHE'S BEAUTIFUL," BREATHED NELLIE.

CHAPTER NINE



AND SO EDWARD TULANE BECAME Susanna. Nellie sewed several outfits for him: a pink dress with ruffles for special occasions, a simple shift fashioned out of a flower-covered cloth for everyday use, and a long white gown made of cotton for Edward to sleep in. In addition, she remade his ears, stripping them of the few pieces of fur that remained and designing him a new pair.

"Oh," she told him when she was done, "you look lovely."

He was horrified at first. He was, after all, a boy rabbit. He did not want to be dressed as a girl. And the outfits, even the special-occasion dress, were so

simple, so plain. They lacked the elegance and artistry of his real clothes. But then Edward remembered lying on the ocean floor, the muck in his face, the stars so far away, and he said to himself, What difference does it make really? Wearing a dress won't hurt me.

Besides, life in the little green house with the fisherman and his wife was sweet. Nellie loved to bake, and so she spent her day in the kitchen. She put Edward on the counter and leaned him up against the flour canister and arranged his dress around his knees. She bent his ears so that he could hear well.

And then she set to work, kneading dough for bread and rolling out dough for cookies and pies. The kitchen soon filled with the smell of baking bread and with the sweet smells of cinnamon and sugar and cloves. The windows steamed up. And while Nellie worked, she talked.

She told Edward about her children: her daughter, Lolly, who was a secretary; and her boys: Ralph, who was in the army; and Raymond, who had died of pneumonia when he was only five years old.

"He drowned inside of himself," said Nellie. "It is a horrible, terrible thing, the worst thing, to watch

somebody you love die right in front of you and not be able to do nothing about it. I dream about him most nights."

Nellie wiped at her tears with the back of her hands. She smiled at Edward.

"I suppose you think I'm daft, talking to a toy. But it seems to me that you are listening, Susanna."

And Edward was surprised to discover that he was listening. Before, when Abilene talked to him, everything had seemed so boring, so pointless. But now, the stories Nellie told struck him as the most important thing in the world and he listened as if his life depended on what she said. It made him wonder if some of the muck from the ocean floor had got inside his china head and damaged him somehow.

In the evening, Lawrence came home from the sea and there was dinner and Edward sat at the table with the fisherman and his wife. He sat in an old wooden high chair; and while at first he was mortified (a high chair, after all, was a chair designed for babies, not for elegant rabbits), he soon became used to it. He liked being up high, looking out over the table instead of staring at the tablecloth as he had at the Tulane

household. He liked feeling like a part of things.

Every night after dinner, Lawrence said that he thought he would go out and get some fresh air and that maybe Susanna would like to come with him. He placed Edward on his shoulder as he had that first night when he walked him through town, bringing him home to Nellie.

They went outside and Lawrence lit his pipe and held Edward there on his shoulder; and if the night was clear, Lawrence said the names of the constellations one at a time, Andromeda, Pegasus, pointing at them with the stem of his pipe. Edward loved looking up at the stars, and he loved the sounds of the constellation names. They were sweet in his ears.

Sometimes, though, staring up at the night sky, Edward remembered Pellegrina, saw again her dark and glowing eyes, and a chill would go through him.

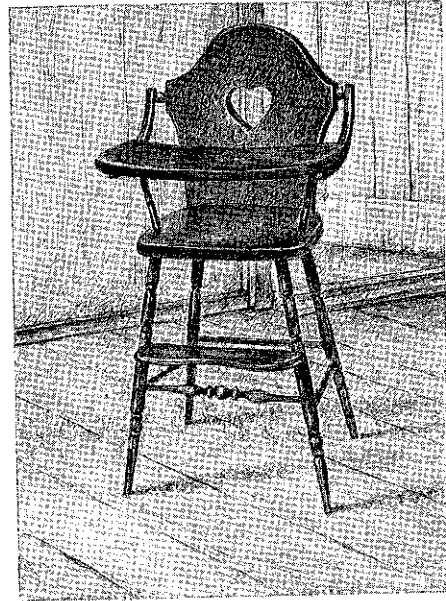
Warthogs, he would think. Witches.

But Nellie, before she put him to bed each night, sang Edward a lullaby, a song about a mockingbird that did not sing and a diamond ring that would not shine, and the sound of Nellie's voice soothed the rabbit and he forgot about Pellegrina.

Life, for a very long time, was sweet.

And then Lawrence and Nellie's daughter came to visit.

CHAPTER TEN



LOLLY WAS A LUMPY WOMAN WHO spoke too loudly and who wore too much lipstick. She entered the house and immediately spotted Edward sitting on the living-room couch.

"What's this?" she said. She put down her suitcase and picked Edward up by one foot. She held him upside down.

"That's Susanna," said Nellie.

"Susanna!" shouted Lolly. She gave Edward a shake.

His dress was up over his head and he could see nothing. Already, he had formed a deep and abiding hatred for Lolly.

"Your father found her," said Nellie. "She came up in a net and she didn't have no clothes on her, so I made her some dresses."

"Have you gone mad?" shouted Lolly. "Rabbits don't need clothes."

"Well," said Nellie. Her voice shook. "This one seemed to."

Lolly tossed Edward back on the couch. He landed face down with his arms over his head and his dress still over his face, and he stayed that way through dinner.

"Why have you got out that old high chair?" shouted Lolly.

"Oh, don't pay it no mind," said Nellie. "Your father was just gluing on a missing piece, wasn't you, Lawrence?"

"That's right," said Lawrence, without looking up from his plate.

Of course, after dinner Edward did not go outside and stand beneath the stars to have a smoke with Lawrence. And Nellie, for the first time since Edward had been with her, did not sing him a lullaby. In fact, Edward was ignored and forgotten about until the

next morning, when Lolly picked him up again and pulled his dress down away from his face and stared him in the eye.

"Got the old folks bewitched, don't you?" said Lolly. "I heard the talk in town. That they've been treating you like a rabbit child."

Edward stared back at Lolly. Her lipstick was a bright and bloody red. He felt a cold breeze blow through the room.

Was a door open somewhere?

"Well, you don't fool me," she said. She gave him a shake. "We'll be taking a trip together, you and me."

Holding Edward by the ears, Lolly marched into the kitchen and shoved him face down in the rubbish bin.

"Ma!" Lolly shouted, "I'm taking the truck. I'm going to head out and do some errands."

"Oh," came Nellie's tremulous voice, "that's wonderful, dear. Goodbye, then."

Goodbye, thought Edward as Lolly hauled the rubbish bin out to the truck.

"Goodbye," Nellie called again, louder this time.

Edward felt a sharp pain somewhere deep inside
his china chest.

For the first time, his heart called out to him.

It said two words: Nellie. Lawrence.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

