

Puff

by Sandra Knauf

Puff, a.k.a. Fox Mulder, former humper-bunny extraordinaire, rested on a towel in my lap as I fed him Earth Farms Organic baby food, diluted with warm milk and spiked with crushed antibiotics. The carrot goo, administered through syringe, dribbled out his mouth and down his dirty-white chest. The dwarf rabbit looked rough; he'd had surgery the day before to open up a large-marble-sized abscess on his chin. We were surprised he made it through. I didn't see how someone so tiny and weak, little more than fur and air, could survive. I just knew his heart would give out. I'd almost planned his funeral. But here he was.

The bald, fleshy abscess now had a gaping hole in it. Terrifically gross, but I was beginning to get used to it. I had to keep it clean by squirting it with saline solution a couple times a day with a bigger syringe.

Even though Puff had made it through surgery, the vet hadn't been optimistic. "I wasn't able to drain it because *Lepus* have a thick, non-liquid, almost hard pus," Dr. Hart explained, as I and my two daughters gathered around his cage. "I got out as much as I could."

Six-year-old Lily stared at the rabbit. Though she'd recently confided she thought the young doctor "cute," she wouldn't look at him now. "He's bloody," she announced, her eyes glued to Puff's blood-flecked chest. She was scandalized.

"Honey, they don't have time to bathe them after surgery," I whispered. Her sister, Zora, ten, petted Puff silently.

"We'll keep him on antibiotics and see what happens," said Dr. Hart.

As I fed Puff, I thought about the nightmare Lily shared with me that morning. She dreamed Puff had a hole in his throat and all his blood squirted out until he got as small and skinny as a deflated

balloon. As he sat on my lap, sucking down baby food, wanting to live, I wanted to weep.

Maybe this was my penance for not taking good enough care of our first rabbit. Oscar was a lop-eared rabbit from the feed store, last year's Easter present for the girls, especially Lily, who'd become smitten with rabbits in kindergarten. Although Oscar proved to have dangerous claws and an independent personality (in other words, not a huggable playmate), we enjoyed him as an addition to our family. Unfortunately, his stay was short. He disappeared from our fenced back yard last summer and was never found. I'd been the one who thought it'd be okay to let him scamper free.

When spring came again this year, all crocuses, daffodils and marshmallow chicks, my mind returned to those happy heralds of spring, bunnies. In May, I noticed a classified ad: "Free male dwarf rabbit to a good home. Comes with a hutch and food." I called and the owner described him, "He's Himalayan, white with dark markings."

White, I thought, that's the rabbit color Zora likes best. White with pink eyes, like the March Hare in *Alice in Wonderland*. Then she mentioned his name, Felix.

Felix. Our first bunny was...Oscar. It had to be fate.

"We want him."

Less than an hour later, a winsome rabbit cuddled on my lap as Andy and I rode home in his truck. The owner said we didn't need a cage, he'd be fine on my lap, and Felix was. I'd been thrilled by how damn cute he was, white with dark pearl-grey ears, muzzle and feet, and so small, only slightly bigger than a guinea pig. Only his bright pink eyes seemed strange. We were given, in addition to the bunny and hutch, a bag of rabbit pellets, mini alfalfa bales, and a salt wheel—and told that Felix didn't care for carrots. His owner said she'd gotten him two years ago from a sister-in-law who had, in turn, found him through an animal rescue place in Denver.

"Won't Zora be surprised?" I said, stroking the rabbit. I loved spontaneous pet buys; they weren't the always wisest but they were, as the girls would say, the "funnest."

The girls squealed when they saw him. Zora said, “this is *exactly* the bunny I wanted!” She had a hard time choosing a new name. It was between Puff and Fox Mulder (of the *X Files*, her favorite TV program). Lily wanted to name him Poof. I steered her away from Poof. In the weeks to follow we became so charmed with gregarious Puff, and so pleased with the Netherlands Dwarf breed, we decided to get a second rabbit for Lily. Unlike the large, lop-eared variety, Puff was manageable; his scratches didn't leave bloody gouges, and he seemed to genuinely like us. He was not, as far as I could tell, plotting a disappearance. Zora fed him carrots and he loved them.

To find another bunny, I first checked with local rescue groups and the Humane Society. When those bunny trails led nowhere, I found a breeder.

The next Saturday morning, the girls and I drove to a neighborhood a few miles away and stopped at a blue house. Sadie met us at the door, all smiles. Her husband waved from the living room sofa.

From a wicker carrier by the door, Sadie brought out the bunnies, one buck and three does, so minuscule you could cradle one in the palm of your hand. Soon they bounded around the carpet. The girls and I had delighted in baby animals before—chicks, ducklings, puppies and kitties, even lambs and goats—but the five-and-a-half week old rabbits, so perfectly tiny, with cunning satin ears, velvet coats and spun sugar whiskers, were paws-down most precious.

“They're so small,” I said. “Is it really okay to take them now?”

Sadie nodded. “They recommend up to eight weeks before weaning with the larger breeds, but Netherlands can be weaned at five. They've been on solid food for almost a week now.”

They came in a color assortment: two black, one brown, one white. Sadie said the white and brown ones (Himalayan and sable) would get their markings later. We took turns cuddling them. A longing for all of them swept over me, and I dreamt of a life where baby bunnies frolicked about a Beatrix Potter thatched cottage, and around my feet, every day. As they hopped and played, performing marvelous stunts like standing on their hind legs and giving their

whiskers a washin', Lily made up her mind. She wanted a black female, just like Poopsie-Doodle, one of the psychedelic cartoon animals created by girls' merchandise phenomena Lisa Frank. A few days earlier, when she showed me a small stuffed animal, the prototype for her perfect rabbit, I forewarned her that the bunnies we'd find were not likely to have outsized Kryptonite green eyes.

I, too, wanted a female. I'd been told by the feed store owner who sold us the lop-eared that two males would not get along. Actually, her exact words were, "You don't want to get two males. Males have been known to try to castrate each other." The image of testosterone-crazed rabbits, gore dripping from furry herbivore mouths, made me decide that would never happen. A female, on the other hand, would fulfill my grander, secret scheme; I wanted the rabbits to have a litter, just one, so the girls and I could experience the wonder of mammalian pet birth.

I wondered aloud if Sadie was sure of the sexes, since baby rabbit genitalia is not exactly easy to discern. In spite of their notorious reputations, even grown rabbits can sometimes have, to put it delicately, "discreet" sex organs. Sadie laughed. "I've been doing this for a while. I have two does and a buck I breed regularly." I asked her about breeding. Obviously, this was Sadie's hobby and passion—she was the grand mistress of bunny love, priestess of pet procreation.

"It'll be about six months before the female's mature enough. You can keep them together until then; they should get along fine. But once they get together, they'll have a litter in about 30 days *to the day*."

"And how soon can she get pregnant again?"

"Almost immediately." In a hushed tone, she added that the father should be kept away from them, and the mother might eat the first litter as well.

Sadie came from rural Kansas, and her family had raised rabbits for food and pelts. As a former small town Missourian, I could relate. The occasional wild rabbit in the frying pan, compliments of my dad's hunting skills, was a part of my youth as well. Sadie was now,

like me, a city girl—she wasn't in it for food or pelts, and, at \$25 each, the dwarfs were pretty safe from being bought as food for city pythons.

Lily finally settled on one of the two black females, her version of Poopsie.

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Lily named her brown-eyed baby Satine, after Nicole Kidman's character in *Moulin Rouge* (there is a degree of permissiveness in our household regarding letting children view bawdy and wildly romantic films). Satine and Puff got along well, though Puff tried to hump her every now and then. This caused us alarm, particularly in the beginning when Satine was one third his size, and I became angry the time or two Puff pulled out a mouthful of fur. Later, when Satine got a little older, I'm sorry to admit the humping became a source of amusement to my daughters. I'd read that this (humping, not laughing at it) was a show of dominance, also used by female rabbits on the young ones, a *Lepus* pecking order thing.

We found some large, collapsible metal pens that we could use as bunny playpens during the day. The rabbits had room to leap, sniff, hop, run, nibble grass, and stretch out on their bellies under a shrub, while we kept an eye on them. The girls played with them, pushing them around in Lily's wicker baby carriage, and they'd entertain themselves by fiddling with the bunnies' mouths, making their upper lips stick up so you could see their buck teeth. Bunny yawns caused mirth too; there was something about those huge incisors, top and bottom, and all the tiny teeth on the sides that gave the yawns a delicious comic effect. At night we'd return them to their hutch.

A rabbit magazine I found had an article on bunny "hypnotism." We tried it. To put a rabbit in a trance, you lay it on your lap, on its back, then use both your hands to stroke the sides of its head, from front to back and up its ears. Usually, within less than a minute, the rabbit will be slack-jawed, legs straight up in the air, eyes half-opened and glassy, perfectly still. Even peals of laughter would not

raise Puff, who soon became so easily hypnotized Zora could merely flip him over and he'd go under.

Then one day Zora noticed Puff "chewing" at times when he wasn't eating. I didn't pay much attention, at first, thinking the rabbit mastication motions a tic, probably something rabbits just did. A few days later I noticed a hard spot under his jaw. I wondered if it was abnormal, so I felt and compared his jaw with Satine's. I couldn't tell a difference. Scanning several books on rabbits and small farm animals led to a dead end. Andy checked him out and came to the same prognosis—there didn't seem to be cause for alarm.

A few more days passed and it became noticeable, a definite bump, and he looked thinner. He was having trouble eating. Panicked, I got a referral from our veterinarian (who didn't do bunnies) for someone who did and made an appointment.

The next day the girls and I took Puff in to Dr. Jeff Hart.

The receptionist led us into a small white examining room and soon Dr. Hart breezed in. He's young, was the first thing I thought. The second was, great, now that I'm nearing 40, I'm seeing thirty-year-old doctors as young whipper-snappers.

"And who do we have here?" Dr. Hart smiled, an earnest, clean-cut boyish smile that reminded me of Doogie Houser.

I explained Puff's situation. The girls looked on, and the doctor nodded, lips pressed together, eyes solemn. He took Puff to another room to weigh him. As soon the door closed, Lily looked up at me, straightened her dress and asked, "Do I look all right?"

This is a girl who at age three, on library excursions, used to bring me romance paperbacks with Fabio on the cover. "You should check these books out, Mommy." Now, with a mixture of horror and pride, I thought again, oh God, she's going to be just like me, a dreamy flirt.

Zora chortled, looked first at me, then Lily. "Gawd Lily! Lily's in luuuuve."

"Stop it Zora," Lily squealed.

"Cut it out, both of you."

Dr. Hart came back and told us Puff weighed in at just under 2 lbs. Underweight, but not alarmingly so. He put him on antibiotics for a week and scheduled surgery to open the abscess. He suggested I buy baby food to mix with the medicine.

I bought jars of spinach, peas and carrots, got out the mortar and pestle to grind the pills. I let the girls be in charge of the feedings. Puff ate from a saucer; food covered his mouth and chest at each meal.

The next week we brought him in and found out he'd lost half a pound, one quarter of his weight.

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In spite of his compromised condition, Dr. Hart decided to go ahead with the surgery and Puff made it through. More than anything, the weight loss horrified me and filled me with guilt. I decided to take charge of all feedings. Three 12cc syringes of baby food or pureed vegetables six times a day, mixed with antibiotics for two of those feedings.

I fed him organic baby food mixed with milk by syringe, I ground pills, I dumped cans of mixed vegetables (carrot, potato and green bean) in the blender and divided the portions into small plastic containers for the fridge. I warmed the food in the microwave. I sat him in my lap, squirted the food into his mouth, a small amount at a time, and waited for him to get it down. Each feeding took fifteen minutes. Zora helped, placing hot compresses on the gaping wound and cleaning it, giving him a feeding or two each day and a bath every few days. We took turns cleaning up his diarrhea.

He was the perfect patient, docile and hungry with a strong will to live. He'd meet me at the door of the cage every time I came to feed him. Holding him for hours made me notice things about him, how his ears would cross slightly when he was concentrating on eating, how his once sort of creepy-strange pink eyes were actually quite beautiful, how his left ear was slightly longer than his right. The food got all over him, no matter how careful we were. I wanted to cry at every feeding.

After ten days he was looking better. I could tell he'd gained weight, yet the abscess was still huge, still big-marble-sized, and he couldn't eat any solids except hay and lettuce. I had tried grinding up some of the rabbit pellets and they went untouched.

I drove across town for more antibiotics and was told to bring in Puff in a week. After five days and still no change, the frustration and exhaustion began to take its toll. The endless feedings, our living room as sick bay, seeing him like a furred half-ghost, the trips to the store to buy food, everything wore on me. How long could this go on? Shouldn't there be some major change by this time? With another round of antibiotics and another call to Dr. Hart looming, I decided to see what I could find out about this problem on the Internet. Even though I was, at the time, basically a computer illiterate, it didn't take long to locate information under "Rabbit Health, Jaw Abscesses."

The first article was on face abscesses. It didn't say much about jaws, it singled out abscesses of the teeth, a not-uncommon affliction. It described them as being extremely difficult to treat, usually a recurring problem, and said that they often required a *lifetime* of antibiotic treatment. The overall prognosis was guarded to poor. The article said it didn't do much good to leave any abscess open because they cannot drain like dog and cat abscesses; the pus, as Dr. Hart told us, was too thick. My gut tightened at the realization of what I'd begun to intuit, the ugly inevitable. Another article included a listing of treatments, all long term, all calling for more surgery or dangerous chemicals. The last one, called bead treatment, detailed the making and implantation of antibiotic-soaked clay pellets that would have to be made by the vet because they're not commercially available. This last remedy, said to be "promising," had no actual hard data of failures or successes as the "data was still being gathered."

There it was, in black and white—guarded to poor. Now I was pretty sure Puff had a tooth abscess, not a jaw abscess, and unless I devoted god knows how much more money and time on a quixotic veterinary mission, he didn't stand a chance. And even if I barreled

ahead, he would mostly likely be on antibiotics *for the rest of his life*. A dwarf rabbit invalid requiring years of nursing care. Something I could not, would not, do, Sam I Am. Not for a bunny, not with our money. Doogie Houser looks be damned, I felt anger toward Dr. Hart. The vet had either not known, or not leveled with me. If he had known, he should have been straight with us on the very first visit. No, it wouldn't have been pleasant to tell a woman with two apple-cheeked grammar school girls that the prognosis for Puff was bad. That Puff had probably gnawed his last carrot. And if Doogie was clueless, too wet behind the ears to know Puff was screwed, then, goddamn it, he should have found out. Spent a little time on research like I did. *He should have done his job*.

There were only two things left to do, share the burden of my knowledge with my husband, and get one last opinion from another vet, one who was, this time, familiar with rabbits. My animal-expert friend Becky had highly recommended her vet, Dr. Partlet, after I'd taken Puff in the first time. Now I cringed, recalling how I'd said, "No, we've already been to Dr. Hart and I think we should stay with him." What loyalty! What an idiot. I also remember Becky had given me her sage opinion about rabbit illnesses and mortality, "There's a reason why animals like mice and rabbits procreate so quickly. They have a lot of predators. There's a lot of things that can get them."

That afternoon I had Puff's papers faxed from Dr. Hart's to Dr. Partlet's and I gathered up the Internet literature.

I wanted Andy's support, a confirmation of my decision, and his sympathy. That afternoon, while the girls were at a friend's house, I cornered him. I laid out all the medical information. Meekly, I fessed up to how much I'd spent on medical treatment.

"Almost two hundred dollars! We can't afford this!"

"It just sort of added up," I said. "Anyway, I used the money in my account, money that I had left over from last year's gardening work."

"You spent two hundred dollars on a *rabbit*?"

Now he was becoming belligerent. This wasn't just a rabbit, it was Puff.

"Just how," I inquired, snottily, "can you put a price on the value of a life?"

"Well," Andy deadpanned, "a bunny's \$100, a cat's \$200, and a dog's \$500."

I scoffed. "And what about *you*?"

"A thousand."

I couldn't help but laugh.

After a few moments of silence he asked, "How old does Satine have to be to get pregnant?"

"I've already thought about that. She's too young. She won't be able to make babies for a few more months."

"Dammit," he said. "This is what pets are about, they're a big pain in the ass."

"No, this is what life's all about, the good and the bad."

"Sandy, some people don't even make \$200 a week."

He was right. This was an incredible indulgence. There were people struggling out there to keep a roof over their heads. "But he's so sweet," I protested weakly. "It's not like he's this mean, little jerk of a bunny."

"Oh, so a life's value is determined by personality? That's fair."

I admit it, I was bicycling outside the neighborhood of Rational. Days of nursing Puff, worrying over what to do, trying to make the best decision, trying to be a good person. I couldn't keep him on antibiotics forever. I couldn't hand-feed him baby food indefinitely; in fact, I couldn't keep any of it up for much longer. I was tired. Depressed. His life was in my hands, and I was too big a wuss to deliver the death sentence. Yet, aside from a miracle, I didn't see an alternative. I'd only faced animal euthanasia once before, with the pet chicken Garrett, who had broken his leg; frankly, we hadn't been close. I took a deep breath. It was time to buck up. Time to be a grown up.

"Andy, I'm taking him in tomorrow, one last time. If he can't be cured, I'll have him put to sleep."

After Andy left, I sat down and cried. Then I wondered. Had Puff's life really had any quality these last few weeks? If he'd been in the

wild, he'd be gone already, long gone. Suddenly I realized something else about this free bunny; maybe his previous owner had faced this same decision. She, too, could have nursed him through an abscess, then decided to quietly pass him on. She could have rationalized it by thinking, well, maybe he won't get sick again. That's why he was free! I thought. Make him someone else's problem, give him away. At that moment I despised both her and Doogie Houser equally. Then I did something even more difficult; I thought about my role. Who was I really doing all this for? Were these extreme measures for Puff, or for me? With no little pain, I began to realize my biggest investment in this drama had been my opinion of myself. Yes, it was the same ole story, all about me, me, me.

Zora and Lily came home from their friends' house and found me in the living room, sitting on the chair near Puff's cage, puff-y eyed.

Zora walked over to me. "Mom, you look upset." She laid a hand on my shoulder.

I found myself tearing up again, explaining to my girls what was happening, what I'd learned on the Internet. I told them I was worried this was it, the end of the bunny trail. That I'd made another appointment for tomorrow, just to be sure.

"I love Puff," Zora said, "but you can't spend all your time trying to fix him."

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The stucco office building, decorated in a southwestern motif, held the practice of three vets. Lily busied herself looking at animal health brochures with cute pictures of puppies and kittens, while Zora sat with Puff in his wooden cage on her lap. I dug into a stack of paperwork, more than most multi-thousand-dollar contracts require.

Lily stayed behind when one of Dr. Partlet's assistants came for us. She reminded me of Satine's breeder, Sadie. They had the same mid-western accent, wholesome demeanor and plump corn-fed look. When I asked her if she was from Colorado, she smiled. "No, my family's from Kansas." Once in the examining room, she took Puff out to be weighed.

Dr. Partlet, an attractive forty-something woman with a trim figure and shoulder length blonde hair, brought Puff back in. Her assistant followed.

"He's gained back six ounces," she said, smiling.

Although she said she'd perused the other vet's paperwork, she asked the same questions: how long has he been sick, what has been done, what are you doing now. She began to examine him, bypassing his abscess and looking directly into his mouth. Immediately she pointed out dense milk-colored pus, coming up from his gumline at his bottom incisors. My heart fell.

"That's pus?" Zora said. "I thought that was plaque, I've been scraping it off."

"She knows what plaque is?" asked the assistant. "That's pretty impressive for a girl your age."

Dr. Partlet agreed and they both smiled at my ten year old daughter in a way that suggested "maybe she'll be one of us one day." My feeling of pride was diminished by nausea at the thought of Zora "scraping it off."

The doctor told us she was sure that the abscess came from the bottom incisors. She said she could go back in surgically and try to take out more of the infected tissue, while continuing antibiotic treatment, of course, but that eventually the teeth would have to come out. She explained about teeth trimming (which would become necessary) and feeding, all in an optimistic we-can-do-this tone. My head swam. I couldn't believe it. She seemed enthusiastic about starting treatment, as if this were just a rousing challenge.

I interrupted. "But even if we did all this, there's still no guarantee that it would solve the problem?"

"No, not really."

"Or that there wouldn't be recurring abscesses?"

"Yes, it's possible it could recur."

"Not to mention the feeding difficulties we'll have."

My dam of information broke. I told the doctor what I had read about abscesses, the general prognosis of "guarded to poor," and said that while we loved Puff, I couldn't see how we could justify

doing more surgery. My eyes filled with tears, I was losing all composure. In the face of the doctor's optimism I was carrying out the death sentence. I had told Andy the night before that putting a cute little bunny to sleep, even one as messed up as Puff, seemed somehow sinful.

The vet nodded in agreement to everything I said. After finishing, I stood there trying to compose myself. Dr. Partlet waited patiently, sympathetically. Finally, I asked, "Can you do it?"

"Yes." She asked if we wanted to be present. I didn't, Zora said she did.

The doctor looked at me. "If she wants to be here," I said, "it's her choice."

"I do," said Zora.

"I'll stay then, too."

I looked at my daughter—where did she get this courage? Certainly not from me. My insides felt like jelly, my head light. Even though I had been through natural childbirth, twice, I actually worried that I might swoon. The doctor and her assistant left to get another form and the lethal shot.

"Zora, are you sure you want to be here?"

"Yes, Mom."

I stood weak-kneed by my girl.

They came back and I signed the paperwork for the euthanasia. The assistant put a box of tissues on top of Puff's wood transport cage, "just in case."

I grabbed one and began dabbing the flow.

The veterinarian looked at Puff's ears, first swabbing them with alcohol.

"I don't see a vein that's going to be big enough. These guys are so tiny. Our other option is to inject the abdomen. It takes longer for the drug to work that way, but I don't think we'll have a choice."

"He won't feel pain will he?" I asked. I knew the answer, knew how the drug paralyzed the muscles, the nervous system, finally the respiratory and circulatory systems. And we can't really ask them how it feels, now, can we?

"No, but it might take up to a half hour. First he will lie down, but it may take a while for the heart to completely stop." She went into the details, how to feel his heart. I knew about his heart, I'd felt it beat many times as I held him. I'd even noticed his breathing after we'd picked him up after surgery. His nose had moved so slowly, yet still looked so cute; I noted this even as I wondered if he'd die from the stress.

I felt sorry for the veterinarian. How many beloved family members had she had to put down? Though she seemed to want to go to extreme measures to save him, maybe that's what she was expected to do, what our society expected. Maybe it wasn't they who were supposed to have all the guts, maybe we were.

I turned away, tears flowing. She injected him. Zora looked on, then patted Puff reassuringly.

They put him back in the wooden case. He was paralyzed, limp, eyes open.

I went outside, tissues in hand, nose running, and paid the bill. Lily had done well waiting for us in the examining room, but now she looked at me and I could see her worry, over me. We got into the car for the ten block trip home. Zora sat up front.

"Can I take him out of the cage?" she asked.

Inside, I thought, oh no, please don't, but I said, "I don't know Zora . . . when he goes, well, he might make a mess."

"I don't care."

"Well, okay then."

She held him on her lap, stroking him.

I pulled up in our driveway, with two little girls and a dying bunny.

"He's gone," Zora said.

I looked across at her. She was teary, but holding it together. Only I was at the ragged edge of despair, sobbing. Puff's beautiful candy pink eyes were clouded, dull. He was gone.

We got out of the car and went into the house to grieve, to think on lessons gleaned from our Lilliputian, ill-fated friend. We'd have the funeral later, when Andy came home.

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