

Fat Emma

by

Vixxy Fox

“To be good is noble; but to show others how to be good is nobler and no trouble.” Mark Twain

“What passes desirous of feminine beauty changes at the whim of those without a whole lot else to talk about. For the most part it is steeped in the unobtainable.” Scanectity Skunk

“Th’further outta reach it is, th’more simple minded folks has a way of want’n it... and for what? So they can says in the face of t’others; ‘It’s mine not yors so ha ha haaaaa.’”

Papa paused to tap out his pipe on the porch railing. Mama would have slapped him a good one for doing so but she was off visiting her sister who just had another litter of babes. Poor Mama, all she had was me. I’m not what you might call ‘the most beautiful thing in the world’.

“Time was,” Papa droned on as he packed his pipe with fresh corn silk, “A Doe Rabbit was cherished by her weight and not by the mere size of her tail. She had to be big enough to keep you warm with her snuggling during the winter and cool in her shadow during the summer.”

I know he meant well. It was probably the fermented carrot juice talking, but it hurt none the less because I certainly fit that description. It was just getting towards dusk and we’d just finished our evening meal. Papa told me to do the dishes later ‘because the sun sets but once a day and a critter ought’a appreciate it for what it was; with a smoke and a cup o’ strong tea’. We didn’t have a whole lot in the way of wealth so the smoke was all he had. The best I could do for tea was boiled mint leaves. I liked it plenty but Papa never did. He said it made him pee too much.

Striking a match the old Buck placed pipe to lip and sucked on it loudly causing the flame to go in and out of the bowl as if it were alive and placing its head into a chamber pot.

“I’m a’tell’n ya Em... yor the finest look’n Rabbit I ever did see other than your Ma. That it takes three times the material to make you a dress speaks buckets and buckets of compliments to your form.”

“Mother’s not large Papa.”

He squinted his one good eye at me and sucked a bit harder on his pipe. “I told ya early on yor the spit’n image of yor Great Aunt Edna; and she was a fine look’n Bunny that one was. She was so fit she outlived three husbands and had children with all of’em.”

For a moment my knitting needles stilled themselves and I somehow summoned the courage to speak up. “So you’re telling me I should eat more and have loads of babies?”

“Well now I didn’t z’actly say...”

I didn’t give him the chance to answer but stormed off into the cabin to finish the dishes. Once inside I grabbed the dish towel and dried my eyes which had strangely beaded up with tears. I was not about to fool myself into believing my father. He meant well and I suppose I shouldn’t have said what I said; but ever since I began attending school my life went from that of a sheltered farm Bunny to one of daily humiliation. As soon as the teacher’s back was turned I was treated to as many offensive remarks and gestures as a body could take. It got so bad that I didn’t even attend the last month before summer break.

They called me Fat Emma and I suppose I shall always think of myself in those terms.

The one bright spot for me was the lone Bull who sat at the back of the room and took almost as much abuse. He, at least, was large enough that no one would ever dare think of giving him a pinch on the backside or a pull of the ear. His name is Toby and he lives with the Skunk family a distance across the valley. One day... one of my worse days... he pretend tripped and fell right on Jack Jackaboos Rabbit completely crushing his desk. I suppose it was a small miracle that neither of them was hurt. I was so very grateful; even though he swore it was an accident.

He spent a week in the corner for that but Jack, now sitting at a desk too small for him, at least toned down his insults.

Lighting the kitchen lamp I hung it on the wall and started my after dinner chores. I’d even made up a little song to go with it:

Take the big pot off’n the stove and put it under the pump.
Work the iron handle to bring the water up.
Ya gotta use hot water or the soap’ll stay sticky
And do’n that’ll make your next meal icky.

I remember hearing the buzz of a fly and absently waved a paw around my face to chase it off. That buzz then turned into the strumming of a banjo which was joined by a guitar and that by a fiddle. I figured Papa had something to do with this, well meaning old soul that he was, until I heard him say, “What in God’s green fields is that noise?”

Peering out of the kitchen window I saw one of the biggest silhouettes ever to stand in front of a night’s setting sky and then the sweetest tenor voice I’d ever heard began singing ‘Buffalo Gal Won’t You Come Out Tonight’.

“Well it fits yor des’cription,” Papa muttered from behind me. He never knew how close he’d come to being bonked on the noggin with my water pot.

That song was followed by ‘The Girl I left Behind’, ‘Camptown Races’, ‘Ashokan Farewell’, ‘Home Sweet Home’, and ‘The First Snow Waltz’.

Papa and I moved out onto to our small back porch after the first song. He lit up his pipe again while I simply stood transfixed that someone would even consider serenading me. I felt sure they must certainly have found the wrong house and would be so disappointed when they were done.

But I was wrong.

After the last song, the huge silhouette slowly moved forward until in the now near darkness I could clearly see it was Toby Skunk. He was holding a single Daisy and he held this out to me.

“Sorry,” Papa says all gruff like, “But we already ate.”

I will give Toby much credit as a kind and gentle soul because he made no retort to my elder’s rudeness. “Emma,” he says in that delicate voice, “It would please me greatly if’n you’d come to the dance with me this weekend.”

Papa cleared his throat apparently deciding to be all formal like. “Young fella,” he says, “I believe it is proper to ask the Doe’s father if he might come a’court’n a’fore he ever gives a flower.”

“It’s a dance, sir,” the Bull responded mildly. “May I take your daughter to the dance this weekend?”

“Well, sir,” Papa replied, “Normally I don’t cotton to Skunks, and you are a Skunk by adoption ain’t cha? You live with that fella Scanectity?”

I turned and shot him a look mother taught me when we were being silly girlish one day. She’d told me it was guaranteed to freeze a Buck in place; and it sure seemed to work because Papa swallowed three times before he again spoke. “You’ve known the Skunks for a long time Papa,” I told him, “They’re right fine folks and you know it.”

“Well I still don’t cotton...” the rest was lost in a grumble and then he said it would be all right so long as the Bull behaved himself.

“His name is Toby,” I voiced strongly and then turned back to my mystery suitor. “I would be delighted Toby. May I offer you and your friends some cider? I fresh squeezed it in our press just yesterday.”

“I would be much obliged,” he replied politely. After that we all moved to the front porch and its single lantern where we sang a few more songs before they had to leave. The moon was full and bright so I knew they’d be all right getting home.

I don’t think I slept a wink that night. The thought that I only had the one patchwork dress for school pressed hard on me. Even if we had any money at all I would never consider using it. My parents wanted for so much and though rightfully I should have been out on my own by now they never said a word about it.

The next morning found me working in the garden, my head still in the clouds from the night before. Papa actually called to me from the back porch several times before he got my attention. He told me I had visitors in the front and perhaps I should come make some of my 'delicious' mint tea for them.

Certainly this confused me even further as it would seem that I'd gone from no friends at all to an abundance of people seeking me out. Me... Fat Emma... the Bunny without so much as a carrot to my name.

Wiping my paws on my extra extra large coveralls I walked around our small cabin to the front. I have to admit I was more than a bit surprised in finding four very comely ladies sitting on our porch patiently waiting for me; a Cat, two Skunks, and a small Fox with very large ears.

"May I help you?" I asked, not knowing what else to say.

The eldest Skunk rose and introduced herself. "My name is Bella, I'm Toby's mother." Motioning to the Cat, she said, "This is my daughter-in-law Lucy," to the little Fox, "Miss Vixy," and to the other Skunk, "And Victoria."

Now I was sure the dance was off. Certainly Toby's mother must have learned what a fool he'd been and came with support to explain to me why he had to be stopped before the entire village...

"We were discussing yesterday's events and thought we would come by and have a sewing bee if you don't mind."

"I'm good with the shears and measurements," the Fox added holding up a large pair of scissors.

"And I'm very good at embroidery," the Cat offered.

"And I'm specially good at look'n good," the younger Skunk told me with a smile. This fetched a look of disapproval from the old Fox while the other two ladies tittered a giggle.

"What?" she retorted, "I meant I'm good in the talents of grooming. I've done more than enough coiffures for the women folk that've stayed at the Inn Miss Vixy."

"And charged them a pretty penny for it too," the Fox muttered.

The young Skunk stood and placed her paws on her hips obviously about to remark on this, but the elder Skunk intervened. "Ladies... concentrate... we are here for a reason."

When I could finally speak, I offered mint tea for their pleasure but also added I had no material for them to sew. I told them that I did have a needle and thread for darning and would be pleased to help so long as papa would agree to let me out of my chores. This brought forth more tittering and a rain cloud must have passed across my face because my eyes filled and their water began streaming down my face.

“If you’re here to make fun of the poor Fat Bunny,” I told them, “Then you can all go sit at the desks in the schoolhouse and wait a very long time because I’m never ever going there again.”

The laughter stopped abruptly and Toby’s mother quickly came down from the porch. Taking my paws in her own she said, “Emma, we’re not laughing at you... we were humored that you mistook the purpose of our sewing bee. We’re here to make you a dress for the dance.”

I tried to answer, but she placed a finger over my lips and softly shushed me. “My Toby came to me the other day all on his own, saying he had a friend he would like to invite to the dance. He is still a child in some ways and had no idea what to do as he’s never done such a thing before. We sat in the kitchen and must have talked about this for better than an hour... and then he spent another hour talking to his Pa just on how he should ask you to go.”

Taking a kerchief from her pocket she dabbed at my eyes with it and then held it over my nose and told me to blow just as if I were again a little over large babe.

“There is no shame in being poor,” she told me, “Nor is there shame in being who you are. I will admit it is hurtful that folks don’t always look upon a person and see their heart rather than their body... but that’s their own foolishness.” Placing a paw on my cheek, she smiled an honest smile. “This is for you, Emma, because you have a friend who cares what happens to you and he has family and friends too. What he cares about, we care about.”

There was a disturbance on the porch and I looked up to find the little Fox holding up a large piece of material. “You brought polka dots?” She was frowning the most sour of expressions. “Bella... you brought polka dots?”

“I like polka dots,” I offered. “They make me smile.”

The Fox stuffed the material back into the large patchwork bag she’d been going through and pronounced, “Then it’ll make me smile too. Time we was about the business of sewing. Victoria, you take Emma inside and help her clean up. Take my bag with you because I brought some of that flower smelly soap Wire bought for me... and there’s another small box in there; don’t open that one.”

Papa not being able to stand a whole houseful of women folk left for the fields with a hoe over his shoulder. He promised to pick a parcel of corn for everyone and this was politely accepted as it would make for a good lunch even eaten raw.

Then we were about the business of sewing. I, for the most part, stood on a small wooden box brought specifically for that reason. These ladies whom I’d never met before this day measured me, patted me, pinched my cheeks just like a relative would, and made small talk that was delightful to my ears. I couldn’t even make tea for them as Victoria took care of that, serving the other ladies while I washed myself in the kitchen. The entire time I plied that soapy rag she prattled on all whispery like about a certain boy she’d been enamored with and how she’d chased after him. She was ever so crushed when he out rightly rejected her.

“I almost drowned myself,” she confided, “But life has its unexpected turns and my life was saved by the very fella I now call my own. He was the Skunk playing the banjo last night. So you just think about that story if you will and be patient cuz the right fella will certainly be along for you one day... which could be tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that. But first we need to get you ready for that dance this weekend.”

“But I’m so fat,” I whispered back to her; whereupon she slapped me on the backside.

“You are not that word!” she hissed at me. “You are beautiful. You have a mighty girth which shows good health and ruggedness. You are what every male secretly desires but is too afraid to let it be known. No Buck Rabbit would ever pass by a treat so delicate as a Doe Bunny of your stature.”

“You really think so?”

“I said so didn’t I?”

Lunch came and went and it was like a picnic in heaven. We spread a blanket upon the ground in front of the porch and munched upon Papa’s ears of corn and sweet clover. Miss Vixyy, catching Miss Bella’s eye made a gesture with a cucumber that the rest of us were not supposed to see, after which she took a big bite and just smiled as she chewed. To say Miss Bella was speechless would be quite right; but that was more because she was laughing so hard.

By tea time the dress was done, and what a dress it was.

“Emma,” Papa says to me when the ladies called him out to the porch, “I n’ere did see sech a Rabbit so beuteeful as you... cept’n your Ma o’course.”

“I’d say she has you well trained too,” Miss Vixyy chuckled, “Good woman. Victoria, if you please, bring me that small box I told you not to snoop in which I know you did.”

“I never did,” the younger Skunk protested and we all laughed. It didn’t really matter if she did or didn’t, it was the repartee that mattered. That was a big word Lucy taught me meaning the fun chitter chatter that we all shared together.

When the box was brought and given over to the Fox, she held it in front of me and opened it. Inside was the most beautiful necklace I’d ever ever seen.

“This is for you,” she said with a smile. “It’s from all of us and never you worry a care for its cost. It’s a present.”

By this time the tears were streaming down my face again and all I could manage was, “Why?”

Bella placed a paw upon my shoulder as Lucy took the necklace out of the box and moved to fasten it around my neck. “The answer to that is easy Emma... because.”

“All right then,” Papa near shouted with emotion when I turned to show him. “And what time will the young gentleman be by to escort my Emma to that dance?” The truth is, we didn’t even own a clock and papa wouldn’t have known how to read its face even if we did.”

“Is your wife to be home soon?” Miss Vixyy asked.

“Day after tomorrow I recon,” he told her, “It’s a long walk to her sisters.”

“Friday you bring her and your daughter to the Whackadoodle. I’ll have a room there for you and I have a bath tub. Your wife and daughter can expect much pampering, and you’re welcome to make the water muddy too if you’d like. On Sunday after a fine breakfast, you can come home again.”

Papa puffed up his chest a bit and I could see the wheels turning in his head.

“It ain’t charity,” the Vixen told him flatly, obviously reading his mind. “It is a gift of friendship. If you feel the need to make a fuss then I’ll have to charge you. That was very good corn we had for our lunch today. I’m thinking perhaps a bushel basket full would be good recompense.”

Papa looked at me and his expression was one of being lost. He was a simple soul and ‘high’ words as he called them were like a foreign language to him. “It means payment for the room,” I told him softly, where upon he smiled and said, “Done!”

I could go on and on all about that wonderful place called the Whackadoodle, and perhaps one day if you ask, I will. The bathtub was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in the whole entire world. I soaked in it until my skin was all wrinkly and I was afraid my fur would begin falling out. I had bubbles up to my eyes and Victoria was there to help me just as she promised. True to her word, she was very good at beautifying. She certainly must have brushed my fur for over an hour.

I then changed into my polka dot dress and put on that lovely necklace but there were also a few more surprises in store for me. Before my bath, Miss Vixyy had me stand on a piece of paper so she could trace out my feet. Handing that to her Bo, a Wolf by the name of Wire, she asked him to go and show it to Mister Field Mouse at the General Seed and Hardware. “He’ll know what to do with it,” she told him. “I already presented my wishes this morning.”

In short order this fine gentleman was back holding an actual pair of shoes. They were dainty looking and I would guess they wouldn’t have lasted a day in the fields. I was told to sit and they were placed upon my feet.

“I think they fit all right,” Victoria told me, “But if they become uncomfortable you just slip them off. Most of the other folks there will be barefoot in any case.”

Miss Bella was next. She stood before me and told me to close my eyes, which I did. I heard a small hissing sort of noise and felt moisture on my face. The resulting scent was certainly what heaven must smell like. "It's so wonderful," I told her when I was instructed to again open my eyes.

"It's my favorite," she replied with a smile. "Now it's time to go down and meet your date. He's been waiting in the parlor for near half an hour."

I gasped and picking up the hem of my dress making to run down the stairs.

"Wait!" Miss Vixy said with authority. "Trust an old Vixen Emma. If you don't make them kill a little time then you won't get near the respect you deserve. Give us women folk a moment to get down to the parlor and then follow us down all slow like, a step at a time. Just for the love of everything Rabbit don't trip on the hem of your dress. Hold it up just ever so slightly as you walk."

I did as I was told and the effect was wondrous. Papa about popped a button from his shirt his chest puffed up so in pride. Mother cried... I cried... all the women folk cried; even the old Vixen.

Toby and his foster father stood in the parlor proper. Both wore their very best coveralls and a red bandanna around their necks. They also had matching straw hats. I'm sure Miss Bella had a lot to do with how good the pair looked, but the flowers Toby held I learned later he'd picked all by himself. He handed these to me and I smelled deeply of them. Then, picking out the prettiest, I bit the stem short and pushed it through a button hole where his left shoulder strap attached to the bib of the overalls. He stood so straight and looked so proud.

"Times a'wasting," Mr. Skunk said loudly, "Let's get to it before all the punch has been drunk."

The walk to the dance was lovely and I felt so wonderful walking next to Toby. I have to chuckle still because standing next to the Bull I was comparatively so small. When we got to the Grange Hall Toby and I were motioned to the front of our little group. Mr. Scanectity smiled at me and said, "We wouldn't dream of stealing your thunder. You and Toby go in first. We'll follow behind. And just a post note to all of this Emma, when Toby came and spoke with me I had no idea you would be so very pretty. You know he's done quite a few things in his life that..."

Miss Bella's elbow found the old Skunks ribs and pretty much drove the wind out of his small speech. He smiled at her, but it was with a pained look. I'm guessing that after years of practice the mother Skunk knew exactly where to strike. She then motioned for me and Toby to head on into the dance.

I remember that, at this point, my feet were quickly turning to ice and I would have been ever so happy just to sit in one of the many rockers on the porch of the hall. My heart was telling me that we could enjoy the music from outside and never have to suffer a tease from those attending

inside. That was when Toby, guessing my feelings, offered me his elbow and told me it would be all right.

I had no idea what to expect. Stepping up on the porch, we crossed to the open doors and moved into the hall. Toby removed his hat and had to duck his head slightly to enter. His size alone drew all eyes to us, and slowly the dancing wound down. Eventually the music stopped too, dragging out for the last few notes as Curly Moe stopped tapping on his washboard. Curly, being a Bear, was probably the only person present that even came close to Toby in size so I'm sure he understood what it was like to be stared at. There was a buzz of voices and one old Buck Rabbit let out a joyous sounding whistle that was cut short by his wife's elbow in the same movement Miss Bella used. Then Mr. Scanectity was there motioning to Curly Moe that he should commence with the music again... which he did.

Slowly the dancers got back to the business of dancing and we were herded, for lack of a better word, over to the area of the punch bowl. Toby politely filled two of the glasses for us and we stood watching all that was going on. This was when the first compliment of the evening came to me in the form of an ancient Doe Rabbit who worked her way around the perimeter of the room just to get to me. She respectfully greeted my parents first and then stepped right up and pinched my cheek. The action was coupled with a large smile.

"You are by far the prettiest Doe I have seen here tonight," she told me loudly, "And I love your dress." She sniffed at me. "And your perfume is so fragrant... it reminds me of a whole field full of flowers. I have a grandson here somewhere." And she winked at me in a way that said I was wasting my time dancing with a Bull. Of course her back was at least politely towards Toby so he wouldn't be offended. "You're the most beautiful Doe I have seen in a long long time, my dear. All of them youngsters and their starved looks; I'm surprised their parents let them get away with it."

To say I was in shock is a mild understatement. I even looked suspiciously at my parents to see if maybe they'd arranged this but the look was interrupted by another old Doe accompanied by her husband who kept winking at me. This went on for several minutes before the band started up with a new song; a waltz. Toby rescued me once again by asking for the dance.

Curly Moe's group might only have been a string and jug band but as we walked out onto the dance floor their smallish sound grew in my mind until we were dancing to a full orchestra. Like magic the stiff awkward movements of the Fat Bunny and the Huge Bull became the flowing motions of a well and practiced dancing couple. For the first half of the song it was just me and Toby on the floor. Everyone within the hall for some reason just stood quietly watching. Then, Mr. and Mrs. Skunk joined us along with my parents. I snuck a look at Mother and Papa and I don't recall ever seeing them this happy. Mr. Scanectity winked at me, and Miss Bella smiled a smile large enough for three people. Soon the floor was full of couples and in our little village's rustic ways they all looked in my eyes to be the swirling wonderful dancers of some faraway King's court.

When the music ended and we walked off the floor I was again surprised as Jack Jackaboos Rabbit was waiting for us. To say your Daddy looked nervous is hardly a strong enough word to

describe what I saw in his trembling form; but he was also brave in what he did. Standing his ground when he could have run, he delivered the little speech he'd obviously thought about for more than just this one evening.

"Toby Skunk," he began with a nod to my date, and then to me, "Emma Rabbit."

Toby nodded and I think I smiled if only a little bit.

"I just want to apologize for the way I treated you both in school. What you did Toby... I deserved. I was mean and egged the others on to do like."

Toby, not saying anything, simply held out his huge paw to this repentant Bunny. I am happy to say it was warmly clasped in return.

When it was done, Jack further says, "If it's not too much bother Toby, sir, I would like to ask your date a question."

The Bull smiled and nodded as if he'd expected this to happen all along.

"Emma," Jack Jackaboos says to me, "Would you consider allowing me a dance later?"

The large Bunny paused in her story just long enough to shift her suckling babe from one breast to the other. Her rocker made a quiet creaking noise as she did so.

"That was the first of many many offers to dance that night," she continued. "You know... I never even knew there were that many Rabbits in the entire valley. Of course there were a fair amount of other folk who also asked me to dance. Let's see now... there were Mice and Raccoons, Skunks and Dogs. I even had the pleasure of dancing with a Cat and a Beaver." She chuckled at this remembrance. "I will tell you that Friend Beaver's tail was more than a bit of a hindrance. He solved the problem with a piece of yarn supplied by one of the ladies. He did look a bit funny with it tied up to his waist; but not a person there made fun of him for doing so."

She kissed the now sleeping infant on the forehead.

"Now wouldn't the world be such a nicer place if it were always like that?" she asked softly.

With the kiss she too closed her eyes and began a slow rocking motion which matched the rhythm of the music now playing in her head.

It took her back again to the night when her life so dramatically changed and the world became a happier place for it.

