

Max and Me

by Karen Nicole Mitchell

He munched on my toes. Little nips on my toes that weren't painful. My toes were painted pale green like tips of fresh romaine lettuce, so I couldn't blame him. I woke up that way each morning I stayed at my friend's flat in Studio City in Los Angeles, California.

He was a hairy little beast. Chubby Max was a Lionhead with black and gray luxurious hair whipping around his stout body like a cascading cape. Three inch-long ears tufted like golden scallops of endive standing at attention atop his little round head. He had peaceful dark brown eyes. I melted within those pools of cocoa brown. Max stood at attention toward the end of my bed—the beige guest couch, nested within the middle of the living room. Max was a cage-free social butterfly, and I was in the center of his house.

Max sat perched in the corner. When he wasn't playing with my toes, he was eating little lettuce cups, grooming his luxurious nest of hair, watching and waiting for the humans in his life to arrive. Pellets of food and an abundance of hay were scattered in cups and bowls throughout the apartment. He was king of this palace. Fresh food was within reach wherever he might roam in the bunny-proofed home. Within the cage and rabbit den, water, clean bedding, and toys were placed for Max to access at his leisure. He slept on the ground floor level while his primary caregiver slept and worked in the loft. As the house guest, I spent most of my time near Max, who grew closer to me every day.

I painted my toes a soothing pale orange like the color of a fresh summer carrot. Max nipped my orange toes until I awakened. His nose twitched and his whiskers fluttered and thrummed

like cattails in a breeze. His chocolate-brown eyes trained on me and my every move. I smiled and grinned at him. I lightly petted him on the head and stroked his large watermelon-sized body.

We formed a routine. He got to nip my toes to wake me up so I didn't need to set an alarm. We ate breakfast together. He ate hay, pellets, and greens while I had water, granola, and fruit. We sat silently together. I cooed at him and he buzzed at me in the curious way rabbits do. We found each other every morning.

Max's silky locks tended to clump in little knots. It was too much for a rabbit to handle alone. Max's primary caretaker had been trained by a professional to manage his hair. She brushed and groomed Max's locks down to a manageable, clump-free length. By grooming Max, she reduced the risk of stasis (digestive stoppage) from his ingesting fur as he cleaned himself.

One hot evening, Max's caretaker gave Max a hair trimming. Unfortunately, she opted to use scissors to clip out a large tangle. On that night, I wished for a better choice. The scissors slipped and Max was cut. The silvery, sharp blade passed through Max's skin. Looking at the wound, I shivered. The caretaker was quick on her feet. With a list of emergency animal hospitals that treated rabbits, she immediately found one nearby. We packed Max up in a warm blanket and pet carrier, and then sped down the highway.

We arrived to find a team of nurses and veterinarians ready for us. There were about six of them in scrubs standing beneath the bright florescent lights. I was in awe that there were so many of them ready to help. My friend took the lead in talking to the doctors, while I backed myself into a corner of

the room and stared at the shiny walls, aware of hushed conversation. I tried not to get in the way so my friend Max could get the best care.

In a circle around Max, the medical team and my friend looked like a football team in a huddle conversing about strategies. After determining that Max needed stitches, the staff was ready to begin the procedure.

Max escaped from the phalanx and softly padded the twenty feet across the cold linoleum floor to me. He faced me with his heart-shaped face and chocolate-brown eyes looking directly into mine. His round, heavy bottom was planted on my toes as he tucked his warm body into my legs. In his own bunny way, Max had asked me to hold his hand. After one of the vets retrieved Max and placed him on the table, I left the room to wait and pace the lobby.

After Max's wound was stitched up, he was sent home to heal, his caretaker armed with medicine and instructions. Follow-up appointments were arranged so the vet could monitor his progress. Thankfully, my friend achieved a full recovery and returned to his usual Max-like antics. My pastel toes were still nipped. He was still the king of the palace and a social butterfly. We were all very lucky that night to survive what could have been a disaster.

Seventeen years later, I still think of Max, who left a strong impression on me. Since my early childhood, members of my animal family included a cat, fish, and hamsters, though I never shared space with a rabbit before Max. Our time together opened my eyes to the possibility. A week ago, I adopted a rabbit who had been abandoned by his previous family. I was ready to give this rabbit a home because Max opened his home to me. ■

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