

"Who Censored Roger Rabbit?" by Gary K. Wolf
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Chapter 1

I found the bungalow and rang the bell.

My client answered the door.

He was almost my height, close to six feet, but only if you counted his eighteen-inch ears. He wore only a baggy pair of shorts, held up by brightly colored suspenders. His shoulders stooped so badly, he had to secure his suspender tops in place with crossed pieces of cellophane tape. For eyes, he had twin black dots, floating in the center of two oblong white saucers. His white stomach, nose, toes, and palms on a light brown body made him resemble someone who had just walked face first into a freshly painted wall.

"I'm Eddie Valiant, private eye. You the one who called?"

"Yes, I am," he said, extending a fuzzy white paw. "I'm Roger Rabbit." His words came out encased in a balloon that floated over his head.

The rabbit ushered me into his living room. The angular furniture reminded me of the upward-reaching spires in caves. That, combined with an extremely low ceiling and stale air, gave the room the closed-in nature of an underground burrow. Perfect interior design for a rabbit.

The bunny opened a liquor cabinet and brought out an earthenware jug emblazoned with three X's. "Drink?" he asked.

Since Toons could not legally buy human-manufactured liquor, most drank the moonshine produced by their country cousins in Dogpatch and Hootin' Holler. Potent stuff. Few humans could handle it.

Although no stranger to strong drink, I knew my limitations well enough to pass.

"Mind if I do?" the rabbit asked. "Fine with me," I said.

The rabbit cradled the jug in his elbow and guzzled down a healthy swig. Almost instantly, twin puffs of smoke shot out of his ears, drifted lazily upward, and bounced gently against the ceiling.

Quite nonchalantly, the rabbit pulled a large butterfly net out from behind the sofa, snared the bobbling whiffets, and shook them free through an open window. They joined forces, floated merrily skyward, and expanded into a soft, billowy cloud.

"Cumulonimbus," the rabbit remarked, as he watched the evidence of his indulgence drift away.

The rabbit closed the window and drew the drapes to protect his frail parchment skin from the drying effects of the early morning sun. He hippity-hopped across the room to his desk, returned, and handed me a check. "A retainer. I hope it's large enough."

It certainly was! At my regular rates, the check would buy my services for nearly a week.

"Maybe I'd better outline my problem," said the rabbit. "I know all the cash in the world wouldn't persuade a private eye to take on an unjust cause."

I nodded. If the rabbit only knew. I had undertaken numerous unjust causes in the course of my career, and for a lot less than all the cash in the world. A lot less.

The rabbit picked a walnut-inlaid cigar box off a mushroom-shaped coffee table. "Carrot?" he asked.

I looked inside. Sure enough, carrots, carefully selected for uniformity of color, size, and shape, and alternated big end to little end so that the maximum number of them could be squeezed inside. Each bore a narrow, gold and red paper band proclaiming it a product of mid-state Illinois, generally acknowledged as the world's finest source of the orange nibblers.

I declined.

The rabbit selected a chunky specimen for himself and gnawed at it noisily, freckling his chin with tiny orange chips that flaked off in the gap between his front incisors. "About a year ago, the DeGreasy brothers, the cartoon syndicate, told me that if I signed with them they would give me my own strip." He laid his half-eaten carrot on an end table beside a display of framed and autographed photos, some human, some Toon. They included Snoopy, Joe Namath, Beetle Bailey, John F. Kennedy, and, in a group shot, Dick Tracy, Secret Agent X-9, and J. Edgar Hoover. "Instead they made me a second banana to a dopey, obese, thumb sucking sniveler named Baby Herman."

"So find yourself another syndicate."

"I can't." The rabbit's face collapsed. "My contract binds me to the DeGreasys for another twenty years. When I asked them to release me so I could look for work elsewhere, they refused."

"They give you any reason?"

"None. Being somewhat an amateur private eye myself, I did some legwork." He displayed a hind limb that would have looked exceptionally good dangling from the end

of a key-chain. "I nosed around the industry and uncovered a rumor that someone wants to buy out my contract and give me a starring. role, but the DeGreasy's refuse to sell. I want you to find out what's going on. If the DeGreasy's won't star me, why won't they deal me away?"

Sounded horribly boring, but one more look at his check convinced me to at least go through the motions. I hauled out my notebook and pen.

Normally I would have asked some questions about his background and personal life but, since I only intended to give this case a lick and a promise anyway, why bother? I asked for the DeGreasy's' address, and he rattled it off.

"I'll stay in touch," I promised on my way out.

"See you in the funny papers," joked the rabbit.

I didn't smile.