

Genevieve

The autobiography of a pet shop bunny

I don't know when I was born. I don't think wild rabbits know their birthdays and none of the rabbits I have known, care when they were born although I now know that most of us are born in early summer when the days are getting longer.

I came from a pet shop on Hillingdon Heath. There were lots of us for sale, black ones, white ones and gold piebald. I was very small and all white with grey ears and a chocolate nose and cost 5 shillings (25 pence in today's money). My owner took me home in a box on the seat of his car. I was very frightened and didn't move. My owner, I will call him J, took the box to a grass area when the car stopped and I spent a long time sitting down on his hand while he smoothed my fur and then he put me on the grass and sat down. The grass was nice. It smelled nice and soon I moved a hop and then some more hops and stopped feeling so scared.

I stayed in a box in a shed for a couple of nights while J built a pen for me with a small covered enclosure at one end where I could be private and go in and out to nibble grass anytime I liked. My owner was a kind man and I was well looked after. He gave me rabbit pellets and all manner of fruit and vegetables. If I liked them I ate them and if I didn't I just left them and he took them away so that my pen stayed clean. He soon learned what I liked and didn't like, and he moved my pen every few days so the grass tasted different and the view changed. I have always found my humans quite easy to manage.

As I got older, I developed a hobby, digging holes, but J, my owner, didn't like that for some reason. There was a smooth area of concrete in the garden where a shed had stood so he put my pen on that. He thought the concrete would stop me digging, I suppose, but I still dug. It didn't take me long to turn the entire base into sand and gravel and I started to dig my way out. Then J covered the bottom of the pen with chicken wire and moved me back onto the lawn. I hurt my foot on the wire trying to dig, so I didn't dig any more but I could still eat grass and J moved my pen every few days. I suppose I was lucky as I had plenty of food and water, and there was a piece of cloth on my pen so there was always some shade for me to sit in, but I missed digging.

Life went on, I got bigger and bigger and the days started to get shorter. Sometimes I was introduced to other humans J brought out of his own huge hutch. I was used to humans now and in fact I quite enjoyed being stroked. One day a human picked me up by my ears and it hurt, but J quickly took me away so it didn't do any damage. J cut my claws regularly because now I couldn't dig, they grew quickly, but he never cut into the quick. I always had a piece of tree to keep my teeth sharp and I never felt unwell. Sometimes, he took me into a big field at the bottom of the garden, to run fast. There were two rivers and one day I fell in the big river. I could swim, but I hated getting wet and made sure I didn't do it again. I never ran away. I saw other humans called neighbours and children and J told them all my name was Genevieve and I was almost 14 pounds, which they they said was "Wah very big". Sometimes I saw dogs but J picked me up. I didn't mind the barking. It just seemed rude.

When winter came, most of my door was blocked off to keep out the wind and rain but I could still get in and out. I always had plenty of fresh straw and hay. I arranged the soft hay in a pile on top of the straw and snuggled into it. I also grew a winter coat so I was never cold. J said "you would make a lovely pair of mittens." which I guessed must be a good thing. Sometimes everything everywhere turned white and once, at a white time, J took me to the field. It was harder than running through hay. I had to jump each step and once, I had to stand on my back legs to see where J was. He said all he could see was my ears. On the way back, I was making sure I didn't fall in the small river when I realised I was just about to go up the bank. I was walking on the water which was covered in snow! Most of the winter, when it was nearly dark all the time, I just buried myself in the hay and slept.

I noticed that it was getting warmer and I could smell some new flowers. We rabbits are sensitive to things like that. It was getting light earlier in the morning and dark later at night. J took me into a garden belonging to another hutch he called 57, and on the grass, there was another rabbit just like me. I hadn't seen another rabbit since I was taken away from the pet shop. I was uncomfortable and I didn't like it. The other rabbit had two humans who were both called J so I named them J2 and J3 and they said the rabbit was called Humphrey and was owned by the young lady human called J3. She picked Humphrey up and put his nose close to mine

but I just tried to snuggle into J's coat.

Humphrey was bigger than me and J3 said he was a pound heavier. He was all white, including his nose and ears. I didn't like the smell of Humphrey and didn't feel safe with him. When J put me on the grass, he kept coming close to me so I climbed on J's shoes or hid between his ankles. J2 said we were playing hide and seek but I was only playing hide. I did not like smelly Humphrey.

Humphrey's owner said that when the weather was a couple of weeks warmer, J should bring me to go in Humphrey's hutch. Humphrey didn't have a nice pen like mine. It was high off the ground and had two rooms joined by a hole one with a wooden door for sleeping and one with wire bars to look out. He couldn't go out on the grass whenever he liked. About two weeks later, J took me to Humphrey's hutch, put me in and went into 57 with J2. I didn't like it. It was smelly and I felt trapped. Whichever room I went in, Humphrey followed and kept jumping on top of me and pulling my fur out. At last, I had had enough, so I kicked him very hard with my back legs and he went in his sleeping box and left me alone in the corner ready to kick him again. I wished I had thought of that earlier. A bit later, J came back and lifted me out to take me back to my own pen.

The days were getting quite long now and it didn't rain so much. I should have been outside, but I spent more and more time in my hay box and J started to look in daily. Then one day, I felt very sore, I mean really really sore, and I went crazy. I dashed round messing up my bed and tossing hay and straw everywhere, even out onto the grass. When J saw the mess in the morning, he gave me fresh food and then put me in a big box of hay and I dozed. When J cleared out the blood soaked hay and straw, he found 9 little pink blobs and put it all on the compost heap. Then he scrubbed out the box with bleach and rinsed it with carbolic soap and when it was dry, put new straw and hay in. That afternoon, he had a really good look at me before he put me back in my pen. It smelt of something and carbolic (J does sometimes) but I was glad to be home. J told his friends J3 and J2 that my litter was dead. I didn't like Humphrey.

Everything was just as it should be for a while. The days got longer and then got shorter and just as the weather started to get colder, my owner and his humans moved me to another garden. I went in another car, my second ride, but this time I was in my hay box all alone. It was dark and there were no windows. It seemed to take a long time and I was quite nervous. The new garden was very small, only about 6 times as big as my pen, but the first thing I noticed when I was taken out of the car, was that the day seemed shorter. It got dark earlier even though it was the same day. As I said previously, rabbits are sensitive to seasons. There wasn't much to nibble or smell but I had plenty of pellets and was cared for. I was surprised I missed human company but maybe because I didn't have any company. It was rare even to see a bird. I stayed in that garden for two winters but there is nothing much to tell you about it.

My fourth Spring arrived and even though I felt energetic as usual. I wasn't really "excited." For the first time, spring had been dull, boring. I was taken out once or twice but there was no field, just the huge hutches humans live in. Then one day, when I thought I should be able to smell flowers, but couldn't, J, who hadn't spent much time with me at all in the small garden, put me on the front seat of his car and took me for my third ride. We didn't go very far at all, this time, and once we stopped and J put a huge block of straw in the car. The smell of straw was so strong, it was lovely. We stopped in front of a big human hutch with a garden so big you could drive in. It was even bigger than my first garden and J put me on the grass while he got the straw out of the car. I had never seen so much straw. The straw was so big that lots of rabbits could have lived in it. Then he picked me up and took me into an even bigger field which he called the back garden and there, was my new hutch.

I jumped with fear when I first saw it because it reminded me of Humphrey's hutch. Then I realised it was completely different because it was at least four times bigger than Humphrey's and only about 6 inches from the ground so I could jump in and out. One side was solid wood and one had bars and opened the dividing wall could be removed for cleaning and it was easy to move from one to room to the other. J put the bale of straw in a shed at the side of the garden, put me in my hutch with a huge pile of straw, rabbit pellets and water, and left me. I think he had to put all the things from his old home in his new home. Soon I was given a pen like my old one but bigger. It was open at one end and just hooked onto my new hutch so I could hop out of my hutch into my pen. My owner moved it every few weeks just like in my first garden. The garden was so big that when I was out of my pen, I could explore all afternoon without J always stopping me if he

thought I had found a gap in the hedge or something. I think he believed that if I did go out, I would come back, because I was a pet shop bunny.

I had only been in my new garden for about two moons when I saw my first brown rabbit. I knew by instinct it was another rabbit although it was much smaller than me and a streaked brown colour and didn't have pink eyes. It was always near the trees at the bottom of the garden and sometimes I saw three or four of them. On one of my regular pen moves, J had moved me close to a big Hawthorn tree nearer to the bottom of the garden. The brown rabbits now came quite close but they seemed scared, maybe because I was double their size or maybe because I was friends with a human. Eventually one came quite close and we actually touched noses through the wire. Soon they visited quite often and I knew all five of them but they only came in the morning or evening when there were no humans about. I wanted to play with them and they with me, but we couldn't, apart from running round the pen, me inside and them outside. Then the accident happened.

J came and moved my pen to some fresh grass and checked my claws, ears and teeth. He had a new bigger water bottle which he fixed to my pen and put down two bowls of rabbit pellets and a thick willow branch. I liked being stroked and I liked willow bark even more. Then he left. I didn't know, but I was being left because it was something called the May holiday. As the Sun settled behind the willow trees, I was dozing in the corner of my pen with my eyes and ears half closed when something disturbed me. It was a rabbit in my pen. Yes IN my pen! J hadn't hooked my pen to the hutch both sides and there was a gap one side just big enough to squeeze through. I hopped towards the rabbit and it hopped away so I jumped into my hutch. Brownny stood up on his back legs and and looked in, so I jumped out and ran across my pen. Brownny jumped into my hutch and explored. He found my water and had a sip. Then he found my pellets and tucked in. He really liked them whereas I liked grass and bark. I think he had never had pellets before. We played together for some time and then he squeezed back out into the garden.

Very soon, all his family appeared. One by one, they inspected the gap in my pen. Brownny came back in, then his Mum and two Sisters and finally his Dad. We all sniffed each other, but only Brownny really wanted to play. They seemed most interested in the pellets and water. I was happy if they liked my pellets. Then I thought. If Brownny could get in, I could get out. So I inspected the gap. I pushed my head through and then squashed my shoulders up and got them through and I was out although it would have been a struggle if I was still wearing my winter coat. I ran round my pen and watched the brown rabbits exploring my pen, feeling the wire jumping in and out of my hutch. It was strange to think we had changed places but we were the same rabbits and liked the same things. We were just free.

When it got dark, I decided to go back into my pen. The brown rabbits had gone but I didn't see them go. I wasn't scared of the dark. I'd heard all the noises, trees creaking, owls hooting and animals and insects scuttling every night, but I wasn't part of it. I had seen owls hunting in the moonlight, the whoosh of their wings and the terrible squeaking when an owl fell on a mouse. The sound reminded me how scared I was by dogs barking when J first took me in the field near my first garden. I settled in my hay and straw and dozed.

I awoke to a thudding sound I hadn't heard before. I stretched and jumped out of my hutch. Brownny was beside my pen stamping his back feet and we sniffed noses through the wire and then I remembered I could get out. I squeezed out easily and ran round to Brownny. We sniffed noses and Brownny smelled so nice, not like Horrid Humphrey. It was so nice to have rabbit company. Brownny and I ran round and round each other and then put his paws on my shoulders. I tore up the garden and Brownny chased me. He could run so fast but I was much bigger than him so I could push him over. I ran away again, and found I had run right round J's big hutch. We played chasing together for a long time. Brownny caught me and I pushed him over and ran and hid behind an apple tree or willow. It was such fun, but I wasn't used to running so far and had to stop. Brownny stopped beside me and pulled the fur on my dewlap. I stayed quite still and Brownny climbed on my back a few times. I felt so happy with Brownny. He was friendly and we did everything together.

The Sun was rising so we hopped back to the bottom of the garden. The others soon arrived, and then went off exploring or eating sometimes alone sometimes following each other, so I did the same. They spent quite a lot of time "resting" and I was good at that. I found they had small paths going to different gardens and fields. It wasn't too far to the bank where they lived. They had dug burrows into the side of a small hill with a hedge on top. I dug a hole, but then I followed another rabbit who was going to eat walnuts. The walnuts were very nice but when I had enough, I couldn't remember where I had started to dig, so I went back to my

garden. There were a lot of flowers in the garden nearest my hutch, so I decided to explore there with another rabbit. A wire fence went right to the ground so I decided to dig a hole. We both worked on the hole and it didn't take long before we could get under the fence, but none of the flowers tasted good and soon we came to another fence so we dug another hole. Suddenly I heard barking and my companion vanished so I dashed back to the hole I'd dug. I was lucky because the dog was so close that it crashed into the fence I had dug the hole under. There was no J to rescue free rabbits by picking them up.

I spent that night and the next day roaming with my friends. Sometimes I went back to my hutch and sometimes I didn't. I went down one empty burrow but it was very small and I was tired of digging. Brownny was my special friend and we played chasing and he jumped on me some more. The second night I heard the car near J's home and there were lights. J came and shone a torch on me and went away. The next morning I saw Brownny and his family but they didn't come to my pen. I squeezed out and hopped over to them. Only Brownny came to greet me and I ran away so he would chase me. Then I heard J shout "Genevieve's out and she's got some friends." And all the brown rabbits disappeared. J came all the way down the Garden, picked me up, and put me back in my hutch.

Of course when he saw his mistake, he was very sorry he hadn't fixed the pen properly. But I wasn't.

The brown rabbits came to my pen once or twice in the next few weeks, but of course they couldn't get in and I couldn't get out.

About 5 weeks after J left my pen open, I felt very strange. I scraped the straw and hay in my hay box into a big pile and made a nice hollow lined with fur I'd pulled from my dewlap and sides. 5 beautiful little babies wriggled from my tummy. They were tiny and pink with screwed up faces and their eyes tight shut. I kept them warm and made sure they had plenty of milk. They grew very fast and were soon covered in fur and their eyes and ears were open. I could tell them apart now. There was one mostly white like me one very small one who looked just like Brownny and the other three were piebald different coloured, black, white and a sandy colour but they all had some brown. About this time J opened the door and looked in. I could tell he was very pleased. He brought all his humans to have a look. He had a small human who looked just like him and was very excited. J put some bricks in my pen so my babies could climb in and out but when they were 14 nights old, they could do everything. When they were about 21 nights, when it was almost dark 5 brown rabbits came into the garden and one of them came close enough to sniff my nose. It was my special friend Brownny, and he sniffed each of my baby's nose as well. We were very contented.

As soon as the babies no longer needed feeding with milk from me, J came to my pen, picked up the five rabbits and put them in a box half full of hay. I guessed he must be taking them to a new home. I remembered the pet shop on Hillingdon Heath and hoped he would take them to a garden like mine instead of taking them to a pet shop. I was sure he would.

Two more summers passed happily but uneventfully Brownny was just a pleasant but important memory. My 6th Winter was approaching and I knew it was going to be a harsh one. We rabbits are sensitive to things like that.

For some weeks, I had been suffering from boils on my feet. I'd have it lanced, and the pus removed and no sooner had it healed than another one would come. J took me for a short ride in the car, and we sat in a big room full of humans, mostly with cats and dogs but there was a rat and a snake like the ones in my garden but much bigger. When I was called, a nice lady looked at my most recent boils, there were three, and talked to J. I could tell he, and the lady, were not very happy. The lady stroked me and put her hand on J's arm and smiled at him. Then she said something and J said "No!" in a voice I had never heard before. He took me home.

The weather got worse and worse and my feet got worse and worse and J moved my hutch so it was close to his hutch. I had no pen, but I didn't mind as I seldom went out with my sore feet and the cold and snow. If it was very cold, he took me into his home to clean and dress my feet. The days were short now and the humans all seemed sick. He put me in a box in his hutch while he put clean straw in mine, with hay water and pellets. Then he held me on the table cleaned away all the puss and put antiseptic and a dressing on. It took a long time because he was coughing a lot and had to keep stopping. He sat me on his knee and stroked

my ears and back. I felt comfortable and my legs always stopped hurting when they were cleaned and dressed. Then J put me back in my hutch.

I nibbled some hay, burrowed into my fresh straw and dozed, thinking of the field with two rivers, the big garden, Brownny and the walnuts; his burrow and my babies, one just like him. I dozed deeper and deeper and fell into a warm deep, comfortable sleep. (4164 words)