

RABBIT, READ

By Alexander Moser

I graduated from college over a year ago, yet hadn't been able to land a single job. I sent in applications, and even got a few interviews, but no matter how well I did, someone seemed to pass me over. For the past year, I made money through various odd jobs, whether I drafted paperwork for my father, or helped sell my cousin's baseball cards on eBay. I gathered enough cash to rent my own apartment, but never shook the feeling that I labored at the whim of my family, acting as their go-to person when they were too lazy to do the work themselves.

It took a while, but I stumbled upon a listing at a company called Rabbit, Read. They were asking for individuals with strong comprehension skills, so I applied, and was shocked that I even received an interview. I knew little about what the company did—only that they made biographies—but I was destitute enough where I needed a real job, not intermittent work from my father.

Toward the end of a first date that was going nowhere, I got the call. They offered me a position as one of their readers, which I accepted. Out of all the candidates, they chose me. I set the phone down with a trembling hand. At last, I could evade my hopeless, unbecoming cycle, transitioning to a dignified and productive member of society.

The mirror-surfaced building of Rabbit, Read poked out of the rows of brownstone apartments, so if you were to get out of the subway and look west, you could spot it right away, with the sunlight bouncing off of the windows, the building glistening in the dim morning air. The office was part of a new Manhattan development, one of the many monoliths sprouting along the East River. Construction spilled over the sidewalk, metal facades directing pedestrians onto the street. I walked along a short route from the subway, snaking through crowds of bustling commuters, stepping over abandoned coffee cups and frayed ends of cigarette butts.

I pushed the heavy revolving door, and entered the building. The lobby's foundation was made of grey slabs of concrete that stretched toward a lofty ceiling. Not a soul loitered about the lobby, save for a sleepy security guard.

My footsteps echoed throughout the open building as I walked down the hall, stopping at the tall, chrome entrance to Rabbit, Read. It was locked. I pounded on the door twice. Seconds later, the door swung open and I hopped out of the way, avoiding danger by a fraction of an inch.

A short woman stuck her head out of the door. She wore her hair in an upright bun. I recognized her—Jessica, the editorial manager at Rabbit, Read. She blinked twice, and belted a quick laugh. "Oh, Jonathan, it's you!"

"It's nice to see you again." I brought my hand out to greet her, but she turned around, propping her full body weight against the door before waving me inside.

The winding corridors could barely fit two people side by side, so I walked behind Jessica. As she led me through the office, I inhaled the strange scent of dirt and animals. Weird, I thought. Why would an office smell like dirt and animals? I didn't smell anything the last time I was here. For my interview, Jessica and I had a short chat in a conference room, and then, she wanted to hear me read aloud. It felt standard at the time, and I never questioned her about the position, other than how much it paid, of course, and whether I would be able to get ample vacation time.

The fetor grew thicker with each passing step. We turned the corner, entering a large room, where employees hunched over rows of desks, laboring with scrupulous demeanor. They

all seemed to be either typing, or speaking into microphones. Their voices echoed in a cacophony of whispers.

My nose tickled and I figured out the source of the stench. On every desk, not only was there a computer, but also a rabbit. Not a toy rabbit or a stuffed animal, but an actual living, furry rabbit. These rabbits sat on small, circular platforms next to a computer. Every desk had their own rabbit, and there must have been over a dozen desks packed together in the room. I scratched my head in bewilderment. I had no memory of rabbits, or even a mention of rabbits in the job description. Not only that, but I had no idea why rabbits were even supposed to be in an office, of all places.

Jessica led me to an empty desk at the end of a row. “This is your work station. Why don’t you have a seat?”

Each desk had an identical makeup with a computer and microphone, connected by a large purple wire that snaked out from the back. I tried to lift the microphone, but large bolts pinned it to the center of the desk.

Parallel to the computer, a round metal plate lay on the desk. The smooth, polished surface sparkled when it caught the right light. Above it, a device I couldn’t recognize—a cone, pointed down toward the plate. I reached over, drawn to the contraption, but heard a thick grunt, coming from Jessica. I snapped my arm back to my side.

“A-hem,” Jessica coughed. She reached into her pocket and took out a slip of paper. “Now, here is your user and password information.”

I entered the credentials in the computer, stabbing at the keys.

“Logged in? Sit tight, Jonathan. I’ll go get you a rabbit.” She scampered toward the far side of the room.

A husky man, wearing a black Mets hoodie and dark jeans, slouched in the seat next to mine. So much for ‘business casual,’ I thought to myself. The husky man scratched at his beard and pushed a pair of circle-framed glasses closer to his eyes. He read aloud, gripping the microphone near his face while his other hand, glued to the mouse, scrolled downward at a slow, even pace. The rabbit seemed to listen, its ears perking up at the start of every sentence.

The husky man turned to me, putting a giant hand over his microphone. “Hey, do you want a tissue?”

I jerked backward, startled by his deep voice. “Huh?”

“Your nose is running.” He pointed at my face.

I ran my fingers down my nose and along my lips. I touched warm, sticky mucus. It leaked down my left nostril, crawling onto my upper lip.

He handed me a tissue. “You’re not allergic, are you?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t allergic to anything. Not even pollen or dust. Yet, this room, windowless, caused my sinuses to flare.

“I’m Charlie, by the way,” said the husky man, with a straight, monotonous drone.

I extended my hand to him, as I did with Jessica. “Jonathan. Jonathan Furlow.” Charlie clasped my hand. Even though his hands were large, he had a thin grip.

“You’re new. First job?”

I shook my head. “I’ve had other jobs before. None like this, though.” Then, silence fell between us and I drummed my fingers along the bare metal platform. “So, Charlie, what’s the deal with these rabbits? Do we feed them carrots, or something?”

Charlie shifted upright. “No, we don’t feed them carrots. The rabbits are the biographies.”

“What?” Charlie must have been kidding. But he showed neither scowl nor smile.

“These rabbits memorize everything we read to them. Clients order the biographies, and the rabbits come. We read, and the rabbits store their profile, filled with the client’s achievements, their work experience, all of that stuff.” He stopped to take a sip of water from a tiny Styrofoam cup. “Does this all make sense to you?”

It didn’t, but I lied. “Sure does!” How did it work? Could the rabbits speak English? What if the clients didn’t speak English? Were there rabbits that could understand Spanish, French, or Mandarin? Or was it something else, something that I didn’t understand?

“I see you’ve met Charlie,” Jessica said. In her hands, she held a small, grey rabbit, which she set on the platform. “Charlie, why don’t you help Jonathan get started?” She bowed her head and returned to her desk at the far side of the room.

The rabbit’s coat was smooth and shone in the light. “You look like a good little guy,” I said. I reached over to touch it.

Charlie thrust an open palm in front of my hand. “Don’t do that,” he said.

“I just wanted to feel it. What’s wrong with that?”

He shrugged. “These aren’t the kind of rabbits you pet, or feed carrots to. We only read.”

“Oh.” I inched my hand backward. How big of a deal could it have been, *to pet a rabbit?* I squinted and peered toward Charlie. His eyes darted left and right as he read. He worked without stopping. I sighed. This was my opportunity to make good on my first real job. I turned and gazed toward the computer. I had one unread e-mail.

Your first assignment! I know you’ll nail it! Remember to read into the microphone nice and clear. Don’t be too loud, or you’ll disturb your fellow co-workers. When you’re done, you can tell me by replying to this message, okay? You’ve got this! – j

The biography of Walter Thronhill. The document was over twenty pages long, the text cascading, paragraph breaks few and far between.

Dr. Walter Thronhill, an accomplished professional in the field of genetic engineering, has dedicated over 40 years to the practice of researching DNA from humans across different continents. Originally from Ohio, he attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on scholarship. Upon receiving his doctoral degree, Dr. Thronhill went to the Langley Research Center in Virginia, where he—

I stopped. “Hey, Charlie? What do I do exactly?”

Charlie leaned over my shoulder so that his body hovered on top of mine. He smelled like the rabbits. “It’s pretty simple.” Charlie pointed to a small, green button on the microphone.

“You hold this button when you speak. Mark off any errors you see, and e-mail them back to Jessica. Then, you read into the microphone and it’s all done.”

“Got it. Thanks, Charlie.”

Charlie returned to his seat and resumed reading. I put one hand over the microphone, my thumb hovering over the green button, eager to push down. With my right hand, I reached for the mouse. I took a deep breath.

Dr. Walter Thronhill...

My voice sounded silly out loud, reciting phrases of another individual’s accomplishments. As I read, a low mechanical groan undulated from the cone. The rabbit’s ears, reacting to the sound, twitched.

I couldn’t shake a thought that lurked in the back of my mind. Before I got this job, back when all I did was type in job applications from nine to five, I went on a last-round interview for an administrative gig in the heart of Midtown. I knew it was between me and one other person

because they scheduled our interviews back to back. During the interview, they asked me what my goals were. “My goals?” I replied.

“Yes. Where do you see yourself in five years?”

I was 22 at the time, but I never gave that question any thought. I never knew what I wanted to do in my life. I watched Netflix. I went out with friends. I didn’t know where I’d be in five years.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess, nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I don’t really see myself in five years.”

“I see.” The interview didn’t last much longer after that. For a while, I hated myself. I thought I was stupid. When Jessica asked me the same question, I lied.

“I want to be a manager,” I told them. “And lead a team.” They liked my answer, and soon enough, I sat, reading to a rabbit.

As I continued, the words spilled off of my tongue and I tuned out the rest of the world, pushing away the buzz of fluorescent lights, the mechanical whirr of the computers. My eyes stuck to the page, and the only noise I heard was my own voice.

But chairs shifted and the sound of movement bounced around the room. Every person in the office had ceased to read and rose from their seats. I looked at the corner of my computer screen. 1:00, on the dot. I received another e-mail from Jessica.

Jonathan, I forgot to tell you! Everyone gets an hour break at 1:00 for lunch. Make sure to be back in your seat by 2:00. Always scan in and out of the office, even to go to the bathroom. I put a keycard inside your desk. Thanks! - j

I spent my lunch reading a novel that I had picked up from the library. Yet every time I got to a new page, my mind drifted to the image of Walter Thronhill. I had no photograph to refer to, but I imagined him as a fine-dressed scientist, the kind who wore an alabaster lab coat over his dark suit. He was bald, with large, thick glasses. I approached the end of a chapter and realized that I had no memory of the story, only a heap of fractured images, jumbled by my wandering mind. Yet, I could still remember where Walter Thronhill went to college, where he received his first teaching position, even 1998 stood out, when Dr. Thronhill received the coveted ‘distinguished scientist award.’

After lunch, I finished biography of Walter Thronhill. I drafted an e-mail back to Jessica.

Jessica, I have completed the assignment, so I can work on something else in the meantime.

Within seconds, she replied.

Hey Jonathan, I’ll be right over with another rabbit, and take this one away. Let me know when you’re ready for another assignment! - j

Jessica snuck up behind me, cradling the rabbit in her arms. “Here’s your next assignment,” she said. In one fluid motion, she picked up the first rabbit with one hand and released the second one onto the platform. “If you can’t finish by the end of the day, let me know. We have someone collect the rabbits after five. But don’t worry, both of you will be ready to work tomorrow, bright and early!”

The rabbit was indistinguishable to the last, except that it had a small white patch of fur an inch or so above its tail. I read the new assignment, my voice recognizing the ebb and flow of the language, trembling less than it did before.

At 5:00, each employee stood up and strolled out the door, as if a switch flipped off in their brains. They marched through the serpentine hallways and into the stark lobby. The patterns

of their movements blended in with the bland, concrete walls. I went outside, passing some of them as I left the building. Outside, the sky became darker and heavy gales blew in from the river. I hurried for the subway, expecting a downpour, but nothing came. Not until I arrived back home, entered my apartment and warmed up leftovers for dinner, did I hear the ensemble of rain, accompanied by a clash of thunder ringing through the sky. I went to bed early, ears tuned to the storm, my mind flooded with Walter Thronhill and that one rabbit's small, white patch of fur, an inch or so above its tail.

My commute to work was long, but simple. I hopped on the subway in Brooklyn, and took it all the way to the end of the line in Manhattan. I spent my time watching people come and go, appearing and disappearing from my view as the train dropped off passengers in the Financial District or Midtown, then veering onward toward my destination.

When I entered the office the next day, I met many of my new co-workers. Melanie, Stephanie, Robert, Harry, a handful of names that in time, I placed to their faces. It seemed that everyone happened to do the same work—reading to rabbits.

When the clock hit nine, the reading began. I started to understand the motions of the office, and my voice exercised a familiar tone. I took allergy medication in the morning, so my eyes wouldn't water and I'd hold back from sneezing. In weeks, the scent faded, or perhaps I grew accustomed to the room.

When I read to the rabbits, the words radiated from my body, rising from the pit of my stomach and expelling out of my mouth. I would cycle through each assignment, reading biographies that ranged from doctors, scientists, lawyers, and even university professors. The repetition left me breathless and tired each night, my mind jumbled from dictation. I often dreamt of black computer font, glowing on a white screen, tantalizing my eyes with audacious speech.

I sequestered my time in a punctual routine. At 11:30, I took a 15-minute stroll, wandering around the lobby, stretching my legs. 1:00, of course, was my lunch. I always made sure to be in my seat at 9:00, 2:00, and left promptly at 5:00. As my routine became more pronounced, I worked at a swift pace, reading to half a dozen rabbits a day.

Jessica, happy with my improvement, handed me a new rabbit and said, "You finished this one so fast. Keep this up and you may be a manager in *less* than five years."

"Oh, wow! Well, it was nothing, really." I smiled and lifted the rabbit from her palms, the soft fur tickling my forearms.

I started to enjoy my job. My work gave me goals to strive for, and I made an impact at this company, even if all I did was read to rabbits.

My alarm blared a dreadful, loud noise. After a shower, I felt a tickle in the back of my throat. I could not have been getting sick, I told myself. I searched for any cuts or lacerations along my throat. I came across a swollen lump, no more than an inch above my Adam's apple, which throbbed when I pushed against it.

There was an open seat on the subway, and I snatched it before it a man in a three-piece suit could push his way through the crowd. The pain in my throat drained me of all my energy, and I needed to rest. From my seat, I watched the familiar apparition of faces fade into the crowd. I closed my eyes, shutting myself away.

I awoke to a loud, shrill voice crackling over ancient speakers. “This is the last stop! Last stop on this train!” I looked around, finding myself alone. When I left the station, I bumped shoulders with a businessman, who stumbled, spilling hot, black coffee on the street.

“Sorry!” I croaked through the biting pain in my throat.

When I arrived at the office, a large white rabbit sat at the platform on my desk. Strange, I thought. I had never read to a white rabbit. Was there a mix-up? I checked my e-mail, and found a message.

Jonathan: We've got a rush assignment for you. I'm sorry, but it's long. Like, really long. Let me know if you have any questions. Thanks so much for the help! – j

That was it. Half a dozen sentences with a half-hearted apology, and a rabbit with fur the shade of snow. Saliva pooled in my mouth, and my throat stung when I attempted to swallow. Reading will be difficult.

I began the biography of Henrich Müller, a painter from Germany. I took a deep breath and tried to read, but it wasn't long before I stumbled over my own words. The rabbit flinched. “Relax,” I said aloud. I wasn't sure if I was speaking to the rabbit, or myself.

...Henrich Müller painted large oil landscapes that captured the immensity and the diversity of his homeland. After teaching university students, he would paint at night, switching the lights off, relying on candles that cast long, dark shadows on the wall. The shadows, he said, created dissonance, which he emphasized in his work.

The clock hit 1:00. When everyone in the office rose from their seats, I rose on instinct. I didn't have time to grab food in the morning, so I ventured out of the office for lunch.

Cotton candy clouds, with no inclination to move, speckled the sky. I popped my head inside a pizzeria, inhaling the aroma of fresh-baked slices. I ordered two slices of pizza and sat by the window. When I took a bite, the cheese stretched out in long, gummy strands, and orange grease formed miniature puddles on the paper plate. I was halfway done with the second slice when I saw a woman in the corner of my sight, marching across the entryway. I recognized the dark tangles of hair, bouncing along her shoulders with every step. Her tan skin, an ambiguous amber hue. It was Lydia.

I leapt out of the store. She was a few yards in front of me. “Lydia,” I called out, choking over my own words. “Lydia!”

She stopped moving, and turned around. “Jonathan?”

Lydia stared at me, then glanced down at the pizza, still clutched in my hand. She raised her eyebrows. “What are you doing here?”

I hid the pizza behind my back. “Yeah, I work around the corner. I'm on a lunch break. What about you? I never expected to see you around here.”

“Yeah, I moved last month.” She pressed a leather bag close to her body. “It's been a long time since we saw each other.”

“Has it?” I could not remember.

“Jonathan, it's been *months*. I know we only had a few dates, but I didn't expect you to be the ghosting type.”

I bit my lower lip and said nothing.

“Well. Are you still at the same job you told me about? The one with the rabbits?”

“Yeah. It's a good gig. I get to read all day, and help some people while I'm at it.”

She scoffed. “Help them with what? You're reading to rabbits.”

I clenched my fists so hard that flakes of pizza crust sprinkled onto the sidewalk. The comment tied a knot in my stomach. Lydia didn't care. She had no idea what I did for a living. She knew this was my first job, and that I worked hard to get where I was.

Lydia hoisted her bag over her shoulder. "Well, I've got to get going. It was sort of nice seeing you." She turned around and left, while I stood watching. Lydia's body became smaller and smaller, transforming into a distant, dark blur in the midst of the city.

I went back into the office. My throat hadn't improved, but Jessica gave me this task, trusted me to do it. And I needed to complete it today.

The rabbit remained poised, nostrils flaring, ears twitching. It looked to be saying: why? Indeed, why was I doing this work? Why would I struggle to make my mark on the world in this office, when Henrich Müller spent each day and night, painting, drawing, living life on his own demands?

I cast my palm over my face. No, I said to myself. I'm going to finish this assignment. No one, not Lydia, not even a sore throat, would stop me from finishing this. I reached out toward the rabbit, my hand hovering over its thick coat. The rabbit's white fur radiated light, heat, and energy.

Then, I touched the rabbit, brushing my fingers over its head, moving down to stroke the rest of its body. The soft fur tickled my fingertips. I felt a warmth, like a fire on a cold winter's night, surging through my veins. It traveled up my body, starting with my palm, trickling up my spine, and spreading across my chest. I continued to move my hand in a straight line, never lifting it from the rabbit. The warmth filled me, spreading to my other arm, extending toward my toes, ballooning into my head.

The memories of Henrich Müller crawled into my mind. Flashbulbs popped in and out of the corner of my sight. I smelled thick oil paint mixed with incense. I heard the sound of a bird chirping, muffled through a thick window. I tasted cinnamon cardamom tea, brewed with honey.

My eyes snapped open and I came to my senses, unsure of how much time passed. I took my hand off the rabbit. Little white hairs clung to my fingers. The rabbit's body swelled and waned with quick, short breaths. I stared at the screen and realized that the rabbit transmitted the biography of Henrich Müller into my mind. My hands shook, and I wanted to put my tips on the soft white fur, but I stopped myself, and continued to read.

Hours later, my hands cupping the microphone, I reached Henrich Müller's death.

...Henrich Müller died on February 1st, in Berlin, days before his 90th birthday. He is survived by his wife, Freida, his children, Hans and Edward, as well as five grandchildren and one great-grandchild. In recognition of his accomplishments, he has received a profile by Rabbit, Reads.

Throughout the struggles, the pain in my throat, and Lydia's ignorance, I completed the assignment. The musty scent of oil paint and the image of forest green Bavarian hills clung to the back of my mind, and I smiled. The rabbit must be for his family. It would be them, not Henrich Müller, who imbibed these memories by petting the rabbit, just as I did earlier in the afternoon.

But what became of the unfinished paintings? Did he leave them littered about the studio, or did students and family take them? I knew that I wouldn't ever find the answer to my questions, so I sent Jessica an e-mail, telling her I finished.

Finished. The word rang in my head, and for once, I knew that I triumphed, at least for the family of an obscure German painter.

Jessica sent me two responses. The first one read:

Thanks Jonathan. I'll get you a new assignment soon!

She addressed the second e-mail to everyone in the office:

Hi! As you all know, today is Charlie's last day. He's worked here for about ten years, and we're celebrating his end here at Rabbit, Read. He's moving to Albany! So, please enjoy some delicious cake in the kitchenette.

I turned over to Charlie. He stared at the screen, dictating to his rabbit. Rather than interrupt him, I walked to the kitchenette. Jessica left the cake on a small table. I cut myself a small slice and took a hesitant bite.

It was delicious. The cake had a tangy aftertaste that cancelled out the heavy, rich icing, forming a flavor that flipped between bitter and sickeningly sweet. I shoveled forkfuls into my mouth. I had never eaten a cake so moist and creamy. The buttercream dissolved on my tongue, sparking a numbing sensation along my taste buds. I ate the cake in one sitting, without pause. I peered around, making sure no one was watching, and cut myself a second slice. This time, I savored it with grace, nibbling piece by piece. I enjoyed each bite so much that tears welled up in the corners of my eyes.

When I finished the second slice, I realized my throat no longer hurt. When I swallowed, I felt no pain at all. I grasped the lump on my neck. It dissolved with a single touch. Now, tears streamed down my face and I could not hold them back. I wanted to eat the entire cake, but I had to get back to work. I meandered to my seat. On my desk, there was a brand-new rabbit ready for me to read to. But all I wanted was more cake. I tried to name the flavor.

Then, it hit me. I began to laugh. I laughed so hard, my co-workers turned their heads, giving me distasteful looks.

Carrot cake.

The rabbit's vacant expression looked everywhere and nowhere all at once. I bet that it wanted that piece of cake too.

Alexander Moser lives in Brooklyn. His writing, some about the uncanny, others about pop culture, can be found at various places on the Internet.

