

ONCE UPON A TIME IN TEXAS

BY STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

broadcast 22: chasing the hare

It was a bright warm day in March, and many of the women of Austin, Texas were secretly gestating rabbits in the base of their skulls.

It was a secret they were keeping even from themselves.

At dinners with friends who weren't pregnant with brain rabbits, the conversations would go along these lines:

"Yes?"

"No?"

"I don't for a second—"

"But you have to talk to him first."

"Well he wasn't driving that when I met him."

"Do you see her, she's right there? The one with the purse that goes like—"

"And they were all clapping and I was just standing there so I started clapping too, right?"

"It wasn't just that it was loud, it was that I couldn't hear the music."

"I'm on the third floor, so that doesn't get to me, but still."

"Are you going, you think?"

"Yes, no?"

And so on.

The average gestation period for a human female is nine months. For a normal rabbit, it's about a month, depending on stress and environment.

Needless to say, these weren't normal rabbits.

At first, as embryos go, they were the little beans of life you expect, just nestled at the top of their mothers' brain stems. It was where they'd finally washed up when the rest of the human body kept trying to spit them out.

But that's oversimplifying it.

Where they tended to wash up was at the base of the spine, but even at a few days old, a rabbit's hearing is too sensitive for the constant slosh of giant human kidneys.

Have you seen the nature videos of those blind, hairless marsupial infants crawling from birthing passage to pouch? So can the inner walls of the human vertebral column be a ladder, the base of the skull a porthole, the medulla oblongata an incubation chamber.

One with an ejection seat, as it were.

All of this is documented.

And this is hardly where the story begins, either. Where it begins is last year, the Hell Bunny Incident that finally culminated in another shooter in the tower on the University of Texas campus, and various cloaks of secrecy, three different kinds of deniability, and at least two series of articles in the tabloids, all of which were reduced to using artist's recreations.

Nobody was killed, at least not on campus.

And then of course there were the chupacabras—denizens of an older world, skulking back into ours, snapping at the edge of the light, as if they knew the weak points in it, could bite holes into it.

And maybe they can.

But we're talking about the women, now. The reluctant mothers.

The first birth was at the Alamo Drafthouse, the one down on Sixth Street.

It was premature, too.

Or, as far as we know, it was premature. It's not like there's a lot of normal brain-rabbit births to compare this one with.

These two, really.

The Twins.

And these two mothers-to-be, they'd never met before, didn't know each other, didn't know of each other, and of course they hadn't been attending any Lamaze classes together.

There are no classes for what they were about to go through.

And if you think I haven't interviewed the one who survived, guess again.

Though 'interview' is problematic at best, here.

Suffice it to say that, after her prolonged convalescence was over and her psychological healing could begin, her third appointment with her assigned

therapist might have set her back a few years. Maybe all the way to infancy. To her days as a zygote.

If you're listening, Cheralyn Tapers, please understand that I meant no harm.

Had I not fastened you to that chair, though—you would have run, wouldn't you have? And then you'd still be out there, tearing through the brush, the mesquite pulling at your clothes, your face tear-streaked, your breathing too deep to last, Texas still all around you, a nightmare closing in fast.

So I did you a favor, see.

Still, to have been you, then. To have pushed open that tall heavy door on the third floor, and then to have leaned forward, kind of peered through the gathered shadows, seen that tall-backed, maroon leather chair facing away from you. And to have seen—did you? please say yes, I sat like that for so long, what's left of my fingers churched under what's left of my chin, the leather of the chair boiling under me—to have seen the smoky shape of two tall ears cresting the back of that chair.

Yes, Cheralyn, this is our interview.

Thank you.

Without you, the story of how this all started might well be forever lost, it might have become inextricable from its own legend. There are the grainy cell-phone videos of the event, yes, and conflicting accounts in all the papers, but of course no one in attendance for the *I Spit on Your Grave* revival that night turned out to have the stomach for the act of birth you endured.

As you told me that day in the office, once I turned the chair around and waited for you to unfaint, you didn't even want to go to the movie in the first place, did you? All rape-revenge stories start with a rape, after all, and, because everybody in the theater would be familiar with the movie, they would then be cheering during the rape, as if cheering for it, when really what they were cheering for was the fact that this was what was going to trigger all the glorious revenge, the kind that has to take place when the police can't possibly be enough.

Still, it can be uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, it was the first weekend of South by Southwest, your roommate had tickets, you were meeting friends, and the movie was only going to be the first part of a night that might ride the sun up, leave you considering a mound of potatoes and eggs down at the Magnolia.

Did I mention your age?

You're twenty-seven, here.

Like every one of the mothers.

And, as for why you'd never encountered one of them yet, it's just numbers. There are three-quarters of a million people on any given night in Austin, Texas, and, at the time of that *I Spit on Your Grave* screening, there were only forty-three women carrying a fetus in their skull.

It's a wonder you managed to meet another one at all, really.

Fast-forward to the movie's introduction, now, Joe Bob Briggs flown in special to work the mic, a woman on each arm, and then the scratched film is reeling through itself, the crowd eating and drinking and talking at first but then losing themselves into this story, this movie, this piece of history.

Your server's name is Melissa, and you appreciate the halogen white bra she's wearing under her black shirt. It's for tips. Boys aren't complicated. You hope she cleans up, and are even planning on tipping a little extra as well, just so she'll know you know how hard her job is, here. Dealing with drunk people while trying not to get in the way of what's on screen can't be easy.

But of course this is before you smell each other.

Give that a couple of minutes, though. First, let her do her thing—ferry fries here and there, balance pitchers of beers on trays, swivel away from the hands casually grabbing at her in the dark, the eyes tracking her white bra like they've never seen a girl in a bikini.

It's about context, though. Floating the Pedernales, she'd just be another girl, but the Alamo Drafthouse isn't the river, and being able to scope her bra on what feels like the sly, it's probably like the first time you see the moon in the daytime sky, and you look around to see if anybody else in your third grade recess has figured out what's going on here.

In this case, yes: all the guys on your row, they're certified geniuses.

You shake your head, find yourself tracking her as well. Note how, now that the rape scene's full-tilt lookaway bad, she's taking the steps a bit slower, is getting drawn up onto the screen in spite of what's happening up there.

Occupational hazard and all.

She never spills, though.

Well, at least she doesn't until she's setting your group's second basket of fries down and the girl on screen, Jennifer, just really opens up and screams, and everybody knew it was coming, screams with her.

It straightens your server's back, makes her catch her breath, and it's like dominoes falling: she fumbles the fries, stabs to correct, taps into the empty pitcher, which rattles your beer.

When you try to catch it, it splashes up, one of those perfect dollops that just coasts up the side of the glass, splats right onto your face.

And, the thing is, you don't even like beer that much, definitely don't need to smell like it for the rest of the night.

"Oh," she says, her face still slack from the rape scene.

"Um, yeah," you say back, still half at a loss.

Of course your whole row's watching this play out now, their eyes shiny with possibility.

You stand back from your beer, hold your hands out, fingers spread.

"Shit, I'm, I don't know . . ." the server—full name: Melissa Yanez—says, pulling her bottom lip in, her eyes saucering out.

"No, it's, it's—" you tell her, rubbing at the beer on the side of your face, but then . . . this is when you catch her scent.

Though I can't imagine what that must be like, I do remember as a kid, catching field mice and then holding them up by the tail, how they'd always be perfectly calm, at least until you held two mice close together, at which point they'd just start peeing on each other like that's all they had inside them. Like there was no choice in the matter.

Or, this one cat my mom had when I was in second grade, that cat was just a teenager cat, but still she threw a litter somehow, and those kittens grew up fast, even though she never nursed them or taught them how to be cats. But they learned how to be cats all on their own, I guess. One day she jumped the fence back into the yard and there was this big stand-off, lots of hissing and bowed-up backs, and then the litter moved in. These kittens were going to kill her, had her about halfway dead before we dug her out with a broom and the water hose. We had to keep them apart after that, the mom in the garage, and it finally turned out that what the kittens had smelled was that the mom had gone out into the alley and gotten pregnant again.

It was like that for you, wasn't it, Cheralyn?

A response so deep in the blood that it was more instinct than anything.

And the cell-phone videos do show this part, anyway. You, raising your lips like you probably never had before and launching over that tall table, driving Melissa back into the row below. How your hand came up with a clump of hair that still had scalp attached to it. And how you held the raw side of that scalp up, licked it to be sure you'd smelled what you'd smelled.

You were the movie now.

Melissa stood, blood slipping down her face, and she came at you not like a person, but an animal, finally driving you by the face into the wall.

On the third face slam, you wedged an elbow against the wall, your other hand pulling her away so that her thin girlie-cut shirt tore off, her white bra cups surfacing through the dark like icebergs.

The theater exploded with applause.

Everybody was circled around now, holding each other back, smiling, yelling, egging you and her on, trying to get a proper chant going.

Except—this time when you came at her, instead of meeting you head-on, she planted a foot on the side of a chair, vaulted over you, up into the projector light so she was white-hot for a moment. On the way down she reached back for a pitcher, launched it at your face like she was born fighting.

You'd come up through the same dojo, though, or had it in your blood now anyway. You collected the pitcher from the air, guiding it behind you to absorb the momentum, then slammed it on the ground so that all you had left was the handle. And its two sharp ends. And a grin that would have made any other opponent on any other night turn tail, leave a them-shaped hole in the wall on their way out.

Not Melissa Yanez.

She just smiled back, wiped the blood from her chin and slung it onto the floor.

"Holy shit," somebody said, and everybody kind of collectively gulped.

Holy shit indeed.

She came at you and you fainted left like you were going to plant on a chairback, pirouette up into the air as well, attack from above, but then you slid under instead, came up hard and fast and slashy, opened her naked stomach from hip to hip.

For maybe ten seconds then, there was complete silence, but then a girl standing across from you turned it inside out with a scream that took her whole body, and then somebody else screamed, then, on-screen, Jennifer or one of the rapists screamed. You looked around to the moviegoers, your hand still gripping that bloody handle, and you might very well have gutted them all, feasted on whatever goodness you could find inside their steaming insides, but before anything else could happen, Melissa's sliced-open body arced back, standing her just on the back of her head and her heels, her ass nowhere near the ground. Like she had a jolt of electricity surging through her. Or a demon.

You cocked your head over—even in your reduced state, you had a distinct sense that you hadn't done this—and then it happened to you.

Your and Melissa's babies were pulling the handles on their escape hatches.

You fell back, started coughing, then shrieked back onto your knees—this is the last cell-phone image of you, and even in the background of it you can already see brave historians of cinema, fleeing for the doors—and your hands found the sides of your head. Because you didn't want it to crack open like an egg. Like the egg it was.

I'm sorry, Charalyn. Sorry you had to go through this.

And no, there's no direct line of access between the medulla oblongata and the human mouth.

Or, for you, there wasn't.

Your rabbit fetus, though, your baby, it had been growing claws these past few days. It had jacked some sort of umbilical into your bloodstream, had been leaching your calories, your nutrition, converting it into something you'd never planned.

Have any of you ever tried to hold a rabbit that doesn't want to be held? It can bite all the way through the web of your hand if you let it, sure, even if you've got welding gloves on—like with sharks, rabbit teeth never stop growing—but if you hug a rabbit to your body, it'll plow furrows in your chest and stomach with its back claws, like it's in a cartoon, is spinning out.

They make this high-pitched squeal, too.

Charalyn, you know that cry, don't you?

Some things you can never stop knowing.

I set you back with our interview, yes, and I'm sorry for that—did you think I was your child, already grown up?—but let's be honest, here. No therapist was going to be stopping the nightmares any time soon, were they?

You can't forget that night at the theater, I mean.

Worse, you saw it happen to Melissa first, didn't you? Her throat bulging up like it was going to explode, her head spasming back, then her mouth filling, two bloody paws hooking to either side of her lips, so the head can push through.

And then those ears that had been smoothed down to the back of the fetus like wings for the duration of its gestation period, they unfolded, radar-dished around, and the rest of the rabbit slow-hopped out, its powerful hind legs pushing at Melissa's face, kicking it over sideways so she was staring right at you now.

So you knew what was coming for you in the next few moments.

Melissa's rabbit was maybe five ounces, total. Not completely formed, but not blind, either.

It looked around, twitched its nose twice, saw you.

You screamed, or tried to, and then your throat was too full for sound, and the only reason you lived is because the paramedics were already screeching up, and because nobody had gutted you with the sharp handle of a beer pitcher.

Still, it was touch and go.

The last thing you remember?

Do you mind if I say this part on the air?

The movie's still playing, onto a quieter part now, and you're lying there in the spilled fries and tacky beer and popcorn, your mouth dripping with afterbirth, your chest hitching for air. And you've got a sightline on what you just gave birth to.

A bunny. Small enough you could hide it in the palm of your hand.

It's moving timidly, like just figuring out what it can do. It hops over to its brother.

Instead of fighting, they touch noses, move on.

Not into the hidden recesses of the theater, but to the hamburger spilled on the floor.

It's a common misperception that rabbits are all about carrots.

What they really like, as you know, it's meat.

And they don't necessarily need it cooked.

★