



The Tale of Mark the Bunny

By Lewis Shiner

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One spring it stopped raining in early March and didn't start again.

There was one very well-off bunny in the village who had a large burrow and lots of food saved up. He wasn't worried about the drought at all. The other bunnies, though, looked at the purple-red nettles withering in the fields and the mayweed that hadn't even flowered and wondered if they were going to have enough food to get them through the next winter.

The very well-off bunny was named Albertus, but everybody called him Big Al--at least they called him that when they were sure he couldn't hear them. Big Al was in fact a very large bunny with long, white, silky fur. He had lots of land that his parents had left to him, and he never let any of the other bunnies gather food there. The story was that Big Al had sat on the one bunny who tried to make off with some of his carrots until the small bunny begged for mercy. After Big Al let him up, the small bunny moved to another village.

One morning a dozen or more bunnies sat around the village square, licking the dew off the dried and wrinkled clover to quench their thirsts, and talking about the drought. There was still a bit of a cool breeze from Possum Creek, a mile or so away. Sophie Bunny, who was large and sleek, with a black circle around one eye, was there with her husband Lenny and their youngest, Ralph, who still lived at home with them.

"I don't mind telling you," Lenny said, "I'm getting a little scared by all this." Lenny was a small, tan bunny with buck teeth and big cheeks like a chipmunk.

"No need to be afraid," said the short, overweight Reverend Billy Bunny, the village's spiritual leader. "The Easter Bunny will provide." He sat, as he usually did, by the thick green hawthorn bush in the middle of the square--although the bush was neither as thick nor as green as it had once been.

"Easter was two weeks ago," said Maria Bunny. "And there's not a cloud in the sky."

"I thought the Easter Bunny just did eggs," little Ralph said.

"Actually," Lenny said, "so did I."

"I never really understood what a bunny was doing with eggs in the first place," Sophie said, "if you want to know the truth."

"We could ask Big Al for help," Annie Bunny suggested. "He's got enough food for everybody."

It was well known that Big Al provided the Reverend Billy's food. He'd discovered Billy preaching in the village square a few years before and liked the fact that most of Billy's sermons were about keeping things the way they already were. Since then word had gone around that Big Al thought the other bunnies should pay attention when the Reverend Billy had something to say, and that he would frown on anyone who made fun of him in public. If anybody could talk to Big Al, it had to be the Reverend Billy.

"Well, ah, ahem," Billy said. Ever since he became official, he'd started to talk like a much older rabbit. "I think we should remember that the Easter Bunny helps those who help themselves." This was exactly the sort of thinking that had impressed Big Al.

"I agree," Annie said. "Let's help ourselves to some of Big Al's food."

Annie's husband Jonathan said, "I don't think that's what he meant."

Suddenly a bunny no one had ever seen before hopped out from behind a tree. He was very thin, with black fur and dark, intense eyes. "I know one thing you could do," he said. "You could stop eating all that clover while you're worrying about starving to death."

"Darn it!" Lenny said. "I am eating again."

"Who are you?" the Reverend Billy asked the stranger.

"My name is Mark."

Billy narrowed his eyes. "Are you the same Mark Bunny that used to live down by Clearwater Pond? The one that got kicked out of the village for being a troublemaker?"

"I guess I am," Mark said.

"Uh oh," somebody said. For a few seconds all the bunnies hopped around nervously, and when everyone quieted down again Mark had lots of space around him in all directions.

Billy continued to stare at Mark from his high position. "You keep moving along," he said. "We don't want your kind around here."

Mark looked at the other bunnies to see if anyone else wanted to speak up. When no one did he said, "Okay," and hopped slowly away.

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Late that afternoon, as Sophie, Lenny, and Ralph headed home to their burrow, they saw Mark in the grass by the side of the path ahead of them.

"Oh dear," Lenny said. "It's that Mark bunny."

"I don't think he'd actually hurt us, do you?" Ralph said. "He just looks kind of sad."

"I don't know," Lenny said. "I'm afraid."

"I'm afraid too," Sophie said. "We're bunnies. We're always afraid. But sometimes we have to do the right thing, even when it's scary."

"And what exactly are you saying, in this case, the right thing might be?" Lenny asked.

"There's wolves around this time of year. We can't let him wander around all night without a burrow to stay in."

"Actually we could, if we wanted to..."

"Lenny..."

"Okay, okay, I'll go ask him."

Lenny hopped carefully over toward Mark. "Um, hi," Lenny said.

Mark nodded.

"My wife," Lenny said, "er, that is, we, wanted to know if maybe you needed a place to stay tonight? Of course if you have someplace else, that would be perfectly fine and we wouldn't feel in the least insulted if you turned us down."

"No," Mark said, "I don't have a place. That's very kind of you."

"We've got some strawberries we've been saving," little Ralph said, bounding up. "They're kind of small, but you could have one."

"I do love strawberries," Mark said. "But you'll have to let me do something for you in return."

"How come?" Ralph said.

"That's just my philosophy."

"What's a philosophy?"

"Well," Mark said, "I guess it's just some ideas about life."

"Oh. Why don't you just say 'ideas about life,' then?"

"Ralph," Sophie said, "you're being rude."

"Sorry," Ralph said.

That evening, after sharing the strawberries, the four bunnies lay happily on the floor of the burrow. "Tell me some more about this philosophy of yours," Sophie said. Sophie was always interested in new things.

"You mean my ideas about life?" Mark asked. Ralph laughed at that and Mark wiggled his whiskers and went on. "Really I just have this one idea. I've thought about it a lot and got it down to the simplest words I could."

"So what is it?" Lenny asked.

Mark sat up and spoke in a deep voice, clearly liking the sound of the words as they came out. "Give what you can. Take what you need."

"Is that what got you in trouble at Clearwater Pond?" Sophie asked.

"Actually most people seemed to like my idea, once they thought about it. There was just this one very well-off bunny named Sophocles who got upset, and told everybody I was dangerous."

"Are all rich bunnies mean?" Ralph asked.

"I've traveled around quite a bit," Mark said, "and I've seen rich bunnies who were very kind and generous. I've also seen quite a few who did tend to be a bit selfish."

"So are you saying," Sophie asked, "that if we get hungry enough it's okay to take some of Big Al's food?"

"Only if Big Al had already given up what he could for you to take from. Everybody has to agree. That's the hard part, of course, for those that have more than enough to give some of it up."

"It's hard to think about," Lenny said. "It scares me."

"Bunnies are always afraid," Sophie said. "But sometimes..."

"I know," Lenny said. "I know." He thought for a while. "Do you think if all of us put all our food together--except for Big Al, of course--we'd have enough to get us through the drought?"

"I don't think so," Sophie said.

Mark shrugged his shoulders and lay down again. "That's where the luck part comes in."

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Mark left before the others got up the next morning. When little Ralph went outside he found something very strange and called for his parents to come look. It seemed Mark had chewed some of the leaves off a nearby hawthorn bush and stuck some new branches where there hadn't been any before. Sophie, Lenny, and Ralph all looked at it for a while.

"You know," Lenny said, "it almost looks like...nah. Couldn't be."

"Looks like what?" Sophie said. She was finishing her morning grooming, licking her front paws and then rubbing them over her big, silky ears.

"Well, except for being green and everything, don't you think it looks a bit like Ralph?"

"I think it looks a lot like Ralph," Sophie said.

"Why would somebody make a tree look like a bunny?" Lenny asked.

"I think it's called 'art,'" Sophie said.

"Art," Lenny said. "No doubt about it. That was one weird bunny."

"I liked him," Ralph said.

"Me, too," said Sophie."

"I don't know," Lenny said. "I lay awake for a long time last night thinking about his--" He looked at Ralph. "--ideas about life, and this morning my head hurts. Now I look at this 'art' thing and it makes my head hurt too." Slowly he reached up with his rear leg to scratch under his chin. "Okay," he said, "maybe it hurts in a nice kind of way."

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They all went back to the village that morning to talk some more about the drought. Everyone seemed a little crankier and a little thirstier than the day before.

"Everyone should just eat less," the Reverend Billy said.

"Some of us aren't eating much at all right now," Maria said. She was in fact a very thin bunny, going gray in many places.

There was a long silence.

"What if we..." Lenny swallowed hard. "What if everybody gave all they could and only took what they needed?"

All the other bunnies turned to look at him. "What?" Jonathan asked.

The Reverend Billy hopped over from the high place in the middle of the square and stared right into Lenny's eyes. "What are you?" he said, squinting. "Some kind of Markist?"

Lenny took a short hop backwards without really meaning to.

"That's not very nice," Sophie said.

"That sounds like name-calling," said little Ralphie.

"I'm only speaking the truth," said the Reverend.

"It might be only speaking the truth to say somebody was short and fat," said Sophie, "but it still wouldn't be very nice to say it in that tone of voice."

The Reverend Billy, who was in fact rather short and fat, wrinkled up his nose and said, "Hmmpf."

"Look," Sophie said. "The problem is water, right? But there's all the water we would ever need over in Possum Creek."

"What are you saying, that we should move the village?" Jonathan asked. "I don't like it by the creek, with all those holly bushes. Besides, wolves live there. And it would take forever to make new burrows."

"No," Sophie said, "I wasn't thinking about moving the village. I was thinking--what if we made the water come to us?"

*

Apparently Sophie had been awake much of the night thinking, too. She knew that Possum Creek had once flowed right by the village, many, many years before Sophie's mother had been born. It had filled up with sand and after that the river had flowed away to other places.

But if there was one thing bunnies were good at, besides eating and having big families, it was digging. What if they dug out the old river bed and made part of Possum Creek--just a small part, not enough to hurt anyone downstream--come through their village again? Then after it came through the village it could go back and join back up with the main river.

After Sophie finished talking about her plan, the other bunnies found that their heads hurt just as much as Lenny's did. They all started to talk at once and it was almost an hour before it got quiet enough for Lenny to speak up.

"I've heard what everybody has to say," he said, "which mostly seems to be that they're afraid. Well, I can understand that. But we have to do something, or we won't have any food. I think everybody who wants to give what they can to this plan should meet us tomorrow down at Possum Creek."

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Lenny and Sophie and Ralph all slept badly that night, but as soon as the first rays of sunshine trickled into their burrow they got up and went to Possum Creek. By the time the sun was fully up there were only five other bunnies there.

"Thank you all for coming," Lenny said, and looked up at the sky. "Boy, it looks like it's going to be another really hot day."

It looked like he shouldn't have said that, because as soon as he did, Jonathan made a little hop like he was going to try to sneak away.

"Good thing we're here by the river, then, isn't it?" said Sophie in a funny voice. "Where it's so cool and nice?"

"Uh, yeah!" Lenny said. "Sure is!"

"Right, Jonathan?" Sophie said.

Jonathan saw that all the bunnies were now looking at him. "I guess so," he said.

Sophie showed them what she'd been thinking, which was to start digging inland a little way from the river bank. That would leave a wall of dirt between the river and the ditch they were going to dig, so no water would get in the hole. Then, when they were all done, they could dig through the wall and let the water in.

"I figure we should start digging about here," Sophie said, scratching a line in the dirt with one paw.

"Well," Lenny said, "what are we waiting for? Let's make a river!"

They dug all day, and when they were done their paws were sore and their legs were tired, but they had a wide, deep channel about fifty feet long. In the last of the daylight they stood looking at it.

"This isn't going to work," Sophie said, very quietly, so nobody but Lenny could hear her. "It's just too much work and there aren't enough of us."

"It was a good idea, though," Lenny said.

"And you did your best," Sophie said. "You worked harder than anyone."

"So what happens now?"

"I don't know," Sophie said. "I'm all out of ideas."

Just then Jonathan started to hop slowly along the edges of the hole, looking at what they'd done. He seemed to be thinking very hard.

"This is it," Sophie whispered. "When Jonathan gives up, the others will, too."

Jonathan stopped and turned to face the other bunnies. He sat up on his hind legs and said, "Look! Look what we did!"

"It's not so bad," Lenny said.

"Not so bad?" Jonathan said. "Not so bad? It's wonderful. We're only bunnies, and we did this. We made this great big hole, which isn't just a hole, it's the start of a new river. Instead of just sitting around and being scared and hungry, we did something about it! I'm going to tell everybody!"

*

The next morning there were forty eager bunnies at the trench, and still more showed up as the day went on. Sophie and Lenny had to stop frequently to answer questions and explain Sophie's idea over and over. But with forty bunnies digging and laughing and having fun, the work went much faster than it had the day before.

In the afternoon Jane Bunny came to the edge of the ditch and asked if she could talk to Sophie. Sophie hopped out and said, "What can I do for you?"

"No, it's me," Jane said. "I want to do something for you. But I can't dig." She held up her left front leg, which had never worked right, even when she was a baby.

"There is something you can do," Sophie said. "If you really want to."

Sophie explained her ideas to Jane, who actually had some ideas of her own. For instance, she thought of making trees that had grown up in the old riverbed into islands, so the bunnies wouldn't have to dig them up or move to higher ground to get around them. Jane was able to hop up and down along the trench and answer questions and carry messages back and forth between the other workers.

On the third day, even more bunnies showed up. One of them was Albertus, though he hadn't come to work. He sat on a hill and watched for long enough that everyone could see him, and see that he was unhappy, before he hopped slowly away.

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That evening the Reverend Billy Bunny called a meeting in the village square. "What you're doing," he said, "just isn't natural."

"Bunnies dig," Maria said. "What's unnatural about that?"

"You're changing things," the Reverend Billy said.

"We're just putting the river back where it used to be," Jane said. "We're not hurting any other animals."

"Only the Easter Bunny," the Reverend Billy said, "is supposed to change the shape of the land."

This was a very difficult idea and everyone got very quiet to think about it. It was a hot night, with stars almost as bright as the Moon, and crickets sang all around them.

Suddenly a voice spoke up from the back of the crowd.

"Eggs," little Ralph said.

The Reverend Billy seemed startled. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'eggs,'" Ralph told him. "I thought the Easter Bunny was just in charge of Easter eggs."

"Well, er, um..."

"Yeah," said Lenny, who seemed to be much less afraid than he used to be. "Who said the Easter bunny was in charge of rivers?"

"Yeah," said Annie. "You're always telling us the Easter Bunny helps those who help themselves. If this isn't helping ourselves, what is?"

"But, er, well..."

The bunnies, one and two at a time, began to slowly hop away from the square. "We're tired," Jonathan said as he left. "Let's do this some other time."

"If you want to help us dig," Maria said, "we'd be happy to see you tomorrow."

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The Reverend Billy Bunny didn't show up to dig the next day, or any of the days after. However, he didn't call any more meetings either, which many of the bunnies thought almost made up for his not working.

Soon the hole went right up to the edge of the village. Some of the bunnies wanted to quit right then and there and let the water into the ditch, but Jane spoke up. "You've seen how water gets bad if it doesn't keep moving. We need to finish the job, just like Sophie said."

Other bunnies had ideas, too. Little Ralph surprised even himself when he figured out that they needed to tunnel under a big tree that had fallen across the old riverbed instead of going around it or trying to move it. "That way," he said, "when the water goes under it, we can use it to get to the other side."

Three weeks from the day they first broke ground, the ditch was almost finished. Sophie and Lenny together broke through at the downstream end, where the little river would eventually join back with the big one. All that was left was to break through the wall at the upstream end and let the water in.

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The entire village gathered at the river, ready to celebrate, including old Albertus, who had found another hill where he could look down on them. Even the Reverend Billy was there, trying to look stern and disapproving.

Though there still hadn't been any rain in the bunnies' village, it had been raining upstream. The river was full of water and running very, very fast.

"You know," Sophie said, "We could have a problem here."

"What do you mean?" Lenny asked. "C'mon, c'mon, we've been working on this forever. Bunnies aren't very patient, you know. Let's finish this!"

"I'm afraid--"

"Bunnies are always afraid," Lenny said. "But sometimes--"

"No," Sophie said. "This is different. When we dig through that last wall of dirt, the whole river is going to rush right into our new hole. Whoever does it could get really, really hurt."

"Oh," Lenny said. "Do you think?"

They all stood and looked at the river, which no longer seemed peaceful, but seemed a little angry. Then they looked at Sophie's ditch. Then they looked at the river again.

"I'll do it," Lenny said.

"Lenny, no," Sophie said. "I won't let you."

"Somebody's got to do it," Lenny said. "It might as well be me."

"No," said a deep voice behind them. "It has to be me."

They all turned. "You?" Lenny said.

"Me," Albertus said.

"But...but...that doesn't make any sense," Sophie said. "You're rich."

"I used to be," Albertus said.

The others gathered around to listen. "What happened?" Maria asked.

"Back in February, when I went down to look at all my lovely food, it was gone."

"Gone?" Jonathan said.

"Mice," Albertus said. "They tunneled into my vault, between the big rocks, and they took everything. And

because my land is so high up, the drought hurt me worse than anyone else."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Sophie asked.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Reverend Billy asked. He seemed more upset than Albertus was.

"I know you don't like me," Albertus said. "I know what you all call me behind my back. 'Albert Doo-Doo head.'"

"Um, actually, nobody's ever called you that," Ralph said.

"Really?"

"Really. 'Big Al,' that's what everybody calls you."

"'Big Al' isn't so bad," Albertus said thoughtfully. "Anyway, I've been hearing all these ideas going around, all this, 'give what you can, take what you can get away with--'"

"Take what you need," Lenny said. "There's a difference."

"Whatever. At first I thought I would come sit on one of you until you gave me some food. But none of you has any food either. That was when it hit me: I'm the same as anybody else now."

"Wow," Maria said.

"I'm not exactly happy about it," Albertus said. "I stayed in my burrow and sulked for a long time. But after a while I would come out here and watch all of you digging. It looked like fun, but I didn't know how to, well, to ask to join in."

"I guess you just did," Sophie said. "Frankly, I think you have a lot to make up for, but if I understand what Mark taught us, once you're willing to give what you can, you're in."

"Thank you," Albertus said. "I mean that."

"I hope you meant what you said about digging through to the river," Lenny said.

"I did," Albertus said, "and I do."

With that he hopped into the hole and began to dig. Soon his paws were damp and muddy, and very slowly water began to seep into the ditch.

"Oh my," Sophie said. "Oh my. This might actually work."

"Are you just now figuring that out?" Lenny said.

Albertus kept digging. Dirty water splashed his beautiful white coat until he was almost as brown as Lenny, and his powerful forepaws sent mud and rocks flying out of the hole.

Jonathan began to hop up and down in one place. "Look out!" he said. "Look out! It's coming!"

With a roar the water broke through the wall, and it swept Albertus away with it. The last they saw of him before he disappeared around a bend in the brand new river was one massive paw raised in farewell.

*

"Oh no!" Sophie cried, and she began to run after Albertus. So did all the other bunnies, but the new river was much, much faster than they were and they couldn't begin to catch up.

The bunnies, all of whom had been working very hard for many days, simply ran out of strength before they even got to the village. Sophie dropped to the ground panting, and Lenny fell down beside her.

"I didn't want this to happen," she said. "I was mad at him because he never wanted to share his food, but I didn't want this. It's all my fault."

"What's all your fault?" asked a deep voice.

All the bunnies looked up from where they were sprawled on the dry grass.

"Albertus!" Sophie said. "Are you all right?"

"Apparently someone left a tree across the new river," Albertus said. "I was able to hold on and pull myself out."

"That was little Ralph," Lenny said proudly.

Albertus nodded at him grandly. "Thank you, young bunny," he said. "If you wish, you may call me 'Big Al.'"

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The bunnies wanted to call it "Sophie's River," but Sophie said they should name it after Mark. They all nodded and pretended to agree with her, but went on calling it Sophie's River anyway.

The grass and the clover and the nettles began to bloom again almost immediately, and even the old hawthorn bush in the middle of the village square started to perk up. As soon as it did, though, a very strange thing happened. One night someone nibbled and worked at the bush until it came to look exactly like Mark the Bunny, whose ideas had inspired Sophie to save the village.

For several days afterwards Lenny had a bad stomach ache, and when anyone asked him if he'd made the art in the village square he would only say that the question made his head hurt.

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